

## Nikki Grimes Curriculum Guide and Classroom Resources

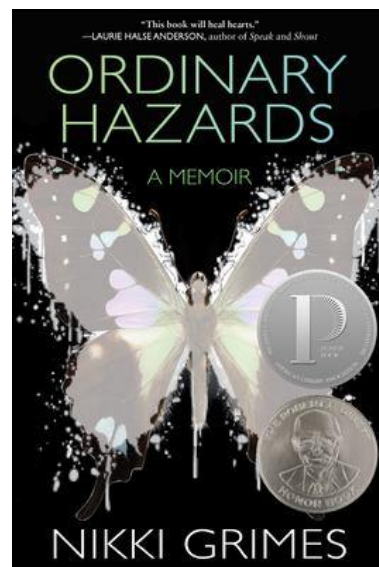
Winner of the 2022 Anne V. Zarrow Award for Young Readers' Literature –

### Nikki Grimes

Lesson ideas for selected reading: *Ordinary Hazards* by Nikki Grimes

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<https://www.nikkigrimes.com/>



The magic of language is at the center of most of **Nikki Grimes** prodigious work, which includes picture books, middle-grade novels, and nonfiction biographies but mainly focuses on poetry, her own and that of others. Some of her poetry is humorous, but most of it is deeply personal and emotionally intense, particularly her memoir in verse, *Ordinary Hazards*, in which she explores her difficult childhood and growing ability as a writer.

***“Thank you to everyone who has ever learned to sing in a world that does not want to hear your voice.” – Jason Mott***

Curriculum guide for *Ordinary Hazards* by 2022 Zarrow Award winner Nikki Grimes – Created by Youth Services Department, Tulsa City-County Library, page 1

# Words with Wings

Some words  
sit still on the page  
holding a story steady.  
Those words  
never get me into trouble.  
But other words have wings  
that wake my daydreams.  
They fly in,  
silent as sunrise,  
tickle my imagination,  
and carry my thoughts away.  
I can't help  
but buckle up  
for the ride!

© Nikki Grimes

## Great Advice about Connecting Kids with Poetry from Nikki Grimes

In her long career writing (and collecting awards!), Nikki Grimes has given a number of interviews for print and in video. One topic she's frequently asked about – and loves to talk about – is how to connect children and young adults to poetry, both in and out of the classroom. Here are a few of her interviews and choice quotes about how adults can use poetry to entice, enchant, and support young people as they become independent adults.

- **“A Renaissance Woman: Up Close with Nikki Grimes”** – School Library Journal, 2017: <https://www.slj.com//story/a-renaissance-woman-up-close-with-nikki-grimes>

**Poetry and spoken word seem to be having a bit of a renaissance, especially in our popular culture. How do you think schools can capitalize on this and embrace the power of language and the multitude of ways it can be used?**

It starts by sharing poetry throughout the curriculum. The marketplace is so rich in poetry right now that one can find poetry with which any student can relate. If your students love sports, try collections of poems about baseball, or soccer, or novels-in-verse featuring basketball. There are themed collections about history, science, even math. You name the subject, there's likely to be at least one or two collections or verse novels on that topic.

Beyond that, try reader's theater, open mic poetry in the classroom, poetry readings, and poetry slams. Some of these are already being experimented with in classrooms across the county, and to great effect. Teachers who are using poetry and novels-in-verse with their students, and inviting them to write and perform poetry of their own, tell me that the culture of their classrooms is changing.

As students share their work, revealing themselves to one another, they're beginning to develop a greater respect for poetry, for language, and for one another. Through poetry, they're discovering that they are more alike than they are different. That's an enormous payoff for bringing poetry into the classroom.

- **Video Interview with Reading Rockets –**  
<https://www.readingrockets.org/books/interviews/grimes>

## Poetry vs. castor oil

My recommendation for K through 3 in terms of introducing poetry is, first of all, to get beyond the sense of intimidation about sharing poetry. What I've discovered is that most adults have had a really unhappy experience with poetry in their own student life, and so they're kind of put off at the very notion of sharing poetry with their students. So, it's important to remember that if you present poetry as if it were castor oil, no one will like it.

