

2001

## March Madness of Poetry

Charles Steltenkamp

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm>

---

### Recommended Citation

Steltenkamp, Charles (2001) "March Madness of Poetry," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 12.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1340>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

---

# March Madness of Poetry

Charles Steltenkamp

---

Many of us have faced blank looks and audible groans when introducing poetry to our classes. As an answer to this, we have had some success in a poetry immersion activity that is modeled after the NCAA Final Four Basketball Tournament. Because it is designed after a popular sports event, this idea appeals to many boys who might not otherwise be drawn to poetry. The main objective of the Poetry Tournament is to expose students to many poems in a short amount of time. Through allowing them to choose which poems “survive” as the tournament goes on, we give them control and freedom over their responses. This sense of individual choice and power over their reading creates a more intense focus for students as they read the poems. Furthermore, as the assignment progresses, individuals and groups revise their criteria as new poems are read and analyzed. It can be adapted for any grade level by:

- Choosing poems appropriate for the grade level, and
- Focusing on appropriate literary elements as criteria for judging a poem.

First, you must decide how many poems you’d like to cover. One of our class tournaments began with 64 poems (some of the reading and ranking was assigned as homework); another started one with 32 (but all tournament work was done in class). Though the number is adaptable, you need to

choose one that is divisible by 4.

## Round One

It usually takes 20 minutes to explain the tournament, and assign groups. Our groups normally have as close to an even ratio of males to females as possible. The discussion and analysis of Round One poems usually takes the whole next class period.

1. Divide your class into four groups: East, West, North, and South. We suggest assigning individual roles within each group: timer, calculator, recorder, and discussion director.
2. Assign each group the same number of poems (e.g., Round One = 16); from these poems, the students must select the best (half of what they started with) based on a certain set of criteria.
3. Each group receives a list of “their” poems. In their groups, they should read each poem aloud and share their responses. Then, each student should rank order (1=best) the 16 poems. Another option is to assign for homework that they must reread all of the poems and rank them. Our criterion for judging the poems in this initial round was “gut reaction”: the students don’t have to articulate why they like the poem, they only need to narrow down the selections based on their personal reaction to them. It is helpful to have them fill out a choice sheet. (See Attachment One.)

4. After each student has rank ordered the list of poems, the group should tally the “scores” for each poem by adding up the numbers of their rankings. The poems with the lowest numbers are the winners.
5. After the group has tallied the results and chosen the 8 poems to “survive” the round, each group needs to work together to write an analysis of the chosen poems. To do this, each group is given a set of questions to answer about each of the poems. They then turn in one set of written answers.
6. The group finishes by writing out the titles of the eight poems they have chosen and the page numbers on which they can be found. This sheet is then given to another group for the next round. (See Attachment One.)

### **Round Two**

1. Again, students should meet in groups, but instead of the same poems they read yesterday, they now have 8 new poems that were winners in another region (group) during round one. In other words, rotate the poems (Ex. Group 1’s choices go to Group 2; 2 to 3; 3 to 4; 4 to 1).
2. Their task is to once again decide which poems will make it to the next round. They will repeat the procedures from the previous round (i.e., read each poem aloud and share responses). Again, they must eventually divide their number in half (from 8 to 4). After ranking the poems, the group should answer the focus questions for the 4 “surviving” poems.
3. Here is where it is nice to change the judging criteria. We suggest adding something a little more sophisticated to the criteria of the day before, such as quality/universality of theme, imagery, language, etc. Normally, we will add questions with each round as the number of poems decreases. Whatever the criteria, be sure to make it clear before the students read the poems. One way to do this is to include a handout that lists particular study focuses. ( See Attachment Two.)

4. Depending on the degree to which groups discuss (and argue about) their choices, Round Two usually takes one class period.

### **Round Three**

Follow the same directions for Round Two but change the evaluation criteria by adding additional questions for analysis. Students will receive 4 poems from which to select 2, and they will answer questions for the “surviving” 2 poems.

### **The Finals: Option A**

In The Finals you must combine teams so that you have only two groups working on the poems (Ex. 1 + 2, 3+ 4). The individual groups follow the same discussion and ranking guidelines as before and cut the two poems to one. Depending on the time we have and the demeanor of the class, the analysis in this round may be adjusted: it can be a group writing effort as before, or the group can orally summarize their analyses to the rest of the class before voting on a winner.

