Poetry Therapy Seminar Guide:  
*Conquering adversity through verse*

By Todd Harris Fries
Introduction: My Inspiration for the Poetry Therapy Seminar Guide

The first poem I ever wrote was an assignment from my second grade teacher Mrs. Mahoney, “A line can be a stair, A line can be the seat of a chair.” The assignment, a rhyming two-line poem describing what a line could be, was a drill designed to challenge its students to think abstractly and use their imaginations. I struggled with the assignment for a couple of days, straining my eyes and mind as I examined the world around me. From my juvenile viewpoint, I had a hard time conceptualizing a line as anything other than a simple mark on a page.

After laboring with the project for almost a week, and the due date approaching, I decided to ask Mrs. Mahoney for advice. She reached into her desk and pulled out a book of connect-the-dot exercises. I felt my intellectual capacity beyond that of connect-the-dot books, but she insisted that I take the book home and complete a few pages. As I connected the dots on page one, a scenic picture of a house with a patio developed. With each dot I connected and each subsequent line I drew, my perception began to change. It became clear that a line was more than simply a scrawl on a page, but an integral component to an elaborate illustration. I looked closely at the picture in front of me and could see lines everywhere: lines in the chair on the patio, lines on the steps of the house, lines all over! I turned in my poem the next day with a renewed outlook on perspective.

Mrs. Mahoney’s lessons in poetry and perspective have stuck with me to this day, twenty years removed from second grade. Having written more than two hundred poems in my personal journals, a second grade assignment has turned into my passion. I can still recite the numerous Shel Silverstein poems I memorized throughout my childhood, as if I were yet a student at Mountain Park Elementary School. Where the Sidewalk Ends and A Light in the Attic sit between Leaves of Grass and The Wasteland on my bookshelf. Using voices other than his own,
Silverstein relates his life experience and lessons via a child’s eyes, imparting adult principles in ways that even a toddler can understand. Emulating his example, I too write from viewpoints other than my own, from a child in “The Stone” to a bird in “Spiro the Sparrow,” and even a scarecrow in “A Scarecrow Who’s Afraid of Crows.” (Original works available at Poetry.com) Writing from an alternate standpoint continually challenges me to empathize and anticipate others’ feelings. The practice of putting oneself in another’s shoes is just as relevant to writing effective poetry as it is to a lawyer representing a client.

My frame of reference has forever been expanded, not only in the way I write my own poetry, but also in the way I analyze. My ability to see other angles did not come without failure. I’ll never forget the sea of red pen that donned my essay on Poe’s “The Raven” as a UCLA freshman. I quickly learned that much of poetry cannot be interpreted at face value. Devices such as metaphor, imagery, and double entendre make poetry a complicated and unrestricted medium. Yet even with indefinite boundaries, a poem must use word precision and ordered meter to convey its messages. There is a contradictory element to a poem’s construction, boundless with exactness. In the margin of my essay, my professor suggested that I look beyond the literal definition of a raven toward a more profound meaning. I soon realized, just as there is more to a word than merely a grouping of letters, there is more to a bird than feathers and wings.

There are many reasons I write poetry. Primarily, I write poetry as a means to leave a mark so that I might one day pass my life lessons on to future generations. Much of what I write is designed to evoke emotion in others: A poetic eulogy for my grandmother, a poem to console my grieving grandfather, a Valentine’s poem for my girlfriend or a Mother’s Day poem to say I love you. Writing has had a therapeutic effect upon my soul, a means by which to relieve and reveal my deepest sentiments. My final step in crafting a poem is presenting it to the
inspirational party. I derive just as much satisfaction sharing my poems with others as I do writing them. I aspire to one day publish a book of my collected works, an anthology that contains as many elements of other people as it does myself. There is a spot reserved on my bookshelf, right in between *A Light in the Attic* and *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. In my fanciful moments, I imagine there’s a spot for a few law books as well.

