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VIRTUAL INSTRUCTION VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Workshop:

Erasure Poetry (Digital)

Learn about erasure poetry and the different techniques that can be used to create an erasure poem. You will also learn about poets who use these techniques in their art, and will draw inspiration from them to create your own erasure poetry in a digital format.

Teaching Artist:
Eric Elshtain

Workshop duration: 25 - 45 minutes



Transcript

Hello! My name is Eric, my pronouns are he/him/his, and I am a poet that teaches with Snow City Arts. Thank you for inviting Snow City Arts into your room. Today, we will work together to compose a short poem. You will be able to do it, even if you have never written a poem before.

Today, I want to show you a technique called **erasure poetry**. Erasure poetry is a form of found poetry, wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains. Erasure poetry may be used as a means of collaboration, creating a new text from an old one; and thereby starting a dialog between the two, or as a means of confrontation—a challenge to a pre-existing text.

So, this means that you are creating a poem, but you're not actually writing anything yourself—which might be a strange way to think about poetry.

Erasure can take many different forms, and can work on many different scales. Some erasure poems are just a single page, taken from a book, a newspaper, or a magazine. Some poets have taken short books, old books that they've found in used bookstores, and they've covered over each page to create a whole new collection of poems.

Instead of covering over sections of the source text, a poet might literally erase portions, leaving negative—or blank—space surrounding the remaining words and phrases. Here is a piece of text the poet **Jordan Abel**, a member of the Nisga'a people of British Columbia, erased. He takes pages from the book *Totem Poles* by anthropologist Marius Barbeau, and erases portions of it. Barbeau's purchasing of totem poles and other sacred items from the Indigenous people that he studies contributed to the loss of those cultures. Abel's own erasing becomes a metaphor for Barbeau's erasing objects from the culture. The negative, or blank, space is a reminder of the blank spaces the anthropologist left behind.

Here are more examples. **Ronald Johnson** went through the first four sections of John Milton's epic poem "Paradise Lost," erasing all mentions of God and Satan—leaving behind a poem with a completely different set of emphases. **Tracy K Smith** erases parts of the Declaration of Independence in her poem "Declaration"—uncovering a poem about the oppression of Black people in this country, finding it within the founding document of this country.

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Some poets will play around with the **opacity**, or level of **transparency**, of the source text. In a poem called "Nets", her erasure of Shakespeare's sonnets, **Jen Bervin** chooses to let the reader see a shadow of Shakespeare's texts, keeping it connected to the history. I want to show you how to use **Microsoft Word** to utilize these techniques. You can also experiment with other word processing programs to achieve the same effects.

Okay! Let's get started. I'm going to search for **Project Gutenberg**, which has tens of thousands of free ebooks available to anybody. So click on "Project Gutenberg." And I'm gonna look up an author named Virginia Woolf and see what selections they have of hers. There are a few. I'll just click on *Night and Day*. And then, you'll want to click on "plain text." And here, you have publication information. And let's just scroll down. I'm just gonna somewhat randomly choose a paragraph.

So, I'm gonna select that portion of text, and I'm going to copy and paste that into **Microsoft Word**. You wanna "keep text only." And then, I'm going to bump up the text size—just a little bit.

And then, I'm going to click **Format > Text effects**, and then click on **Text Fill**. And here, there will be this slide instrument that can play with the **transparency** of the text. You see how it can fade the text completely out—that's 100%. I'm gonna put it at about 50%, so I can make my erasure.

I'm going to select the words and phrases that I want to be completely visible, and then put it at 0%. So, *Katharine stirred this strange*. I like how *thin wind* will sound together. And why did she did this, *out of curiosity*.

So, I've selected the text I want to be completely visible. So now, I'm gonna select the text that I want to be completely transparent, or somewhat transparent. So, 100% is completely transparent. Let's see what it looks like when everything around my chosen words and phrases are completely transparent and I create a lot of negative space around the text.

So now this looks like the examples that we saw from Tracy K Smith's use of the Declaration of Independence, and Ronald Johnson's "Radi Os." But if I bring the text surrounding my choices to about 80%, it's gonna look more like Jen Bervin's versions of Shakespeare's sonnets that we look like, and "Sight and Sigh" by the poet **Travis MacDonald**.

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You can play around with the transparency and whatever looks best to you, make that choice. You wanna save your document. And then, I'm going to type where I got this paragraph from. So, erasure from Virginia Woolf's *Night and Day*. So, next, I'm going to show you how to use another online tool to create erasure.

[If you want to try the text processing technique, pause the video now.]

Michael used the photo editing software called Photoshop, and I want to show you a web-based version. You don't need to download anything, just use it through a browser. It's called **Photopea**. You'll click **New project > Create**, and then you'll drag from your desktop the text that you wanna use. That's just a Word document.

So I'm gonna use the text that I used for the Microsoft Word erasure. I want to create a new layer, and over to the right you'll see **Layer 1**. And I'm gonna drag an image that I got from the Internet over the text. I'm gonna just drag boxes to size it over the text.

I'm gonna change the opacity so I can see the text through the image. I'm gonna enlarge it a little bit so I can see it better. And then, I'm going to choose the erase tool. And you will say "yes" to **Rasterize**. That allows you to manipulate both layers. And, using the erase tool, I am essentially erasing the image I placed over the text to reveal the text that I want people to be able to read.

So, now I'm gonna change the size of the eraser. I'm gonna create these kind of river connections between the text boxes like the **Tom Phillips** example I showed earlier. Drag those to connect those text boxes. Gonna change the opacity there. My image is gone. Now all that's left are the phrases and words that I want visible. And then, I can export this as a .jpg. Save. And it will save to your Downloads file. So, there it is. And now, you have your photo editing software erasure.

Thank you for taking the time to explore erasure poetry today. I hope you found it interesting—the idea that you can create a poem without writing anything yourself.

Now, we explored different ways to create an erasure poem. We talked about different reasons why a poet might choose a form of erasure. Including to create social and political commentary based on the manipulation of a very specific

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source text, like Tracy Smith's use of the Declaration of Independence.

Now, a question may have arisen for you while you watched this video or created your erasure: "Isn't this plagiarism?"

Well, it isn't plagiarism. And it is not for a couple of reasons. One being that many of the texts used by the erasure poets are so old that they're out of copyright, and it's legal to use any portion of that text. Also, when you create an erasure, you're using so little of the source text that you are creating a wholly original piece of art that bears very little relationship to the source text. And so, it has no legal reproductions.

You may come up with your own techniques to create erasure. You may enjoy showing these erasure techniques to friends or family. And you will also notice that means that you are surrounded by potential poems.

Thanks again for taking the time. And see you at the next poem!

Thank you for working with me today. I hope you will choose to work with Snow City Arts again soon.

If you are interested in receiving school credit

for the work you have completed in this workshop, or if you would like to have your work **displayed in a Snow City Arts exhibition space or virtual gallery:**

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Contact us at programs@snowcityarts.org if you have questions, would like to offer feedback, or would like to continue working with us virtually.



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