### **The Finals: Option B**

1. Students should meet in the combined groups mentioned in the previous passage (two separate groups).
2. After each group has chosen one poem and analyzed it either orally or in writing, **switch** the poems. The groups should read over their new poem and discuss.
3. It is the goal of each group to “sell” their poem as the best choice to the other group. The interesting thing is that the groups are now “selling” the poem that the opposite group analyzed previously. Because both groups “know” the two final poems well, and the discussion can get lively!
4. Each student needs to decide which poem is the best by rank ordering the two poems by secret ballot. (Or, students can physically move to the group “selling” that poem. The winner is determined when no more students will move.)
5. We have done different things at the conclusion of this exercise in order to award points.

One example is to give extra credit to both groups—the winning team receives more points than the team with the second place poem.

### **The Finals: Option C**

1. After the two larger groups each select one poem, we break up the groups and each student is on his own.
2. First, we read the final two poems aloud. (The poems should be familiar to them because at one point their group had read it.)
3. As each poem is read, ask questions about it and generate a full-class discussion. You will find that many students have taken ownership of one of the poems, and they can become very verbal!
4. Once the discussion has ended, it is time to vote.
5. Pass out ranking sheets, and allow students to “vote” for the winner.

### **“Betting” (for Option B)**

Arrange two buckets, each labeled with one of the two poems’ names. After the voting is done, give each student five betting tickets. As students receive their tickets, they should put their names on them. Then, when it is time for the betting to begin, students write one title choice on each of the five tickets. (This labeling should help ensure some accuracy in the final count.) Allow them to separate their bets, betting for either poem as they wish as long as they put only one title choice along with their names on each ticket

It is important that you arrange the betting so that the students do not see or discuss what anyone else is betting on; otherwise, they’ll begin placing their bets according to what they know about the voting results rather than their own beliefs. In addition, require them to write their bets without discussion about their voting.

While they’re betting, tally the votes. Once the betting and voting are finished, announce the winner. Each ticket in the winning poem’s bucket receives a certain prize (extra credit points, candy, etc.). You can also award a second place prize (or

fewer points) to the runner-up.

### **Ideas for Motivation/Follow Up/ Extra Credit**

- Make a bracket poster and fill in as the tournament progresses.
- Write a news article covering the tournament.
- Create a commercial advertising the tournament.
- Interview the winning poet and reveal his/her reaction to his/her victory.
- Have students choose their personal favorite from the tournament, even if it didn’t win, and create an imagery collage. Students should reveal the imagery, ideas, and tones of the poems in their collages. After the students write the names of their poems on the backs of their collages, hang the collages around the room and give points to students who can correctly identify a poem by its collage.
- Design a championship ring or trophy for the winning poem.

### **In Conclusion**

As we have attempted to show, the game is incredibly adaptable to your needs and grade levels. Our students are often surprised at how much ownership they feel toward poems that they have chosen, and they enjoy the freedom to eliminate poems that they do not like. The exercise can be suited to virtually any textbook or poetry collection. Have fun with it—we certainly have.

### **About the Author**

Charles Steltenkamp teaches English at Troy High School.

Rebecca Baumann teaches English at Troy High School. She also sponsors the Young Writer’s Club and the Literary Magazine.

Attachment One

**Group One First Round Choices**

Poem	Page
1. To a Waterfowl	139
2. The Tide Rises, The Tide Falls	152
3. I Hear America Singing	331
4. Heart! We will forget Him	355
5. Richard Cory	634
6. I, Too	690
7. The Garden	716
8. Chicago	731
9. Elegy for Jane	1089
10. For the Union Dead	1104
11. Winter Landscape	1125
12. Spinster	1120
13. Shine	677
14. Chambered Nautilus	164
15. What if much of which wind	738
16. Birches	658

**Round One: After your group has read them aloud, rank order your favorite eight poems from the above list:**

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_
8. \_\_\_\_\_

Attachment Two

Hr. \_\_\_\_\_

Group No. and Names:

**Round Two Analysis**

For each of the four poems you have selected, answer the following questions thoroughly and in complete sentences- (you may use additional paper if necessary).

1. What is the poem about? (State the poem's SUBJECT and briefly paraphrase it).
2. Why did you CHOOSE the poem?
3. What is the speaker (or poet's) attitude toward the subject of the poem? In other words, what is the TONE of the poem?
4. What IMAGES does the poet use? (What do you see, smell, hear, taste, and feel?)  
What is the EMOTIONAL effect of these images?

**Poem One** \_\_\_\_\_ **pg. #**

**Poem Two** \_\_\_\_\_ **pg. #**

**Poem Three** \_\_\_\_\_ **pg. #**

**Poem Four** \_\_\_\_\_ **pg. #**