

# The C.R.U.N.K. Guide to Poetry Instruction

by Drew Anderson

## Intro-C.R.U.N.K.-tion

My name is Drew Anderson, and I am, among other things, a teaching artist, actor, rapper, event host, and marathon runner (retired). But before I was any of those things, I was a poet. And this essay is, primarily, about *that* me. The me who was so young that my arms were too short to comfortably hold the newspaper open when my dad would have me read it to him from the passenger seat of his pickup truck; when I still pronounced “determined” as “DEE-ter-MIIIND.” The me who later discovered that words could make sentences and sentences could make spells and spells could make magic. And the me who, still later, became such a passionate practitioner of that magic that I wanted to share its wonder with anyone who wanted to learn.

The foundational principle upon which I teach poetry comes from an Atlanta slang term which was popularized at the top of the millennium by such artists as Lil’ Jon & The Eastside Boyz, The Youngbloodz, and the Ying Ying Twins. The term encapsulates a proactive, lively energy in much the same way as the later term “lit,” New York’s “live,” the Bay Area’s “hyphy,” and my native New Orleans’ “‘bout it.”

In a word, it is “CRUNK.”

But before I get into what “CRUNK” means to me and how it informs my poetic pedagogy, I have to tell you from whence I came.

## Broke-lore, or C.R.U.N.K. Chronicles

I came from a city below sea level; jettisoned into jazz, submerged in soul, bathed in bounce. Yet sheltered in a submarine captained by my middle class parents for my own protection.

Mom was librarian, bookseller, English teacher; she did everything with books but write them. (Leaving the writing to...me, perhaps?) You know how in a bookstore when a paperback is damaged or an issue of a periodical is dated, the bookseller is supposed to ship the covers to the publisher and dispose of the rest? My mom instead brought me home many a coverless comic and frontless paperback, encouraging me to imagine what the cover should have looked like after reading.

Dad was electrical engineer; passionate, but practical. Having felt abandoned by his own father, he loved his family with a vengeance, vowing to provide for and protect us in ways which at times felt smothering. He also loved math and science and computers and thought that he could pass those loves on to his children; partly, I’m certain, in the interest of our own future financial well-being (again, passionate and practical). Some summers, my dad would spend a couple of weeks in Chicago for training and he would bring us back t-shirts. Thus I was wearing a Chicago t-shirt with a picture of the Sears Tower on it the day he called me into the den and asked my early high school self what I

wanted to do with my life. As I suspect was (and continues to be) true for many other young humans, I really had no freaking idea. But I looked over at our 70's holdover behemoth of a floor model television and noticed local African-American anchorman Norman Robinson chronicling the current events of the Crescent City. Not really knowing with any semblance of certainty what occupation I wanted to pursue, but knowing how much I enjoyed writing, it occurred to me to point at Norman Robinson in response.

My dad took this in with the reserved show of stewing that parents engage in when they want to seem like they're genuinely considering their child's silly idea while in all actuality simply considering how they will word their dismissal of it. "Yeeaaaahhhh, I used to want to be a journalist once," he offered, admitting that there was at least some genetic basis for my juvenile journalistic ambitions. "But you gotta think," continued mine sage sire, "do you wanna be on this floor [pointing at the top floor of the Sears Tower on my aforementioned t-shirt] in an office, or on this floor [pointing at roughly the third floor of the aforementioned Sears Tower] pushing a broom?"

So that was pretty much the end of my journalistic "ambitions." (For the moment, at least.)

If I didn't really know what I wanted to do when all I knew was I liked to write, then I REALLY didn't know what I wanted to do once my father assured me writing would lead to my economic demise. What I *did* know was I liked to help people. And I'd been told I was pretty smart. (I managed to graduate from high school as valedictorian despite some pretty nasty run-ins with physics and calculus.) So what was a career pursued by smart people who enjoyed helping others? You got it: I would become a doctor! (Right...)