My friends and associates often point out the dichotomy between form and function of poetry as compared to that of written law. They wonder why I would want to pursue a legal career when law and poetry seem to be built on conflicting principles. Poetry is of the heart and imagination while law is of reason and logic. I always counter by providing relevant historic examples. Thomas Jefferson, founding father and poet-lawyer, used prose like poetry when he authored the Declaration of Independence. Francis Scott Key, creator of our national anthem and lawyer-poet, demonstrated his poetic skill when he composed the “Star Spangled Banner.” Imagine if the affinity for poetry had deterred poet-lawyer Abraham Lincoln from a career in law and politics. Doesn’t the heart of a poet beat throughout the Gettysburg address? I believe, as these men have proven, the analytic and linguistic skills acquired through writing poetry to be applicable and complementary to the practice of law.

I often look back to the first poem I ever wrote: “A line can be a stair, A line can be the seat of a chair.” When I re-analyze my poem twenty years later, the two lines take on a new significance. Metaphorically, a line can represent a chair, a classic symbol of stagnancy and inactivity. Conversely, a line can represent a stair, a symbol of progression to a new level. As I begin to draw a line and move from point a to point b, I have found, much like I did in second grade, that a line can be whatever I perceive it to be. All I have to do is connect the dots.

**What is Poetry Therapy?**
As poetry plays a significant role in my life, poetry can also play a significant role in helping others overcome their problems. Poems, songs, storytelling and creative writing all play central roles in poetry therapy, a relatively new therapeutic technique that uses written or spoken mediums for healing and personal growth.\(^1\) The process of speaking or writing poems stirs the individual’s creative and problem-solving forces.\(^2\) Examining poems helps the individual to appreciate who they are and gain confidence over their emotions.\(^3\) At the same time, listening to others’ poems helps group members gain a sense of connection and realize that others share their burdens.\(^4\) The discussion stimulated through writing and reading poems leads to greater insights and greater understanding of their experience.

Poetry therapy has three essential components: the literature, the trained facilitator, and the client(s).\(^5\) A trained facilitator selects a poem or other form of written or spoken media to serve as a catalyst and evoke feelings and responses for discussion.\(^6\) The interactive process helps the individual to develop emotionally, cognitively, and socially.\(^7\) The focus is on the person's reaction to the literature, never losing sight of the primary objective—the psychological health and well-being of the client.\(^8\) Reading and responding to classic and contemporary poems helps poetry therapy participants deepen into paradox, possibility and potential.\(^9\) Also, writing original poems that at once speak to the unique and the universal is also part of the healing power of poetry and poetry therapy.

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3 Id.
4 Id.
6 Id.
7 Id.
Those who run poetry therapy groups should meet specific criteria. First, poetry therapists must have an acquaintance with a wide variety of poems and create a gentle, non-threatening atmosphere where group members feel safe to share feelings openly and honestly.10 The facilitator should choose literature that will be effective therapeutically; this requires training, knowledge of literature, and clinical skills. Poetry therapy groups are run by writers, writer facilitators, psychological therapists, health professionals such as occupational therapists or nurses, social workers and teachers.11 However, not just anyone who is knowledgeable about poetry can lead a poetry therapy session. The National Association for Poetry Therapy has created guidelines for registration and certification in poetry therapy which entails numerous hours of clinical and practical training.12

The goals of poetry therapy are numerous:

- To develop creativity, self-expression, and greater self-esteem;
- To strengthen interpersonal skills and communication skills;
- To ventilate overpowering emotions and release tension;
- To find new meaning through new ideas, insights, and information; and
- To promote change and increase coping skills and adaptive functions.13

Poetry Therapy has a broad range of applications with people of all ages and is used for health and maintenance, as well as treating various illnesses and conditions.14 Examples include veterans, substance abusers, adolescents, the learning disabled, families with problems, prisoners in rehabilitation, the frail elderly, the physically challenged, and survivors of violence, abuse and

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12 The training requirements and hours needed for certification are steep including a bachelor’s degree and 440 hours of training for certification and a masters degree and 975 hours for registration in Poetry Therapy. See National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), *Guide to Training Requirements for Certification and Registration in Poetry Therapy*, 15 National Association of Biblio/Poetry Therapy (2007).
13 *Id.*
incest. The literature and case studies suggest that poetry therapy can be effective among many different populations.

