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Recommended Citation

Williams, P. (2021) "Sampling the Hors d'Oeuvres: Exploratory Poetics in Archives & Special Collections." In *The Teaching with Archives & Special Collections Cookbook*. Edited by Julie M. Porterfield. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).

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Sampling the Hors d'Oeuvres

Exploratory Poetics in Archives and Special Collections

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NUTRITION INFORMATION

Going beyond a typical show-and-tell, this recipe engages students with primary materials as ingredients for creative work, with attention to the ways researchers read and notice in archives and special collections. This hands-on creative activity helps students to identify and analyze many facets of materials in a special collections setting, and it allows students to explore those materials together. Students create found poems based on a prompt distributed by the librarian-instructor and then engage in reflective sharing of the poems. The prompt draws students toward the textual, paratextual, and metadata elements of materials, and the sharing of poems among students highlights the variety of their observations.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After completing this activity, students will be able to

- describe forms and genres of rare and archival materials
- identify metadata and paratextual information among those materials
- investigate and select among unknown materials from a creative perspective

RELEVANT RBMS/SAA JOINT GUIDELINES

3A, 3B, 5C

COOKING TIME

- Preparation: 2–3 hours (selecting/arranging materials, creating prompt)
- Activity: 80-minute class session

NUMBER SERVED

10–15, to allow for end-of-session sharing

INGREDIENTS

- primary source materials (librarian-instructor's choice)
- poem prompt worksheet
- document camera

PREPARATION

- Select materials for classroom use.

The librarian-instructor selects materials to serve as a basis for the exercise. This may be topic-based, including materials relevant to course subject matter, or a wide variety of selections made to demonstrate certain aspects or the scope of collections. The librarian-instructor should spend time with these materials in order to create a poem prompt (the next step) that is capacious for student exploration and

that suitably reflects course learning outcomes.

- Create poem prompt worksheet.
 - In advance of the session, the librarian-instructor, perhaps in collaboration with the course instructor, should create a line-by-line prompt for a found poem. A poem of 10 lines and a title is appropriate for an 80-minute course session. The prompt should send students exploring without being too prescriptive; it should provide only enough guidance to give them a sense of purpose for browsing materials. Prompts can ask students to borrow words from items on display, or they may suggest students record their own reflections about these materials or describe aspects of them, for example:
 - Title your poem with words you find on a map or illustration.
 - Borrow the last line of a piece of correspondence.
 - Take a phrase or sentence from something that predates the 20th century.
 - Take a phrase from a work written by a woman.
 - Ask a question prompted by something handmade or handwritten.
 - Build a line around something you notice on the outside of a book.

Prompts can be targeted to emphasize aspects such as purpose, form, historical era, production methods, or identities represented in the materials. Title and line prompts should be organized on one side of a sheet (with space for student writing). On the reverse, space should be made for students to cite the sources they use. The librarian-instructor should test the prompt to ensure its applicability to the selected materials and may want to work with course instructors in selecting an appropriate citation style.

- Students learn handling procedures.

When working with students new to handling materials in the archives and special collections setting, a portion of the class should be dedicated to modeling proper handling practices and helping students to get comfortable with materials. For a class that has already visited special collections, more time may be permitted for exploration and poem-finding.

- Students explore items and complete worksheet.

Students should be granted the bulk of the class for exploration and poem-making. During this time, the librarian-instructor can circulate to assist with handling and questions. It can also be fruitful to have students informally consider the origins of the items, how they

were produced and circulated, what audiences and conflicts they represent, and what their significance might be. It may be helpful to create labels for some items to provide context.

- Students raise questions and observations about materials.

Throughout the session, the librarian-instructor should note questions that come up and pay attention to where students spend their time. Additionally, the librarian-instructor should encourage students to take note of observations they may want to share with the group. The librarian-instructor may revisit or ask students to share questions and bring relevant materials to the document camera to explore as a group. The librarian-instructor should model how students might locate or notice paratextual elements present in the prompt and where to look for citation information.

- Impromptu poetry reading.

Once questions and observations are shared, the librarian-instructor should ask volunteers to read their poems to the class, perhaps leading with a poem of their own written before or during the session. The librarian-instructor should ask each reader to describe or cite an item or two that helped them form their poem and note any similarities or shared items or themes.

It is my experience that this kind of exploratory encounter with special collections materials can create a good lead-in to a session about more deliberate searching of the collections and question-posing with primary sources but that trying to combine an activity like this with a searching workshop in a single session is overwhelming.

TASTE TEST

Formative assessment can take place during the session as the librarian-instructor circulates and engages with students. Summative assessment, particularly around questions of source identification and interpretation of key terms in the prompts, is accomplished through reading the student poems after the session. Multiple sessions with the same materials have helped the author to identify the kinds of texts that draw students' attention—chapter titles and photo captions, for example—and have helped me fine-tune the prompt language to ensure that the relevant attributes of materials are clear. By checking citations, the librarian-instructor is able to see if students have borrowed language from materials that satisfy the prompt and identify where their questions or self-written lines originate. Additionally, the citations allow librarian-instructors to check whether students have formed clear ideas about the forms of material they choose to work with, be they books, manuscripts, or objects.