What my pursuit of medical excellence looked like was attending Howard University with a double major in biology and partying. Due to the latter, I graduated with a just-below-honors average in the former. But something worthwhile that I did manage to get out of my time in undergrad was many opportunities to nurture my burgeoning gifts as a writer and performer of poetry. To the point that I earned a reputation as "The Poet" at Howard and was invited to perform in every talent show, fashion show, and pageant. To the point that my "satellite campuses" became the weekly open mics of venues along DC's famed U Street corridor such as Bar Nun, Mango's, and Bohemian Caverns. To the point that I was ultimately a much more dutiful student to the syllabus of spoken word, the midterm of metaphor, the homework of honing my rhymes.

What I didn't end up with, however, was a medical career. Instead, I happened upon a few gigs teaching middle and high school biology. But a funny thing happened; the more I taught science, the more I would sneak my passion for the arts into the classroom. Worksheets decorated with goofy pictures of my students' favorite rappers. Fill-in-the-blank rhyming study guides. Test preparation parodies. The day before I gave a test, I would play this game called Skituations with my students where they "taught" me what was going to be on the test. They could do this individually or in groups, through visual art, performance, game, song, etc. One of my most involved students was a young lady in the 8th grade named Rahel. She adored Adele and would use Adele's songs to write spoofs about my physical/chemical science content.. So "Rolling In The Deep" became:

*We could have had a bond, but you repelled meeeee...*

Rahel would go on to win a \$300,000 Presidential scholarship to St. Lawrence University. I claim zero credit for this, but I certainly credit her for helping me to discover my calling. My year with Rahel would be my last year as a science teacher. If I was a decent teacher of a subject I ambled upon and just found kind of interesting, what kind of teacher might I be at the things I truly loved: creative writing and performing arts?

And so, from the ashes of my career as a science teacher, C.R.U.N.K. Academy was born.

### **Let's Get C.R.U.N.K.!**

C.R.U.N.K. Academy is my curriculum for teaching hip hop, drama, comedy, parody, and poetry. This occurs in the form of hour-long school assemblies, hour-plus workshops, and extensive multi-day residencies. The philosophy of the curriculum is centered around being Creative, Rapturous, Unified, Natural, and Knowledgeable.

#### **Creative**

*The "C" is for "Creative", not just with what you make /  
But with the approach you take; let us know that you're a "Wiz" with the Yellow Brick Road you pave /  
With your heart, courage, and brains /  
Ideas half-baked? Put them back in the oven and wait /  
Too many became famous displaying the same cadence /  
Identical body language and facial gesticulations /  
Nothing new under the sun, they say; if that's true /  
Why don't we rise above the sun to find something that's new? . .*

Poetry is, quite obviously, a type of creative writing. So a teacher of poetry is expected to guide their students on a creative journey. But it's not just about the creativity of the students; it's about yours too, Teach. A lot of students think they "don't like" poetry because they haven't been introduced to it correctly. So your job is to introduce a better introduction.

Start with the art. Come to the table with a creative approach. Let the first words your students hear from you be your favorite poem, dramatically performed with all the passion you felt when you first heard/read/wrote it. Just as the first words of a poem are responsible for intriguing us enough to continue on the artistic journey, your first words as a poetry instructor are responsible for inviting your students to embark on this visionary voyage. So sail ho!

It never ceases to amaze me when poets, so brilliant in their writing and innovative in their concepts, perform every poem with the same volume, pace, and cadence. We should be as creative in the way we put foot to stage and mouth to message as we are when we put pen to paper (or, more likely, fingers to keyboard). And the same creativity which we expect from our students in workshops should be invoked when we prepare our lesson plans. What about having every student write what they think poetry is in 10 words or less as an opening warm-up, then compiling those into a devised

piece which you perform on the spot? Or having the whole class line up along the wall and, in turn, offer one word to a continuing poetic story? With adult students in poetry workshops, I've had everyone introduce themselves with a haiku, senryu, or clerihew that they wrote on the spot.