**What are the Roots of Poetry Therapy?**

Poetry Therapy may be traced back to primitive man, who used religious rites in which shamans and witchdoctors chanted poetry for the well-being of the tribe or individual. As far back as the fourth millennium B.C.E. in ancient Egypt, words were written on papyrus and then dissolved into a solution so that the words could be physically ingested by the patient to take effect. The Greeks are credited as being one of the earliest people to conceive the importance of words and feelings to both poetry and healing. Thus, it is not surprising that Apollo was the dual god of poetry and medicine, since medicine and the arts were entwined. However, the first Poetry Therapist on record was a Roman physician Soranus (98-138 AD), who in the first century A.D., prescribed tragedy for his manic patients and comedy for those who were depressed.

For many centuries the link between poetry and medicine remained obscure. As far back as 1751, Pennsylvania Hospital, the first hospital in the United States, employed many ancillary treatments for their mental patients, including reading, writing and publishing of their writings. However, it was Dr. Benjamin Rush, called the "Father of American Psychiatry", who was the first American to introduce music and poetry as a form of therapy in the early

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15 *Supra* note 8.  
16 Thompson, *supra* note 5.  
17 National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), *supra* note 12, at 5.  
18 *Id.*  
20 Mazza, *supra* note 47, at 5.  
22 National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), *supra* note 12, at 5.  
23 *Id.*  
24 *Id.*
Poemwriting became an activity of the patients, who published their work in *The Illuminator*, the hospital’s newspaper.

In 1928, Eli Greifer, an inspired poet and lawyer and pharmacist by profession, began a campaign to show the healing power of poetry. Greifer offered poetic prescriptions to people filling their drug prescriptions. Greifer believed that memorization of poems was useful for a process of healing he called ‘psychosurgery.’ In the 1950's Greifer started a "poemtherapy" group at Creedmoor State Hospital in New York, where he volunteered his time. By 1959, Greifer expanded his poetry therapy group to Cumberland Hospital where he collaborated with two supervising psychiatrists, Dr. Jack L. Leedy and Dr. Sam Spector. The overwhelming success of Greifer’s poetry therapy groups prompted Greifer to write *Principles of Poetry Therapy* in 1963. Although Greifer died in 1966, he played a key role in the development of what we now call "Poetry Therapy," and is credited for giving poetry therapy its name.

Dr. Jack. L. Leedy continued Greifer’s work and published *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry in the Treatment of Emotional Disorder* in 1969. Leedy’s book, which includes essays by many of the early pioneers in the field, is considered the first definitive book on poetry therapy. About this time, more and more professionals in the medical field began to use poetry integrated with group process. While Dr. Leedy continued his work at Cumberland Hospital,

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27 Kirklin, *supra* note 9, at 156.
28 *Id.*
29 *Id.*
33 *Id.* at 7.
35 National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), *supra* note 12, at 6-7 (‘Around the country many gifted individuals who were helping professionals were using poetry therapy. In 1962, Joy Shieman conducted pioneering
“Ann White [worked] with the Nassau County Recreation Department and developed an experimental project that brought the therapeutic benefits of poetry to hospitals, rehabilitation centers, and schools for special children. At the same time, Gilbert Schloss PhD conducted psychotherapy sessions with individuals and groups at the Institute for Sociotherapy in New York. In 1969, Leedy, White and Schloss collaborated to create the Association for Poetry Therapy (APT). Shortly thereafter, the APT developed a set of standards for certification in the field of poetry therapy.

