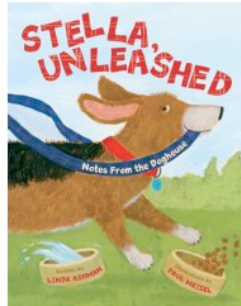


## Teaching Ideas for Stella, Unleashed: Notes from the Doghouse



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Sterling, 2008

**SUMMARY:** A collection of poems about family and life “written” by Stella, a dog adopted from an animal shelter.

**THEMES:** Dogs, pets, family, poetry, humor, animal welfare, humane education

### **BEFORE READING**

Read the title of the book and look at its cover, front and back. What do you think the book is about?

The title uses wordplay to tell us something about Stella. The word “unleashed” has two meanings here. Do you know what they are? In the literal sense, it means that Stella is not attached to her leash. In the other, figurative, sense, it means she’s free to let loose and speak her mind.

“Doghouse” also has a meaning besides a shelter for dogs. What does it mean to be “in the doghouse?”

What do the title and cover illustration suggest to us about Stella’s personality?

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Read the first poem, *Lost and Found*. Where does Stella come from? Discuss the concept of an animal shelter. How might a dog wind up in such a place? Does anyone in the class have a pet from a shelter or rescue organization? Discuss other sorts of places people find pets (and, if appropriate, the problems with pet stores and puppy mills).

2. Read the poems in the “Meet my Family” section. How does Stella feel about her family members and fellow pets? Why might the baby be frightening to Stella? Why does she think her “parents” aren’t all that smart? Think about a pet you know—your own or someone else’s. What would this animal have to say about his/her family?

3. Read *Vive la France*. Do you think dogs should be allowed in restaurants? In other public buildings? How about in schools? Discuss (or write about) what it would be like to have a dog in the classroom. Two related—and very funny—books you might read are [Pete in School](#) by Maira Kalman, and [Officer Buckle and Gloria](#) by Peggy Rathman.
4. Read *Prize Poodle*. How is Stella different from Princess Kate? How does Stella feel about her? Discuss the difference between purebred and mixed breed dogs. What might be the advantages of each?
5. Read *Dispatch from the Front Lawns*. Have you ever noticed how much dogs like to sniff things? A dog's sense of smell is many times stronger than ours—some experts say as much as a thousand times stronger! Can you think of some ways that a dog's sense of smell helps humans? (Examples: dogs are used in search and rescue, after natural disasters, at airports and border crossings to detect illegal substances, and even, more recently, to detect certain cancers in humans). For more about dogs' sense of smell and other interesting information, visit the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles website: <http://www.nhm.org/exhibitions/dogs/>.
6. The illustrator shows dogs in all sorts of activities and positions. If you meet a new dog on the street, how can you tell if he or she is friendly? How do you know it's best to stay away? What's the best way to approach a dog you don't know? For more about interpreting dog behavior, read [How to Talk to Your Dog](#) by Jean Craighead George.
7. Read *For Butch, Who Went Off to Obedience School*. What is it like to have a pet? What responsibilities do we have as pet owners? Many animals wind up in shelters because their owners had unrealistic expectations about what it's like to have a pet, and weren't prepared for all the work. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) has more information about pet ownership and additional lesson ideas at <http://www.aspcaeducation.org>.
8. Stella is based on the author's dog, Nicky, who died before this book was published. Most dogs live somewhere between 10 to 15 years. Cats might live as long as 20 years, and hamsters just 3 years. Because of their short life spans, owning a pet usually means losing a pet. Discuss a pet you've lost, and how you felt. Did you have a special way of saying goodbye or memorializing your pet? A few excellent books on this topic include [Saying Goodbye to Lulu](#), by Corinne Demas, [Jasper's Day](#), by Marjorie Blain Parker, and [Goodbye Mousie](#), by Robie Harris.

## POETRY TOOLS

Poems come in all sorts of forms—long, short, structured, free form, rhyming or not. Some follow strict format rules, while others follow no rules at all. Whatever the format, poems take things we observe and feel and express them in a new way. As poets, we have many tools we can use to make our poems lively and fresh. Here are just a few things to keep in mind when you're writing poems:

**1. Word choice.** Some words are just more interesting than others. Take the word “nice,” for example. It’s pretty plain, and really doesn’t tell us much. On the other hand, words like “gorgeous” (*Prize Poodle*) and “exquisite” (*Vive la France*) sound better and tell us so much more. Other words, like “quibble” (*Pass the Condiments*), and “Fifi” and “Binky” (*What’s in a Name?*) just sound funny.

As a class, create a board of favorite “poetic words”—words that are descriptive, sound funny, or otherwise appeal to you.

**2. Alliteration.** When the first consonant is repeated in a succession of words, it’s called alliteration. Can you find examples of alliteration in *What’s in a Name?* Often, the effect is funny or fun to say, as in many familiar tongue-twisters. Can you think of some? (For example, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”)

**3. Assonance.** Assonance refers to the repetition of certain vowel sounds. Listen to *My Best Buddy*. Can you hear an example? (“great at playing chase/always shares his pillow”). How about in *Dispatch from the Front Lawns*? (“Bruno’s on the loose”, and “Lulu lost her shoes”)

Read *Someone for Each of Us*, and find some examples of alliteration and assonance.