While we're talking about creativity, I do want to stress that I feel teaching poetic devices is key. I realize that artists inevitably push back against too much form, rule and tradition, and that the gradual eschewing of previous forms is part of the revolutionary nature of art itself. But I think too many poets (and I'm talking about adult poets) feel that because they're a poet, everything they write is automatically poetic. Even their shopping list. And it ain't. When I teach poetry, I'm big on showing how, when used correctly, figurative and stylistic tools such as metaphor, simile, hyperbole, understatement, acrostics, assonance, consonance, and alliteration do not stultify us with structure; rather, they can free us from the wallows of writer's block, the prison of plain speech, and the jail cell of "journaling." (I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with journaling; the way I use the term here is in reference to my belief that if you just write what you feel without layering it with any sort of poetic pieces, then what you in fact have is a journal entry, not a poem. And there are too many "poets" out here journaling under the guise of "free verse.")

But the best thing that you as a poetry instructor can do to encourage creativity is to institute a safe space. If being creative is difficult, it is even more difficult when creators feel boxed-in or judged. And particularly when you're working with young people, peer pressure is huge. Just this morning I was running a parody-writing session via Zoom with some middle school students from Montgomery County in Maryland. One of the students wrote a spoof of "Party Girl" by StaySolidRocky. The student was white and had written a song in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. He used the private chat function to communicate with me that he believed in the movement very strongly but was nervous about sharing his song because people could be very mean. I assured him that I had his back and that I would introduce our sharing time with a reminder about the definition of a safe space and how important it was to support each other as creatives, to show empathy and build trust. I ended up performing the song for him with his permission, and since I wasn't familiar with StaySolidRocky, I had to learn his flow with one listen. The other students were all very supportive, praising the student for his concept and craftsmanship. Creativity won the day.

### **Rapturous**

*The "R" is for "Rapturous", and that's a must /*

*To impact us, your passion has to bust /*

*Like Dennis Hopper said in Speed: "A bomb is meant to explode" /*

*So calm isn't the pose which is fitting this mode /*

*That isn't to say /*

*You have to yell like Kiedis when Red Hot Chili played "Give It Away" /*

*But don't perform all dry; that inhibits the flow /*

*Make sure your love shows when you're spitting your odes . .*

The first slide in my poetry Power Point has the following header: "What is poetry and why should

you care?” That’s how important I feel it is to “sell” why what you’re teaching is important. You must get your students invested from the jump, and it starts with showing your own investment. Infect the students with the contagion of your own poetic passion.

Rapture is most readily apparent when teaching the performance aspect of poetry. I always encourage my students to “live in” the energy of the piece as they are performing it. If the piece is happy, the student should exhibit that happiness in their voice, facial expressions and body language. (This is where the elements of theatre come into play: Voice, Imagination, Body, and Ensemble aka “VIBE.”) If the piece is sad, the performer should exude sadness (and ultimately so should the audience). My experience in coaching public speaking competitions and judging poetry slams also helps out in this department. I stress to my students the “5 P’s” of public speaking: Professionalism, Posture, Projection, Pace, and Poise.

To drum in the point about rapture, I like to show my students an old Warner Brothers cartoon called “One Froggy Evening” starring a singing, dancing frog. When the guy who found the frog tried to exploit its talent by putting it on stage, the poor schmoe found out the hard way that the frog would only perform for him privately. The message to the students is not to be all hype in rehearsal only to clam up when it’s showtime.

With more advanced students, I like to incorporate an actual performance challenge. I’ll give some of them private prompts meant to distract the speaker, based on actual distractions which professional performers face (i.e. cough really loudly, start a phone conversation in the middle of the performance, yell “REWIND!” after the speaker’s first line, etc.). Other audience members will be instructed to quietly listen. The performer will know that some audience members will be prompted to distract them, but they won’t know who was instructed to do what. After the performance, we’ll unpack what we noticed as a group, with the speaker guessing what each audience member’s instruction was and the audience members analyzing how the performer responded to their behaviors. Again, this is an exercise which I reserve for more advanced students. No need to traumatize the babies just yet.