In the early 1970’s, many medical professionals developed training institutes for poetry therapy. Among them was Arthur Lerner, Ph.D. of Los Angeles who founded the Poetry Therapy Institute in the 1970’s on the west coast and in 1978 authored Poetry in the Therapeutic Experience. Arleen Hynes, a librarian at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington D.C. established the Bibliotherapy Roundtable and Morris Morrison founded the American Academy of Poetry Therapy in Austin, Texas. While each institute conferred its own training

research within a mental health unit of a California hospital. Shieman believed that her approach utilized the right hemisphere of the brain for natural healing and “realignment of the soul.” She called her work “thera-poetics.” In 1971, Arthur Lerner PhD, poet and clinical psychologist, was appointed Poet-in Residence and Poetry Therapist at a private psychiatric facility, the Calabasas Neuropsychiatric Center in California. Ruth Lisa Schechter, poet (author of Poetry Therapy: A Therapeutic Tool and Healing Force, 1983), became the first official poetry therapist at Odyssey House, in New York City, working with addiction clients and victims of rape and incest in 1971. Librarian Eloise Richardson convinced the Governor of Maryland to hold a Poetry Therapy Day, sponsored by the state of Maryland in 1974. Poet and educator Aaron Kramer PhD opened new worlds to the deaf and disturbed (see Poetry the Healer, 7 Revised December 2006 1973). Poet Art Berger PhD wrote about poetry as a vehicle for self-discovery for both teachers and youngsters (in Poetry the Healer, 1973), and used rock, blues lyrics, and “jazz cinquains” to elicit writing from children. Dr. George Bell (The Self-Discovery Notebook, 1990), a minister from Ohio, was incorporating poetry into his counseling, and developed “the feedback poem,” a technique enabling the counselor and counselee to understand each other better. Clearly, poetry therapy was being used successfully with many different populations.”

36 Id. at 6.
37 Id.
38 Id.
39 Id.
40 National Association for Poetry Therapy, supra note 26.
41 Mazza, supra note 47, at 7 (The Poetry Therapy Institute “was the first legally incorporated nonprofit organization devoted to the practice and study of poetry therapy.”).
42 National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), supra note 12, at 8.
certificates, uniform requirements for poetry therapists had not been established. Consequently, in 1980, a meeting was called to bring together those active in the field working all over the country to formulate guidelines for training and certification in poetry therapy. Those in attendance unanimously decided the APT would become the National Association for Poetry Therapy, a national non-profit association. They also developed the National Federation for Bibliotherapy whose intended purpose was realized in 2002, when it became the certifying body for trained poetry therapists. NAPT is now the official membership organization representing poetry therapists.

**How Does Poetry Therapy Work?**

Poetry therapy group facilitators use many different kinds of media and exercises to aid their clients in overcoming their problems. The different kinds of activities facilitators employ can be broken down into three main components: 1) the receptive/prescriptive component involving the introduction of literature into therapy, 2) the expressive/creative component involving the use of client writing in therapy, and 3) the symbolic/ceremonial component involving the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling. All three components “have the potential to address the cognitive, affective and behavioral domains of human experience” and can be collectively used to develop an effective poetry therapy seminar or session.

The receptive prescriptive component typically involves reading a pre-existing poem to an individual or group and inviting reactions for discussion. The poem introduced to the group should be connected with the pre-determined theme of the session or connected with the dialogue

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43 Id.
44 National Association for Poetry Therapy, supra note 26.
45 Id.
46 National Association for Poetry Therapy (NAPT), supra note 12, at 8.
48 Id.
or content of the session. The poem should serve as a vehicle for group members to talk about ideals, goals and emotions. The discussion following the poem should be focused on what the poem means to the reader and whether there was is any line or overall theme of the poem that strikes the reader as their own. If the poem is to be read aloud to the group, copies should be distributed to group members for visual reference.

The selection of the proper poem or song is essential to effective poetry therapy. Poetry therapists dealing with young adults often prefer to use popular song lyrics or an audio version of a song to elicit reactions from the group. Open-ended songs and poems can assist the client with self-awareness. Encouraging clients to bring their own poems and songs they found to be helpful allows group members to share their feelings with the group. Facilitators can ask clients about particular works they enjoyed or identified with in order to provide the facilitator with “fruitful clinical information and self-understanding for the client.”

