

Teaching Guide: *No Spare People* by Erin Hoover
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Poetry Writing Prompts Inspired by *No Spare People*

- Think back to the most unlikely place you've been or the strangest thing you've been asked to do. You may need to overwrite to tell the story of that experience, but in the final version, scale back your description to basic who, what, when, and where of it. Title the poem very simply, according to the location ("At the child support office").
- Like in "Homewrecker," write a poem addressed to someone who hates you.
- "Retail requiem" recovers a lost way of life by listing department stores that used to exist and experiences of those stores particular to a place and time. Think about what you have lost, and research pertinent details for a poem (old newspapers, family interviews, amateur YouTube videos, Reddit boards).
- Read "Baby care instructions," and write a set of objective-sounding instructions for something intensely personal, complicated, or nonlinear.
- List what you remember or consider important from a year or decade. Order all of the nouns according to a system of logic that make sense to you. What do all of the things you've found have in common, and what do they have to say about the experience of that time? Are there spaces where an idea or concept is missing and you have to do research to fill it in? ("The nineties").
- Look up a figure from popular culture or true crime, and write a poem about that person at a specific point in their life, before whatever occasioned their fame ("Three weeks," "The power of passive voice").
- Using Wikipedia, write a poem inspired by a non-poetry form, such as a mathematical proof ("Proof of impossibility"), scientific concept ("Maternity exhibit as the singularity"), or philosophical idea ("Forms and materials").
- Write a meta poem whose rhetorical stance involves calling attention to the act of interpretation ("On the metaphor, for women, of birthing to creative activity," "The power of passive voice," "What if pain no longer ordered the narrative").
- Listening to the news, pull out a phrase or colloquial expression used in that evening's reportage. Write two or three poems, one that is connected to the news and one or more that isn't. Make the form of these poems as different as possible ("Death parade"). See how they speak to each other.

- Identify a set of writers whose work yours is in conversation with or reacting against, and incorporate their words into your poem and/or address them specifically in the poem (“Forms and materials”).

Discussion Questions for *No Spare People*

General/thematic

1. What adjective would you use to describe the speaker that appears in most of the poems in *No Spare People*, and why would you choose it?
2. Who do you imagine this book was written for, and who might enjoy it most? Is there anyone who you imagine would not like the ideas explored here?
3. What does “spare” mean to you? Is it a positive or negative word? How is it used where it appears in the book and more broadly in the title?
4. Make a list of the poems that have more obvious received forms. What’s the connection between forms, generally speaking, and the book’s subject? If you have written in form, why did you choose form, and what was that writing experience like?
5. What specific references to people, locations, or things give you an idea of the place and time in which the book is set? What effect do those references have on why you imagine the poet wrote *No Spare People*?
6. Where can you find pairs, couples, doubles, or dyads in *No Spare People*, and how are they useful as symbols for the concerns of this book?
7. How does this book engage with popular ideas of feminism, both as a historical movement and a set of beliefs?