Rapture also lives in the amount and type of praise which you give to students. I try to be enthusiastic and specific in my praise. (“Bria, I particularly loved your internal rhyme scheme in the second stanza because of how it aided the flow and how the words felt together. I also dug how you reworked that Nas song for your poetic purpose. What did you mean when you said ‘I never wash, because clean is the sister of self??’”) It also helps to praise the students’ praise of each other. (“I’m seeing all types of love going to Bria’s poem in the chat. I appreciate seeing that because it reminds me that we’re part of a supportive C.R.U.N.K. community.”)

The expression “no one cares how much you know until they know how much you care” has two meanings here. The students won’t be any more excited about learning poetry than you as their instructor are, so they need to see that you care about the craft. But they also need to know that you care about them; that you’re invested in their artistic expression and that you want them to allow poetry to help them to grow as humans.

## **Unified**

*The “U” is for “Unified” /  
So if you decide to get a crew to ride /  
Make sure as a group you stay in tune and vibe /  
And like Preach and Cochise, everything will be Coolie High /  
Now if you’re working solo, make certain you don’t go /  
Rambling on tangents or your audience won’t know /  
How the pieces connect to the thesis /  
So keep it cohesive; that’s Unity, kid . . .*

Unity has to do with maintaining a consistency in tone, energy, subject matter, etc. (unless the very point of the piece is its intentional variation of those). In my case, unity also lives in tapping into all of my interests, borrowing from hip hop, drama, parody, and comedy to teach poetry. But perhaps most importantly, it applies to working together well as a creative group.

I incorporate group unity by addressing my group with monikers like “C.R.U.N.K. Cadets”, “C.R.U.N.K. Comrades”, “C.R.U.N.K. Commandoes”, or my favorite, “C.R.U.N.K. Collaborators.” You might come up with your own names, or simply use whatever class names/mascots they already have going. You can even make choosing their name their first task as a group in order to build the team dynamic early, and encourage them to choose an alliterative or acrostic name so their creative skills are already involved.

The unity piece particularly comes in handy with elementary kids who may engage in distracting behaviors. In such a situation, you might find it beneficial to say something like, “I just came from Ms. Hoover’s class and they were so on point. They already finished their whole song and we’re still trying to figure out the hook. It would be a lot easier if everyone were engaged in helping us out.” This will feed their competitive inclinations (they won’t want to be the last class to finish) and encourage them to refocus.

Ultimately, unity ties back into the element I introduced earlier about providing a creative safe space. Once the conditions of the safe space are established (ideally with language which comes from the students), it becomes everyone’s job to encourage/enforce its protection. With everyone invested in maintaining a creative safe space, no one should feel “othered” for being themselves and sharing their artistic truth. And speaking of being ourselves...

## **Natural**

*The “N” is for “Natural” /  
So peep this; showing off your uniqueness, that’s the goal /  
The goal is not to do what’s forced, but to use the Force /  
Knowing there can only be one Luke, of course /  
Give me that slow-cooked neighborhood slang /  
Wave your pen like a conductor’s baton and get the paper to sing /  
There’s lots of stories out there; only you can tell yours /  
Well, of course, others could try, but they’d likely sell it short . . .*

Being natural has to do with bringing out the students' interests, personalities, and uniqueness in their work. Inevitably, some students will hesitate to personally open up, but it should never be because you didn't invite them to do so or failed to shape a comfortable creative space. It is also inevitable that students will borrow from the styles (and perhaps even the lyrics) of the artists who influence them. Imitation is a normal phase of one's creative process; simply look for opportunities to capitalize on "teachable moments" pertaining to originality versus plagiarism.