A way around that is to find poetry that you love, that you are excited about, and that you're passionate about - because students are going to pick up on your attitude. People talk about poetry that they feel should be taught, and I always say, "Don't 'should' all over me. Choose work that you like."

The poetry market is so rich now that it can be used throughout the curriculum. There's poetry on math, science, space travel, sports, school supplies — poetry on just every conceivable subject.

So choose poetry that you like, that you connect with, and that you know your students are going to connect with, and start there, so that they have a positive experience. Have fun with it! Don't start out by analyzing! Nobody needs to start out analyzing — get them in love with the genre. Let analytical work come later — years later. Their first experience should be enjoyable. It should be fun. Choreograph poems. Experiment with ways to perform it. Children love an opportunity to perform. Do reader's theater with it. Make it a fun experience for yourself and for your students. After that, they'll take off. You won't be able to keep them away from it.

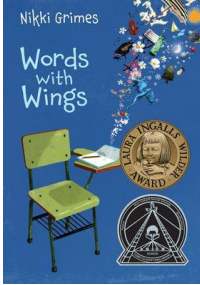
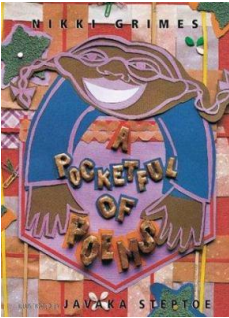
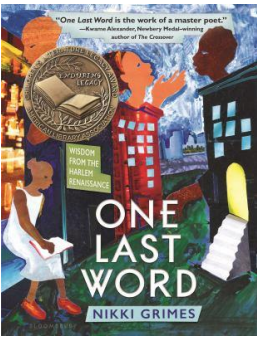
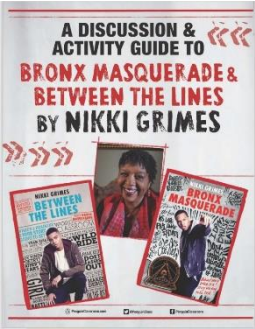
- **“Nikki Grimes on Writing Poetry” – Lee & Low Blog, 2015 -**  
<https://blog.leeandlow.com/2015/06/04/interview-nikki-grimes-on-writing-poetry/>

**Many readers are intimidated by poetry or think it is not for them. For people who find poetry difficult, where would you recommend they start?**

Start with word play. I sometimes like to take a word and study it through the lens of my senses. Take the word “lemon”, for instance. What is its shape, its scent, its color? Does it make a sound? Does it have a taste? How would you describe that sound, that taste? Where is a lemon to be found? What does it do or what can you do with it? In answering such questions, in a line or two in response to each question, one ends up either with a poem or the makings of a poem.

## Resources & Educators Guides

There are many terrific guides and resources for educators on Nikki Grimes's web site, at <https://www.nikkigrimes.com/educators.html>, including:

|   |  |
|---|--|
|    | <p><b>Words With Wings</b></p> <p>Teachers Guide: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/images/pdf/tg_wordswithwings.PDF">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/images/pdf/tg_wordswithwings.PDF</a></p>  |
|   | <p><b>Pocketful of Poems</b></p> <p>Teachers Guide: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pckftltg.html">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pckftltg.html</a></p> <p>Multiple Intelligence Projects: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pcktfmip.html">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pcktfmip.html</a></p> <p>Poetry Toolbox: Personification: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pcktflpe.html">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/pcktflpe.html</a></p> |
|  | <p><b>One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance</b></p> <p>Comprehensive Curriculum Guide: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/OneLastWord_Guide.pdf">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/teacher/OneLastWord_Guide.pdf</a></p> <p><i>NOTE: Of all of the teacher guides, this is the most comprehensive and content-rich.</i></p>  |
|  | <p><b>Bronx Masquerade &amp; Between the Lines</b></p> <p>Discussion and Activity Guide: <a href="https://www.nikkigrimes.com/images/pdf/bronx_between_tg.pdf">https://www.nikkigrimes.com/images/pdf/bronx_between_tg.pdf</a></p>   |