Discussion Questions for *No Spare People*

Specific/close reading: Women and Motherhood

1. Identify the parts of metaphor (vehicle and tenor) in the title, “On the metaphor, for women, of birthing to creative activity.” Do the details of the poem agree or disagree with this relationship?
 - There are places in the poem where the poet references other figures who aren’t mothers. Why do you think that is?
 - How would you describe the appearance of this poem? Why are some lines indented?
 - What act is being described in the final line, “I open my throat”? Why do you think the poem ends this way? Why do you think the poet chose to open *No Spare People* with this poem?
2. “Maternity exhibit in an election year,” “Praying inside the emergency,” “Maternity exhibit as the singularity,” and “Baby care instructions” have varied takes on emotions associated with new motherhood. What are some of those emotions?
 - What clues do we have that the speaker’s identity is beginning to shift in “Maternity exhibit in an election year”? Is there more than one shift?
 - Do you think that figures in “Praying inside the emergency” really think prayer can be a political act? Do the people in this poem remind you of anyone from your own life?
 - How do the many details listed in “Maternity exhibit as the singularity” support the metaphor of birth as opening a rift? What is the effect of listing in this poem? How would the poem change if the lines weren’t staggered, but all left-justified?
 - Is the subject of “Baby care instructions” the child, or the mother? What does the setting of this poem tell you?
3. The poems in this book most explicitly “about” the American South, “Real Arkansas” and “White woman,” each have a surface-level narrative and a deeper one. What literally happens and/or what is the speaker doing in each of these poems, and how are those experiences used as jumping off points? Why do you think the poet chose to include a step before getting into the truth of these poems?
4. Why is “In middle age, at last I understand” addressed to “literary dudebros” and “lads of rock and roll”—who are those figures? Do you know them?
 - Compare the way creativity is gendered in this poem to the way it’s gendered in “On the metaphor, for women, of birthing to creative activity.” Are they the same or different?
 - Do you agree the claims of this poem are only possible during or after middle age? Why or why not?
5. “What if pain no longer ordered the narrative” is titled with a conditional clause, and the author chose to write it as a prose poem. What effect does this have on your reading?
 - Do the ideas in this poem differ from those explored in the second set of questions on this page?

- When the speaker says, “One of us will die first, and there are only two, no spare people,” what kind of scarcity is she referencing? Relate this idea overall to other places in *No Spare People* where scarcity is mentioned.
- Do you know what the speaker means by “the titans of industry who set American on fire”?

Discussion Questions for *No Spare People*

Specific/close reading: Money Poems

1. Overall, what does *No Spare People* assert about ideas of use or usefulness in “The hedge fund manager’s first wife,” “My generation is not lost but we are losing,” “To be a mother in this economy,” and “What use are you?”
2. In “The hedge fund manager’s first wife,” who are the “right people” and who aren’t they? How many different power dynamics between individuals are referenced in this poem?
3. What personal experience is described in the beginning of “My generation is not lost but we are losing” and how is it compared and contrasted with concurrent national events of a certain time period? How do you read this mirror scene, and what does “being good” mean in its context?
4. Though “My generation is not lost but we are losing” and “To be a mother in this economy” share an occasion, their perspectives are different. Describe the impact perspective shift has on your reading of the latter poem.
5. “What use are you?” offers an impression of modern education using specific details. Do you have similar memories of school or otherwise relate to those details? What kind of decisions exist in the poem, who makes them, and what are the results? Compare this with another poem, “Apartment home in Florida as failure of the imagination,” using the same questions.

Discussion Questions for *No Spare People*

Specific/close reading: Body Poems

1. Who or what does the aunt character represent in “If I wear glasses, will you be able to see me?” Identify places where appearance and reality are contrasted in this poem. Is recognizing the same as seeing? How do you articulate the similarity between laughing and crying in the line, “I’ve learned some cries are like talismans, some kinds of laughter, too.”
2. “Proof of impossibility” is a very rhetorical poem, but it also employs metaphor. How are interpersonal relationships figured in this poem, positively or negatively? How is blank or “empty” space used in both the form and content of the poem?
3. “Forms and materials” has seven sections. Can you define these sections in rhetorical terms, meaning, how does each section advance the poem’s argument? Do the poem’s breaking into sections and its fragmented lines make it harder or easier for you to read?
 - Read Wikipedia’s page on “Theory of forms.” The author of this poem has described “Forms and materials” as a coming of age story. Does this poem share aspects of the coming of age stories you know? If the poem intended to memorialize the speaker’s evolving ideas about gender, what purpose do quotations from philosophical, Biblical, and legal texts serve?
 - How do you read the line on the first page of this poem, “My body was an entrance fee”?
 - Compare and contrast the sections labeled [Sonnet] and [Anecdote]. Why are they labeled this way?
 - Who or what is the “new form, growing real” at the end of the poem? If according to Plato’s ideas, can form ever be real” or is this poem a paradox? Why or why not?
 - Make a list of all of imagery in this poem describing bodily sense or feeling. How does the cataloguing of this poem respond to the litanies of “On the metaphor, for women, of birthing to creative activity”?
 - Why do you think this poem is second to last in the book, rather than last?
4. In “Forms and materials,” how does the (spoken) line “I want to be able to talk to people / without having to fuck or be fucked, yeah?” function in the poem? What is the speaker trying to tell her friend about gender? Could this apply to other realities raised in *No Spare People*?