The expressive/creative component involves the use of creative writing (poems, stories, diaries) to aid the client in expressing emotion and gaining a sense of order and concreteness. A variety of creative writing techniques are used, from free-writing exercises to structured poems

49 Id.
51 Mazza, *supra* note 47, at 19.
52 Several authors discuss the importance of choosing the proper works for therapy. See Jack Leedy, *Poetry Therapy: The Use of Poetry Therapy in the Treatment of Emotional Disorders*, 67-74 Lippincott Press (1969) (discussing the isoprinciple of selecting a poem that matches the client’s emotional state but noting that positive endings may invalidate a client’s feeling or make the therapist seem insensitive and thus could be counterproductive for the client); See also A.M. Hynes, M. Hynes-Berry, *Biblio/Poetry Therapy – The Interactive Process: A Handbook*, North Star Press (1994) (detailing criteria for the selection of poetic material according to thematic dimensions (e.g. imagery, rhythm and diction); See also A.M Rolfs, S.I. Super, *Guiding the Unconsciousness: The Process of Poem Selection for Poetry Therapy Groups*, The Arts in Psychotherapy 15, 119-126 (1988) (indemnifying the importance of the process of poetry selection and noting transference/countertransference issues).
56 *Id.* at 20.
to sentence stems.\textsuperscript{57} Some poetry therapy scholars suggest journal writing can be a useful tool for clients to express thoughts and feelings in a personal way.\textsuperscript{58} Keeping a journal allows clients to keep their feelings confidential in the event they are not ready to share among a group. Journals can involve creative techniques, from keeping an open record of thoughts to a highly structured log of events and feelings. Regardless of the creative techniques employed by the group facilitator, creative writing exercises should provide some element of control and expressiveness to the client.\textsuperscript{59}

The symbolic/ceremonial component involves the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling in therapy. Metaphors both in preexisting literature and creative writing are often used in therapeutic capacities to help clients express and understand the connection between internal conflict and external reality.\textsuperscript{60} In its most basic form, “a metaphor is something that stands for something else”; metaphors may stand for emotions, actions and beliefs.\textsuperscript{61} Rituals are also often used in poetry therapy groups to meet the particular needs of clients. For example, writing Christmas cards, giving a eulogy or writing a letter to a loved one may allow individuals to “recognize [the present and] past, let go and move on.”\textsuperscript{62} Using ritual exercises within a poetry therapy group serves dual purposes, “to validate an occurrence and promote change.”\textsuperscript{63} Finally, storytelling exercises aid group members in sharing their experiences and receiving support.\textsuperscript{64} Storytelling is an essential part of everyday life; people tell stories all the time by remembering

\textsuperscript{57} For example, sentence stems involve the client completing a phrase such as “I wish…” or “I am happy when…” See K. Koch, Wishes, Lies, and dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry, Harper and Row (1970).

\textsuperscript{58} Mazza, supra note 47, at 19.

\textsuperscript{59} Id.

\textsuperscript{60} Id. at 20.


\textsuperscript{63} Combs, supra note 61, at 208.

what they experience and telling other people what they remember in the form of a story. Human memory itself is story-based. 65 Most people find it a lot easier to remember what other people have said if they tell it as a story and we learn from these stories, as others learn from the stories we tell. 66 Externalizing problems through narrative storytelling is central to functioning and resolving conflict. 67

**What Happens in a Typical Poetry Therapy Session?**

According to Sherry Reiter, former president of the National Association for Poetry Therapy (1993-1995), the typical poetry therapy session consists of the following steps: 1) the introduction, 2) the body of the session, and 3) closure. Each step will be discussed below. However, please note there is not a norm for a poetry therapy session as exercises and group goals will vary according to group dynamics and makeup.

Each poetry therapy group session should bring with an introduction where ground-rules are set and where group members agree to respect confidential issues that may arise. 68 The beginning of a new session arouses many new feelings and anxieties in participants and facilitators alike. 69 Thus, a warm-up consisting of a word game, word associations, a song, or other verbal introduction is used to "break the ice" so everyone feels comfortable. 70 Further, warm-activities serve to build confidence in group member’s abilities, warm the ink in the pen and get group members’ minds thinking, imaginations working and emotions flowing. 71

In the body of the session, “the facilitator suggests a creative writing theme, or uses creative writing that has already been published to help participants to explore feelings, thoughts,

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66 Id.
67 Mazza, *supra* note 47, at 22.
68 Bolton, *supra* note 11, at 36.
69 Id. at 35.
70 Reiter, *supra* note 1, at 174.
71 Bolton, *supra* note 11, at 36.
ideas and personal issues.”  
Facilitators should choose literature that will be effective therapeutically and should be cautious in introducing works that may be counterproductive to group process. Although there are no fixed rules regarding the method for selecting material, there are some basic guidelines.