## A Lesson from Nikki: Begin a Poem with a Picture

This lesson is provided by Nikki Grimes herself! It was first published in *Instructor* magazine in 1995 but still holds up today:

POETRY PAGES FOR KIDS

# Begin a Poem With a Picture

Poet Nikki Grimes shows how you can write a picture poem

“Sideyard” is one of my favorite poems. Let me tell you how I wrote it. I was looking at a picture one day. I asked myself: What am I looking at? The answer: an old house in the country, with roses leaning against the walls. Their leaves seemed to be fluttering. They made me think about the way the wind sometimes whistles at night. Here is what I wrote down:

### The First Draft

*Did you hear it last night, Lord?  
I never knew the wind could sing  
or sigh the way it did  
back through the dogwood trees  
behind great grandpa's house  
last week  
I never saw so many flowers,  
either, Lord  
You see the way those roses hugged  
the porch?  
I guess they love that old house as  
much as me  
Please bless great grandma for  
asking me to visit, Lord.*

As I usually do, I began to write using everyday language, as though I were speaking. I knew I would add some rhyme later. But first, I



needed to decide whose house this was, and I needed to explain why the girl in the picture had never seen so many flowers before. I pretended that I was that girl.

### The Second Draft

*The wind sang and sighed like an  
old woman spookin' the dog-  
wood trees back of grandma's  
house last night  
I never heard the wind sing or sigh  
before  
not where I live,  
not in the city  
I never saw so many flowers,  
either, Lord.  
You see the way those rose bushes  
climbed the stair  
and hugged that porch?  
I guess they love that timber house  
as much as me.  
God, please bless grandma for let-  
ting me come to visit  
And while you're at it, Lord  
ask her if I can stay again next  
year.*

Obviously, the girl enjoyed the sound of the night wind whipping through the trees, but not everybody does. So I added a younger brother to the poem:

### From the Third Draft

*The wind sang and sighed like an  
old woman spookin' the dog-  
wood trees back of grandma's  
house last night  
My little brother said it was an  
awful fright,  
but me, I loved it.*

Then—in the fourth and final draft—I added a few more rhymes and finished off the poem. I hope you enjoy reading it!

### Now Write a Poem

Find a picture that you like in a book or magazine, or use a picture that one of your friends drew. Try to imagine what the people in the picture are thinking about or doing. If it's a picture of people riding a bus, imagine who's in it and where they might be going or coming from. It helps if you imagine that you are one of those people! Once you've got a few ideas, make up a poem to match the picture.

ILLUSTRATIONS: BETH GLACK

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## Another Lesson from Nikki: “Golden Shovel” Format

For her book, *One Last Word: Wisdom from the Harlem Renaissance*, Nikki Grimes used what is termed the “Golden Shovel” poetry form.

The “rules” for the Golden Shovel are as follows:

Take a line (or lines) from a poem you admire. Use each word in the line (or lines) as the end word in your poem. Keep the end words in order. Give credit to the poet who originally wrote the line (or lines).

She writes: “This is a very challenging way to create a poem, especially in terms of coming up with something that makes sense, and I love it for that very reason! In this form, the poet is bound by the words of the original poem, but the possibilities for creating something entirely new are exciting.”

Here is an example of how Nikki Grimes used the Golden Shovel with the poem “Storm Ending” to inspire her own poem “Truth”:

### STORM ENDING

by Jean Toomer

**Thunder blossoms gorgeously above our heads,**  
Great, hollow, bell-like flowers,  
Rumbling in the wind,  
Stretching clappers to strike our ears . . .  
Full-lipped flowers  
Bitten by the sun  
Bleeding rain  
Dripping rain like golden honey—  
And the sweet earth flying from the thunder.