In his book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie wrote: "A person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language." So use it. Have the students introduce themselves with alliterative or acrostic phrases playing with their own names while revealing aspects of their personalities, like "Athletic Arianna" or "**A**lways **R**unning **I**n **A** **N**earby **N**eighborhood **A**rena." (Admittedly, the end of the alphabet gets trickier to incorporate. I definitely remember an elementary assembly with a Zany Zachary and a Yummy Yasmine. Feel free to let little Xavier "cheat" and be "Xcellent.")

I love encouraging my students to share their slang and other regional references in their writing. It makes the work more relevant to them while also showing them that you are interested in them as people. Plus it's fun learning their "slanguage." I have this Power Point presentation called "The Slang Game" where I take common expressions (like "hello", "friend", and "the party was fun") and show how they are said in the colloquial speech of different regions. The "solemn oath" gets particularly interesting, especially in places like DC which have a dozen versions of it. ("Kill, Moe!") I think a cool slang-centered writing prompt is for the students to do their own version of "Ebonics" by the rapper Big L (though you may have to clean it up depending on what setting you're teaching in).

I have my own version of "Ebonics" called "Broken English", which is based on old New Orleans slang:

*Broke Baller, Broken English; my English is broke /  
But when I'm finished professin', your English professor will say it was "dope" /  
So let me take you to New Orleans, to 6<sup>th</sup> & Baronne /  
Where every utterance we utter is a signature poem /  
Instead of "hello", we say, "Whoa, na"; we don't believe you, we say, "No, huh?" /  
"Huck-a-bucks" are frozen cups; your shoes are "soldiers" /  
When it's time to ride, we say, "Squad up, potna" /  
A-K is a "choppa"; pretty mamma's a "poppa stoppa" /  
Bally's are "B's", Reebok's are "Ree's"; when you showin' off, you "stuntin'" /  
When we see police, we say, "Dem PEOPLE comin'!" /  
We holler like, "Waaahhhh, lemme get dat outcha, lil' mamma!" /  
You lookin' sharp? You "jumpin' shob." You 'bout dat drama? Den you "'bout it, 'bout it"! /  
Big L wrote "Ebonics"? Well, these are Wodi-bonics /  
'Cause I'm N.O.-begotten; peep it, ya dig /  
We break your English in half and then we feed it to the masses /  
Like Jesus did with loaves of bread and pieces of fish /*

*It's Broken English.*

The most gratifying way in which I've celebrated the gift of sharing the natural self with my students has been through the success of *From Gumbo to Mumbo*. It is a poetic stage play starring and written by myself and my longtime partner-in-rhyme Dwayne Lawson-Brown, and it addresses the world through the eyes of two Black men: one from New Orleans and one from DC. (Get it? Gumbo? Mumbo sauce? Guffaw!) The script is rife with cultural references from both cities, and since it has only been performed in the DC area as of this writing, the audiences get to celebrate their DC culture while also learning more about New Orleans. We mounted the play as a field trip series whereby we facilitated pre-show and post-show workshops with a couple thousand middle schoolers. And in those workshops we encouraged our students to write their natural truths in their language, then coalesced their creations into devised poetry which we performed from the stage as part of the show. I don't think I have to tell you how powerfully validating it was for these inner city kids to hear their words reverberate from the walls of a professional theatre.

### **Knowledgeable**

*The "K" is for "Knowledgeable" /  
So read the room whether an actor, poet, rapper, or comic, ya know? /  
The same joke that would kill in one room might die in the next /  
So I might suggest applying context /  
Knowing your audience's needs is white light hitting prism /  
But the rainbow coming out the other side? Applied wisdom /  
Because if knowledge is knowing a tomato's a fruit /  
Wisdom is not putting it in your fruit salad to boot . . .*

And finally it all comes down to knowledge; bringing together all of the other elements of C.R.U.N.K. and applying them to success as a writer and performer. On the last day of a residency, I like to show up in one of my marathon finisher's jackets and all of my medals to stress to them the importance of coming through the "finish line" strong. By the end of your time with them, the students should be ready to teach the class. (I believe the industry term is "gradual release of responsibility.") You might start your last session by asking the students to recap everything they've learned with you so far. If you really want to spice it up, have them do it poetically.