No Spare People Suggested Classroom Activities

Experience the book

Ask the group to comment on their experience of reading *No Spare People*. Some good questions to ask: How did you interpret the cover image? Did you read the front matter or author bio, or jump right into the poems? Did you read the book in one sitting, or over a span of time? Did you read the poems in order? Could you tell what this book would be about by looking at the Table of Contents? What impression did the epigraphs provoke for you? Having read the book, which quote in the front matter felt most apt to you? Did reading the author bio change your impression of the book? Did her photo? Did you read the Notes section, and why or why not?

Draw what you read

Ask each student to draw imagery that stuck with them from reading *No Spare People*, if possible without using the book itself as reference. The point of this exercise isn't drawing skill or execution, but thinking through image relationships and spatial arrangement. Collect the drawings, which should not include student names on the front. Depending on students' comfort level with the assignment, allot 10-20 minutes for drawing. Consider tacking up all of the drawings on a bulletin board and discussing them.

Pair-and-share interview

Have students get into pairs and interview one another about *No Spare People*, taking at least ten minutes per interview. There are no set questions for this exercise; the point is to see what they ask one another. Each person should gather enough information to present a two-minute summary of their partner's opinions to the rest of the class—let them know that taking the full two minutes is part of the assignment. After everyone has shared, reflect on common responses and more unusual ones.

Research ideas

One idea: Ask students what history, place, or idea they want to know more about after reading *No Spare People*. They might go through the book and underline anything they'd like to know more about, and look up enough information to give a “____ for Dummies” presentation to the class, tying whatever they're researching back to the poem it came from. Another: The class imagines that they're interviewing the poet, coming up with five very specific questions that could *only* be asked of this author or this book (in other words, “Why do you write poetry?” could be asked of any poet and “What's Tennessee like?” of any Tennessean—make these questions as particular as possible). Compile the class's questions and choose a few to ask the poet.

Grammar rodeo

Have each student choose a different poem, and make a list of nouns, action verbs, and modifiers in three columns. Once everyone has finished, ask a volunteer to read out one of their columns, taking the words out of order. Ask, are these words part of the same family and/or are they

related? What general impression do you have of what the poem might be about, with things taken out of context? Was anyone able to guess the poem from a single part of speech? As a second part of the exercise, consider pulling ten randomized words from the class list and having everyone use them to write a different short poem in lines or prose.

Paper Assignments: *No Spare People*

Note on word count

The topics below were written for an undergraduate student audience, but no word count or number of required sources are provided in the hopes that the prompt can be “dialed up” or “dialed down” depending on level and the paper length that you would typically assign. In other words, these are intended to be starting points for instructors to adjust as they wish.

Potential Topics

Craft Analysis

Choose one aspect of craft—imagery, speaker, lineation, syntax, sound, or anything else—and trace its development throughout *No Spare People*. A typical beginner’s approach could be to compare two or three poems, an advanced approach to look at how the poet works with the craft aspect in the book as a whole. Being able to cite specific poems and lines is critical to this assignment, as is determining how much you need to summarize what the poem (or poems) is/are doing against using whatever the given word count for higher-level synthesis or analysis.

Formal Analysis

Discuss *No Spare People* as a commentary on ontological or poetic form. Has the author succeeded in using the very formal genre of poetry to also comment on form? Whether you think she has mostly succeeded or failed, give and explain specific examples.

Catalog of Influence

What other texts—literary or beyond—does *No Spare People* remind you of, and why? Choose no more than two or three texts so that you go into some depth with each choice. Can you put this poet in a “school” of poets? (Feel free to invent one!) For this assignment, it’s best to refer to specific poems, both in the case of *No Spare People* and the work(s) or author(s) being compared, though you may also wish to use theoretical texts, secondary sources, and interviews or other background information.