### TRUTH

by Nikki Grimes

The truth is, every day we rise is like **thunder**—  
a clap of surprise. Could be echoes of trouble, or **blossoms**  
of blessing. You never know what garish or **gorgeously**  
disguised memories-to-be might rain down from **above**.  
So, look up! Claim that cloud with the silver lining. **Our**  
job, if you ask me, is to follow it. See where it **heads**.



## Lesson: “Gamify” the Poems

After reading *Ordinary Hazards*, brainstorm, as a class, categories of ideas or themes that come up again and again in Nikki Grimes’s story. Possible categories include:

- Mother
- Father
- Music
- Dancing
- Writing
- Books
- The library
- School
- Bullies
- Foster family
- God/religion/church

Now “gamify” (make into a game)! Break the class into smaller groups or engage as a full class activity.

Follow these steps:

1. Use Google’s random number generator (just Google “random number generator” and it will pop up) and put in numbers 1 through 314 (the number of pages in the book).
2. Click “Generate” for a number.
3. Go to the page number in the book. If it is a blank page or in the middle of a poem, go to the next poem.
4. Read the poem out loud on that page (or nearby).
5. Determine, through discussion, if the poem goes into one of the categories the class has already determined. (There might be alternate views, or you might need to create a new category!)
6. Further the discussion with how important the poem is to the theme: Does this poem accurately express how Nikki Grimes sees [x] category?
7. Decide how many times to “roll the dice” and categorize each poem. (At least 50 is a good target.)
8. Tally the count in each category. Discuss whether this reflects the importance of that category or theme in Nikki’s life and work.



## Lesson: Hindrances and Helpers Art Collage &/or Paragraph Outline\*

\*You may want to combine this with the lesson about ACEs, Adverse Childhood Experiences.

One thing that strikes the reader of *Ordinary Hazards* is the extraordinary number of obstacles Nikki Grimes faced, from early childhood abuse to a schizophrenic alcoholic mother to being separated from her sister in foster homes – yet also how many “angels” helped make her understand her worth and become a strong and resilient adult.

For this lesson, ask students to brainstorm in small groups or as a whole class both her “hindrances” and her “helpers”: the people, circumstances, and events, good and bad, that made up her life.

This can be the basis for either an art collage, with Nikki Grimes in the middle of the page, or an outline, as discussed below.

The Writing Revolution (<https://www.thewritingrevolution.org/>) has several excellent resources to help students write better sentences and essays, including a **Single Paragraph Outline** (SPO), in Appendix of this guide. (Customizable templates are free to download with creating a free account on the web site.)

Here are a few possible outlines to create with your students using notes from your brainstorming session and/or art collage and *Ordinary Hazards* as content.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Topic sentence: Although Nikki Grimes had numerous ACEs (adverse childhood experiences), she was able to overcome her trauma through writing and her relationships with caring adults.<br><br>[Provide this topic sentence and brainstorm sections, below.] | Topic sentence: While it was traumatic to be separated from her sister, Nikki Grimes was fortunate to have a loving foster family in several ways.<br><br>[Provide this topic sentence and brainstorm sections, below.] |
| 1. How writing helped her   | #1 way her foster family helped her   |
| 2. Foster mother  | #2 way her foster family helped her   |
| 3. Friend’s mother  | #3 way her foster family helped her   |
| 4. Teacher  | Concluding sentence:  |
| Concluding sentence: [Write together as a class]  |   |

## Lesson: Advertising Libraries / Library Card Metaphors

Nikki Grimes loves libraries. Nikki Grimes says that libraries saved her. In fact, in poem after poem in *Ordinary Hazards*, she sings the praises of the library and how it helped her during her childhood and young adulthood.