Knowledge is also about being aware of the audience's needs. If you're preparing them to compete in a poetry slam, give them tricks for reading the room, monitoring what the judges responded to and playing off of or contrasting the energy and content of the other slammers. Some general public speaking elements (which were already covered if you followed my advice from Rapture and discussed the "5 P's") could be useful here, like knowing what type of speech (informative, demonstrative, persuasive, entertaining) is being given and what type of delivery (manuscript, memorized, impromptu, extemporaneous) is relevant to their situation.

But you "know" what poets never talk about?  
Money. And we should.

Too many kids don't consider creative careers (besides "rap star") as serious options because they haven't seen enough examples of people being able to make a living from something like performing and teaching poetry. And I think that's partly because we don't tell them about how poetry feeds us both materially and spiritually. They know how much athletes make because their contractual details are blasted all over ESPN. They have an idea how much drug dealers make because they wear (and drive) their "earnings." But they don't know what poets make besides poetry. So let's show them.

As soon as I'm done typing this, I'll be teaching another middle school poetry workshop. And I will tell them about the \$1000 COVID slam I competed in this summer. (I got third place: \$250.) I will also tell them about the \$500 international slam that I was in this summer. (This time I won, but by the time the Canadian exchange rate was done with my winnings, it "translated" to about \$350. Go figure. I'll tell my students that part, too.) We should also be telling them about the perhaps less "sexy" but just as helpful avenues of artistic compensation, such as grant-writing.

But I will definitely tell them this story. Last school year, a teacher whose class had seen and loved *From Gumbo to Mumbo* invited me back to his school to prepare his students for a poetry slam. I don't remember exactly what I quoted him: somewhere between \$100 and \$150 for an hour-or-so workshop.

Thing is, the principal wouldn't pay for it.

So then the teacher offered to pay for my services out of his own pocket; a feat which truly won my heart because that's the type of thing I used to do for my students when I was a full-time classroom teacher.

Thing is, the principal vetoed that move, too.

At this point, I had to look up the principal to see if she was an ex-girlfriend or something. (She wasn't.) Good news was, in the process of booking me (or trying, at least), the teacher recommended me to another school in the same family (this was a system of 6 schools.) So I did my poetry workshop at this second school and knocked it out of the park. The students, teachers and administrators who saw me all loved it. They loved it so much, in fact, that they raved about it to the curriculum/instruction specialist who supervised humanities for all 6 schools. Who, in turn, invited me to run the same workshop for the other 5 schools. (Yes, including the one I had been denied access to previously. You better believe I swaggered up into that joint like George Jefferson.)

And instead of the pithy \$100 to \$150 which I had previously quoted, this kind lady made sure I was paid \$500 per workshop.  $\$500 \times 6 = \$3,000$ . To do the same hour-long workshop six times. Something I enjoy doing so much, I would have done it for free. Oh, the "humanities."

Knowledge is power.

### **C.R.U.N.K.-clusion**

And so, in "C.R.U.N.K.-clusion," I hope that this essay has armed you with some tools that can help you be an effective, empathetic instructor of the poetic arts for students of all ages.

May you exude Creativity in your planning and inspire it in your execution.

May your Rapture for wordplay and performance be so infectious that it leaves your students breathless.

May you Unify your interests into an eclectic poetic potion, stirring your students together into a colorful, comforting cauldron of crafty creative community.

May you invoke your students' (and your own) Natural gifts, encouraging them to share the stories only they can tell in the language only they can tell it with.

And may you share your Knowledge with all who will partake, and gain it from all who will give it, contributing to the never-ending feedback loop of C.R.U.N.K. funk.

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The Poetry Teaching Artist Training Project #PoetryTAT provides training and resources for the professional development of poetry teaching artists. Directed by Jonathan B. Tucker and sponsored by the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities, this essay was produced as part of PoetryTAT 2020. The author of this essay, Drew Anderson, retains

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