Poetry therapists should pay special attention to the content of the material and its relevance to the participants. The group dynamics, group goals and group members’ individual abilities should be assessed prior to making a literary selection. Generally, facilitators should choose poems and songs that elicit emotional associations with the work and foster connections with fellow group members. Each participant should be given a copy of the chosen literature, so that the words can be taken in visually while being heard; a poem must be read word for word in order that rhythm, rhyme, assonance and alliteration be appreciated. Reading poetry aloud builds group cohesion, and enables patients to respond to the rhythm of the poem. Subsequent to the reading of the work, the poetry therapist should engage the group in a discussion regarding the mood, theme, what the work represents for respective group members and what connections if any group members made with the work.

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72 Reiter, supra note 1, at 174.
73 Id. at 174-175 (“Guidelines for poem and song selection include: 1) the facilitator uses universal material to foster identification. Psychiatrist Dr. Jack Leedy suggests that the catalyst poem be chosen according to the isoprinciple, matching the feeling tone of the poem to the client’s mood to aid in the identification process, 2) The facilitator avoids confusing, hopeless, and depressing material that offers no resolution or insights into coping with negative feelings. Even if a poem’s last few lines are uplifting, if the bulk of material is negative, the mood of the client may plummet with counter-therapeutic results, 3) The facilitator chooses poems in which the metaphoric content builds upon and integrates images clearly and consistently. This leads to clear, cohesive thinking on the part of the listener , 4) The facilitator avoids literary material that glorifies homicide, suicide, or that denigrates parental figures or G-d.”).
74 Id. at 175.
75 Id.
77 Schiraldi, supra note 2, at 260.
The reading and reflection of a literary selection should be a group interactive process.

Four stages can be identified in the interactive process: 78

1) **Recognition** - To begin with, participants must be able to recognize and identify with the selection;

2) **Examination** - During this phase, participants explore specific details with the assistance of a [poetry therapist]. Through questions and open dialogue, the group explores the significance of their reactions;

3) **Juxtaposition** - This is a process that explores the significant interplay between contrasts and comparisons. . . Looking at an experience from a directly opposite view can provide an awareness that may become the basis for wise choices in attitude and behavior;

4) **Application to the Self** - The [poetry therapist] encourages feelings to emerge and become integrated with cognitive concepts and deeper self-understanding. . . It is important for the client to see the connection between the individual and the literature, and to apply the new knowledge to his/her own self in the real world. 79

In working through all four stages, it is important for the poetry therapist to establish an atmosphere that promotes member participation so as to build trust and cohesion amongst the group. Group collaboration maximizes communication abilities and establishes a beneficial culture of productivity for all participants.

At the end of the session, the facilitator should provide closure. “Factors to consider include: the length of the session, the degree of self-disclosure and group unity, and the degree of tension encountered during the workshop.” 80 Closure provides a time for a recapitulation of lessons learned and experiences shared throughout the session. Further, closure may be used to highlight the relevance of the workshop to everyday life, summarize some of the key points, address unanswered questions and conclude in a positive and mutually affirming way. 81

**The Poetry Therapy Seminar**

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79 Reiter, *supra* note 1, at 175-176.
80 *Id.* at 176.
81 *Id.*
My goal in creating the poetry therapy seminar guide is to make therapeutic writing techniques more accessible to able facilitators who may want to try and lead a poetry therapy seminar. While the National Association for Poetry Therapy has outlined rigorous standards for certification and registration in poetry therapy, I believe therapeutic writing techniques should not solely be left in the hands of professionals. Keeping diaries, writing stories and reading poems are activities that almost everyone has done at one point in their life. The universality of such activities makes therapeutic writing a familiar and useful tool in helping people overcome their battles.