**4. Metaphor:** Sometimes, to make things interesting, we say a person or thing is something other than it actually is. This sort of comparison is called a metaphor (as opposed to a simile, where we compare things using “like” or “as”). For example, in *At Your Service*, Stella describes herself as many different things. How can a dog be an alarm clock? A vacuum? A doorbell? A teammate? If you wrote such a poem about yourself, what metaphors might you come up with? What if you wrote one about your parent or teacher?

**5. Repetition:** In *The Things I Love*, what is Stella particularly crazy about? How do we know this?

**6. Rhyme:** Poems don't have to rhyme, but all of the poems in this book do. The patterns of rhyme are different, though. For example, look at *My Best Buddy*. Which words rhyme? Compare the rhyme patterns of this poem to *Howl!*, *Pass the Condiments*, and *About this Baby*. What do you notice?

Sometimes, poems have **internal rhymes**, meaning the rhyming words are within a line rather than at the end of it. Can you find some internal rhymes in *Pass the Condiments*?

(Answer: friend/intend, deny/dry. You might also notice that in the first stanza, “course” and “sort” are **slant rhymes**, or **off rhymes**, meaning they're close—but not perfect—rhymes).

**7. Rhythm:** The trickiest part of writing in rhyme is getting the rhythm right. It's not a matter of counting syllables, but requires carefully listening to beat patterns. Every word with more than one syllable has its own beat; string words together and you create a kind of music. By listening to and reading lots of poems aloud, you'll develop a sense of what sounds good to your ear and what doesn't.

In *What's in a Name?* Stella was almost called “Penelope.” Listen to the rhythm of this name (Pen-EL-o-PE) and the name Stella (STEL-la). Pronounce your own name. Do you hear the rhythm in it?

Read *Fur Emporium*. Listen for the rhythm in the words “obvious” and “monumental.” Replace “obvious” with “clear” and “monumental” with “big” and read the stanza again. How does it sound? Try replacing “obvious” with another 3-syllable word, enormous. It still doesn't sound right. Why?

Read *Vive la France!* What's different about the rhythm? Which syllables are stressed? Now listen to *Someone for Each of Us*. What is the rhythm of this poem?

**A few excellent resources for writing poetry:** *Immersed in Verse*, by Allan Wolf; *Poem-Making*, by Myra Cohn Livingston, and *Awakening the Heart*, by Georgia Heard.

### **WRITING ACTIVITIES**

1. Write a poem about your pet (it doesn't have to rhyme). If you don't have a pet, write about someone else's, or a pet you might like to have. What does your pet look and feel like? What sorts of things do you do together? What does your pet mean to you?
2. *The Things I Love* is a “list poem”—a list or inventory of things related to a particular topic. Write your own list poem about the things you love. Feel free to use repetition.
3. *At the Dog Park* is another list poem, this time comprised mostly of verbs. Think of a favorite place and list the things you like to do there. Use these verbs to write your own list poem.

4. In *My Best Buddy*, no nouns or pronouns are used at the beginning of each line—most begin with a verb. (Try adding “he” before each line; how does it sound?). Think about one of your own best friends. Jot down some things that make this person special to you, and what you like to do together, then write a poem in a similar format.

5. Read *In the Doghouse* and *Don't Blame Me!*. Who is Stella talking to in these poems? When a poem is written to a particular person or thing, it's called a “poem of address.” Think about a time you were “in the doghouse,” or had a misunderstanding with someone. Write a poem of address about the incident.

6. Imagine you're a pet—your own or someone else's. What do you think of your family, and your home? What do you do all day? What would you *like* to do? Where would you like to live? What makes you happy? What frustrates you? Write a letter to your owner about your life. (For a wonderful book in which a dog does just this, read Mark Teague's *Dear Mrs. Larue: Letters from Obedience School.*)

### **SERVICE LEARNING**

1. Visit an animal shelter in your community, or invite a speaker to visit your classroom. Find out how you can help the shelter and animals—by raising awareness (for example, writing an article for the school newsletter or writing advocacy letters), and/or collecting donations for the shelter as a classroom or school.

2. Dogs are often referred to as “man's best friend.” Besides companionship, dogs have many talents and can be trained to help humans in remarkable ways. Research and share with the class some of the ways that dogs go to “work” to help humans. Examples might include search and rescue, therapy visits to hospitals, police work, and assisting the blind and disabled. Invite a speaker from such a program to your school to talk about their dogs, how they're trained, and the work they do.

## **VOCABULARY**

ambition

audition

boutique

compliant

croissant

ecstatic

emporium

exquisite

gorgeous

indulge

inspector

lavish

monumental

murmur

obedience

obvious

origin

queasy

quibble

solitude

spurn

ungainly

STELLA, UNLEASHED:  
NOTES FROM THE DOGHOUSE

Word Search

(Note: the words may go forward, backward, up, down or diagonally)

E C F L M A T F A S E R  
F S O O L K R F R R E V  
C G U L H N E I Q Y B O  
T S E O L A A N T M S B  
E T Z H H A T S F N I J  
S C A T S G R O F J R V  
Y R R U F A O D W S F E  
I B E C Z W E D F R X W  
K I B B L E M L F O F Y  
S O D P Q K Z C I E K Z  
I G Y G C O T Z R S R G  
D U K K S Z E N R T H Z

CAT

LEASH

COLLAR

MOUSE

DOGHOUSE

SNIFF

FRISBEE

STELLA

FURRY

TREAT

KIBBLE

WOOF