Here are just some of the metaphors she uses:

- “Meet my new best friend, / the library” (p. 125)
- “LIBRARY CARD: A magic pass / I use to climb into / other people’s skin / any old time / I needed” (p. 137)
- “DELIVERANCE: Desperate for stories / of outrageous adventure / to ferry me far from / my world and my mind, / I reach for my stash / of library offerings / where I’m fortunate to find / a weathered volume, / blue as the sea, / bulging with Viking lore / suited to me, / tales that can / sail me away.” (p. 142)

After reviewing these metaphors, ask your students to brainstorm more, in order to create a series of advertisements on social media that would highlight the benefits of the library to other students.



# LIBRARIES ARE MAGIC

## Lesson Background: Embedding Nonfiction

One approach to teaching literature that can be effective is to embed nonfiction – “to strategically select, adapt, and pair nonfiction texts within the study of a core fictional text,” as described in the book *Reading Reconsidered: A Practical Guide to Rigorous Literacy Instruction* by Colleen Driggs, Doug Lemov, and Erica Woolway.

When you embed nonfiction in literature study, it helps deepen student understanding of the fiction they read while increasing their background knowledge and ability to connect to additional texts.

There are two ways to embed nonfiction: “Inside the Bull’s-Eye” and “Outside the Bull’s-Eye.” The first (Inside) contains “content necessary to support basic understanding of the primary text” (p. 123, *Reading Reconsidered*), while the second (outside) “causes students to look at the primary text in a new and unexpected or more rigorous way” (p. 123, *ibid.*).

Some examples:

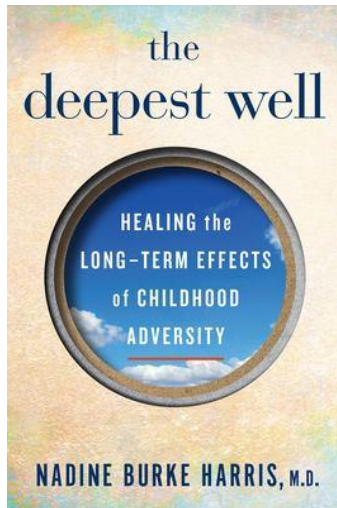
- An article about World War II concentration camps, paired with the novels *The Devil’s Arithmetic*, *Number the Stars*, or *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*.
- An excerpt from a book about the Black Panthers’ free breakfast program, paired with the novel *One Crazy Summer*.
- A nonfiction picture book about wolves, paired with the novel *Old Wolf*.
- A Smithsonian article about young male elephants and their peer connections with the novel *The Outsiders*.

Ultimately: “When students start from a base of knowledge, their inferences allow them to engage with the text with much greater depth – to learn from what they read as efficiently as possible. They’re more attentive, both to the emotions of the characters and to the factual information presented in the fictional text” (p. 123, *ibid.*).

Here is how one teacher selects nonfiction to embed in literature study:

<https://teachlikeachampion.com/blog/ideas-sourcing-embedding-nonfiction/>

## Lesson: ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences – and Resilience



One possible embedded nonfiction area of study to bring to *Ordinary Hazards* is the recent research into ACEs, or Adverse Childhood Experiences, and the impact of various events and stressors in childhood that can impact people’s mental and physical health as adults. As part of this research, there are also many areas that look at how individuals build resilience despite these issues.

Nikki Grimes experienced a number of ACEs but also showed extraordinary resilience.

Start with Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, either with her TED Talk: “How Childhood Trauma Affects Health Across a Lifetime”

[https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine\\_burke\\_harris\\_how\\_childhood\\_trauma\\_affects\\_health\\_across\\_a\\_lifetime?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime?language=en)

or excerpts from her book [\*The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity\*](#).