By creating the *Poetry Therapy Seminar Guide: conquering adversity through verse*, I want to give group facilitators the means to run an organized and effective poetry therapy seminar. Though certain realms of mental illness should be left to trained professionals, the struggles of everyday Americans such as depression and substance abuse\(^{82}\) can be eased through therapeutic writing and poetry therapy. Thus, my aim is to create a poetry therapy seminar that can be used for numerous ailments and across a variety of groups.

The seminar uses a mixture of: (1) receptive/prescriptive exercises, (2) expressive/creative exercises and (3) symbolic/ceremonial exercises (as discussed in the *How Does Poetry Therapy Work?* section above). The overall format is based on a combination of a seven week/session format developed by Nicholas Mazza,\(^{83}\) Ph.D., R.P.T. (Registered Poetry Therapist) and the typical poetry therapy session as outlined by Sherry Reiter, C.S.W, R.P.T., R.D.T (Registered Drama Therapist), in her testimony on Capitol Hill regarding poetry therapy. The seven week format takes into account time limits of participants and participants’ limited

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\(^{82}\) In America today, roughly 18 million people are depressed and 12.8 million people over the age of 12 abuse drugs. Statistics provided by [www.depressioncenter.org](http://www.depressioncenter.org) and [www.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ncjrs.gov) respectively.

\(^{83}\) Mazza, *supra* note 47, at 48 (Nicholas Mazza is recognized as a leader in the field of poetry therapy. Dr. Mazza is a professor of psychology at Florida State University and conducts his research through that university.).
goals. Because session participants will likely be those who have other commitments (work, school, etc.), goals will be more limited than sessions attended strictly by those with serious mental disorders. Mazza suggests that seven weeks serves as an adequate time frame for brief therapy, but that “time could be used as a treatment variable consistent with other student responsibilities.”

My hope is that activities within the seven week program can be duplicated in the event a facilitator finds them successful (if a seminar needs to be lengthened) or eliminated in the event they are counterproductive (if a seminar needs to be shortened).

The poetry therapy seminar schedule and activities should be set-up as follows. The group should convene for one session a week, for seven weeks. The group facilitator should ideally allow at least 2 hours for each session. Each session follows an identical structure: the session begins with 1) a warm-up activity, 2) followed by a reflection activity and 3) concludes with a group activity.

Warm-up activities consist of different forms and methods of creative writing to get group members’ minds thinking, imaginations working and emotions flowing. As aforementioned, the beginning of a new poetry therapy seminar can be a nerve-wracking experience for participants and facilitators. Warm-up activities reduce anxieties, encourage group members to participate and bolster confidence. Most warm-up activities are relatively light and do not require enormous amounts of creativity to complete. Consequently, group members begin to feel confident in their abilities. However, as the sessions progress, and group members become more advanced, warm-up activities get increasingly challenging. After completing the warm-up activity, the facilitator should lead a focused discussion about the exercise and what group members should have learned upon completion of the activity.

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84 Id. (suggesting the time frame for treatment could be shortened or lengthened according to the respective time commitments of group members).
Following the warm-up activity is the reflection activity. Reflection activities employ pre-existing poems or pop music to be used by the group leader to facilitate discussion. Poems and songs can elicit emotional connections with the narrator or with fellow group members through discussion.85 Also, songs and poems allow group members to see how emotions may be expressed from different points of view and likewise how different points of view can be expressed in identical ways.86 The poem/song may be introduced into the session to parallel the conversations or subject matter of the week or may be introduced to allow group members to make an emotional identification with the poem. Copies of the poem should be passed out to each group member for visual reference. Facilitators may also choose to use two or more poems or songs for a compare and contrast activity. Following the reading, the facilitator should lead a discussion focusing on what the poem means to the readers and which lines strike them as significant. Facilitators may also ask the group how they would change the poem if they were the author. The back of the guide contains an appendix containing discussion questions for reflection activities. A list of the twenty-two poems most often used in practice and song suggestions for reflection activities are also included.