Creative/Critical Writing Assignment

Choose a poem or group of poems from *No Spare People* and in an original poem, imitate the poet either in subject matter or style. Write a brief prose introduction in which you explain why you chose to imitate this specific poem and how you went about it, including whatever craft element or elements formed your imitation. Reflect: in what ways do you feel that this imitation succeeded? What do you know now about *No Spare People* that maybe you didn’t before?

Suggested grading criteria

- Paper has an evident and original purpose, which is at some point stated directly.
- Evaluative statements avoid throwaway phrases like “interesting” and “does a good job.”
- Explanations demonstrate close reading at an appropriate level of depth.
- All claims are supported with multiple points of evidence.
- Paper is structured with attention to audience and supplies the information necessary to understand it, including citations from the text.
- Writing demonstrates a high level of author investment with the topic.
- MLA format with no errors at the level of sentence or paragraph.

Book Review Assignment: *No Spare People*

Step One: Research

Look at a series of single book (not omnibus) reviews published in any of the listings of book review outlets found on Poets & Writers (pw.org). Choose a magazine or website where you find critical writing that you admire and where you could possibly even place a review. Some questions you'll want to ask before you get started: Who do you think reads this publication, and how is the review tailored for them? What major points does the reviewer have about the book? What evidence do they use? How much of the personality of the writer of the piece comes into writing it? Check out the publication's guidelines on their website to find out word count and other parameters.

Step Two: Drafting

Draft a review of *No Spare People* tailored for the publication you've chosen. Keep in mind that most book reviews are read by an audience who hasn't read *No Spare People*, and that they may never read the book. Therefore, you'll want your review to have a thesis tied to some theme or aspect of *No Spare People* that also serves as a piece of literary or social commentary, so that your review is entertaining and capable of standing alone. As a bonus, what you've written may (we hope!) interest someone in reading the book.

Everyone has a different process for writing, but you may want to think of several workable thesis statements and choose one that feels urgent and original. It helps if you approach the book "as a reader," meaning, how and why did you respond to it? What would you like to tell other people about *No Spare People*? Figuring this out may (and actually, should) take some time. As with any other paper, please back up your claims with evidence. Give enough background on the poet and the book to contextualize your review, but avoid over-summarizing. Quote the actual poems, but avoid any long quotations of more than four lines.

Finally, if the outlet you've identified uses titles in their reviews, title your review with something catchy (keep in mind that "*No Spare People* Book Review" is unlikely to draw a reader's attention).

Step Three: Peer Feedback and Revision

Once you've finished your draft, have another writer read it, and ask them what their general impression is of *No Spare People* based solely on your review. Can they summarize your opinion of the book in clear terms, and do they know why you feel that way? Is what you're saying original? You can also ask for title help if you need it. If your practice audience has trouble understanding or easily refutes what you've written in your draft, you'll want to revise, either throughout or in the concluding paragraph. You'll know that your review has succeeded if it prompts an actual discussion about *No Spare People* and its contents.

Step Four: Pitch

This stage is optional, but since you've already done the work, why not publish what you've written? Paying careful attention to the journal's online instructions about submitting reviews, contact them to ask if they are interested in your review submission, and send it to them if they are. Keep in mind that most journals won't publish reviews after a book is one year old, and that

most editors adhere to “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all” rule. Thus, entirely negative reviews that “trash” books tend to be rejected, though not always.

Sometimes your pitch would take place before you write your review, then you’d wait for an assignment from an editor, but for the purposes of this exercise you can do it afterward. Then, if your review isn’t accepted, you can always tweak or expand/cut what you’ve written for another publication.

Suggested grading criteria

- Review has an evident and original purpose, which is at some point stated directly.
- Review has been crafted for a specific outlet and adheres to the appropriate length, format, tone, and diction of the target publication.
- Evaluative statements avoid throwaway phrases and include evidence.
- Review supplies the information necessary to understand it, including background information about the poet and quotations from individual poems.
- Writing demonstrates a high level of author investment with the book.
- No errors at the level of sentence or paragraph; note, though, this should NOT be in MLA format! You’ll get the gist by reading reviews and matching their tone and style, including the way your chosen publication quotes poems or individual lines.