Other resources of nonfiction reading or information include:

- Centers for Disease Control’s master page about ACEs: <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/index.html>
- “We Can Prevent ACEs” video: <https://youtu.be/8gm-INpzU4g>
- Wikipedia entry: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adverse\\_childhood\\_experiences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adverse_childhood_experiences)
- One page description: [https://preventchildabuse.org/images/docs/anda\\_wht\\_ppr.pdf](https://preventchildabuse.org/images/docs/anda_wht_ppr.pdf)

### Other Nonfiction Topics to Explore/Embed with *Ordinary Hazards*:

- Foster Care (see this resource list from Nikki Grimes herself:
- Harlem Renaissance
- James Baldwin biography

## Book Reviews: *Ordinary Hazards*

Publishers Weekly:

*/\* Starred Review \*/* Grimes (*One Last Word*) presents a gripping memoir in verse constructed from imperfect recollections of the hardship and abuse she endured as a child. Having lost chunks of her memory as a result of traumatic experiences, Grimes relies on her art to fill in the blanks. In recurring entries titled “The Mystery of Memory,” and “Notebook,” Grimes contextualizes her scattered remembrances to provide a sense of time and place for readers (“Where is the chronology of a life/ chaotic from the start?”). Grimes eloquently conveys the instability of a childhood lived in the unpredictable wake of a mentally ill mother and abusive stepfather alongside hopeful anecdotes about the safe haven provided by her beloved older sister, her growing faith, and the often absent yet doting father she lost too soon. Underlining the idea that “a memoir’s focus is on truth, not fact,” Grimes courageously invites readers to join her on a journey through the shadows of her past, bridging “the gaps/ with suspension cables/ forged of steely gratitude/ for having survived my past/at all.”

Kirkus:

For award-winning children's and YA author Grimes (*Between the Lines*, 2018, etc.), writing, faith, and determination were the keys to surviving her tumultuous childhood. In the face of her father's abandonment and the revolving door of her alcoholic mother's psychiatric hospital stays, Grimes becomes savvier and more resilient than any young child should have to be. After being abused by a babysitter when she was 3, Grimes and her beloved older sister, Carol, enter another set of revolving doors: foster care, sometimes loving, sometimes not. At a dark moment when she is 6, Grimes finds escape and comfort in prayer and writing. Despite the instability and danger she endures, Grimes blossoms into a gifted teen with a passion for books, journaling, and poetry. Her personal, political, and artistic awakenings are intertwined, with the drama of her family life unfolding against the backdrop of pivotal moments in Civil Rights-era America. Grimes recounts her story as a memoir in verse, writing with a poet's lyricism through the lens of memory fractured by trauma. Fans of her poetry and prose will appreciate this intimate look at the forces that shaped her as an artist and as a person determined to find the light in the darkest of circumstances. A raw, heartbreaking, and ultimately uplifting story of trauma, loss, and the healing power of words.

## Related Authors & Novels

If you are looking for read-alikes for *Ordinary Hazards*, these authors and books are a good place to start:

|   |   |
|---|---|
|    | <p><b>Apple: Skin to the Core</b> by Eric Gansworth</p> <p>In a verse memoir similar to that of <i>Ordinary Hazards</i>, Eric Gansworth grapples with the slur of “apple” in Native communities (“red on the outside, white on the inside”) and his story as a Native American.</p> <p>“From the horrible legacy of the government boarding schools, to a boy watching his siblings leave and return and leave again, to a young man fighting to be an artist who balances multiple words. Eric shatters that slur and reclaims it in verse and prose and imagery that truly lives up to the word heartbreaking.”</p> |
|   | <p><b>Brown Girl Dreaming</b> Jacqueline Woodson</p> <p>As a fellow poet, young African American girl, and now Zarrow Award winner, Woodson and Nikki Grimes share much in their similar poetic memoirs.</p> <p>“In vivid poems that reflect the joy of finding her voice through writing stories, an award-winning author shares what it was like to grow up in the 1960s and 1970s in both the North and the South.”</p>  |
|  | <p><b>How I Discovered Poetry</b> by Marilyn Nelson</p> <p>“The author reflects on her childhood in the 1950s and her development as an artist and young woman through fifty poems that consider such influences as the Civil Rights Movement, the “Red Scare” era, and the feminist movement.”</p>   |

# Appendix: Single Paragraph Outline

Find this and other writing templates at <https://www.thewritingrevolution.org/>



## Single-Paragraph Outline

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

T.S. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

C.S. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_