Each session concludes with a group activity. Group activities are comprised of collaborative poems, whereby the group creates a poem with each member having the opportunity to contribute lines. The facilitator should provide a theme for the poem to direct group members’ thinking. Upon completion of the collaborative poem, the group should create an appropriate title for the work. Copies of the collaborative poem should be disseminated to the group and may be used for discussion following the activity or at the beginning of the next session. The benefits to group activities are numerous; collaborative poems are useful in

85 Mazza, supra note 47, at 56.
86 Mazza, supra note 53.
creating group cohesiveness, maximizing communication abilities and interpersonal skills and establishing a culture of productivity. Further, collaborative poems give encouragement to group members who at first may have a hard time completing poems by themselves.

Each week/session is broken into its own color-coded section. Every session starts with a goal sheet to be used by the facilitator for outlining goals for the upcoming session. As different groups will have different goals, the goal sheets are blank. Facilitators are to determine goals for the group according to the group’s needs and progress. Though pre-determined goals would make the seminar more user friendly, they also limit the seminar’s applicability to numerous ailments. Thus, goals will vary according to the particular disorders the seminar intends to address.

The activities and directions for each activity follow the goal sheet for each week. The activities’ directions are generally simple and easy to understand. More difficult activities contain sample poems or model structures to help the facilitator grasp the activities’ set-up. The directions for each activity also include suggested time frames so as to keep each session within two hours. However, facilitators are free to expand or reduce the set time limits for the activities at their discretion. Each activity page contains a section where the group facilitator can make notes regarding the effectiveness of the activity or any other relevant comments. Each section concludes with a leader report form which facilitators can use to chart group members’ progress and make notes about the session’s outcome and the session plan for the next week.

*Poetry Seminar Guide: Conquering Adversity Through Verse* comes in three different versions: 1) the paper version, 2) the laminated version, and 3) the CD-Rom version. The paper version is printed and bound on letter size paper. Facilitators who wish to keep permanent hard

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87 Mazza, *supra* note 47, at 48-49.
88 *Id.*
records of their poetry groups may prefer the paper version. However, facilitators who wish to use and re-use the seminar guide and take separate notes for their permanent records may prefer the laminated version. The laminated version is spiral bound and includes a whiteboard pen for use with the guide. When the seminar is complete, the facilitator can transcribe the relevant notes for their records and simply erase the marks in their guide for easy re-use. Facilitators may also prefer the CD-Rom version which contains the guide in Microsoft Word format and allows for notes to be typed directly into the guide. The CD-Rom version can also be printed in the occasion a facilitator prefers to take hand notes. Regardless of the version used, the poetry seminar guide aims to be user friendly for therapists and poetry group facilitators alike.

The guide concludes with poetry therapy resources including the website for the National Association for Poetry Therapy and other websites with useful information about poetry therapy and therapeutic writing. While the guide provides a very structured seven week format, facilitators are encouraged to change the seminar as they see fit to meet the needs of their respective groups. Facilitators may want to visit the websites provided in the back of the guide for activity suggestions to add to their seminar.

Through this guide I hope to help people overcome their battles. Likewise, I want to provide group facilitators the necessary tools to lessen others’ struggles. I also wish to inspire therapists to become registered as poetry therapists and to use poetry therapy techniques in their practices. I strongly believe poetry can serve others as it has served me over the past twenty years. Finally, and most importantly, I aspire to show others that “a line can be” the first step in “re-versing” their life.

**Law School Lore**

*Another semester almost complete*

*Bookstore no more*
Can’t believe I fell in love
Deepening our understandings of each other’s struggles
  Exams are best administered open-book
  Finally finding my way out and graduating
  Grades are not everything
  Habeas corpus and Hambi v. Rumsfeld
Illness seeps into my stomach at the thought of this experience ending for good
  Jobs are nowhere to be found
Kitschy outfits worn at last month’s bar review
  Long distance relationship no more
  More to do
  Never out of debt
Oh my goodness finals are approaching
  Prognosis hopefully successful
  Quite a joy to teach you all
(W)Right are the professors who love you

-Poem authored by the students and professors of the Public Interest & Social Justice Seminar – Spring 2009