



e. lockhart

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF WE WERE LIARS

the
pool

a love story

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

RHCBTeachersLibrarians.com

about the book

A modern literary tour de force from E. Lockhart, Printz Award honoree and National Book Award finalist and bestselling author of the global sensation *We Were Liars*. Told through short, poetic chapters, this sweeping love story follows two teenagers whose lives—and the lives of everyone in their quiet New England town—are forever altered by a shocking transformation.

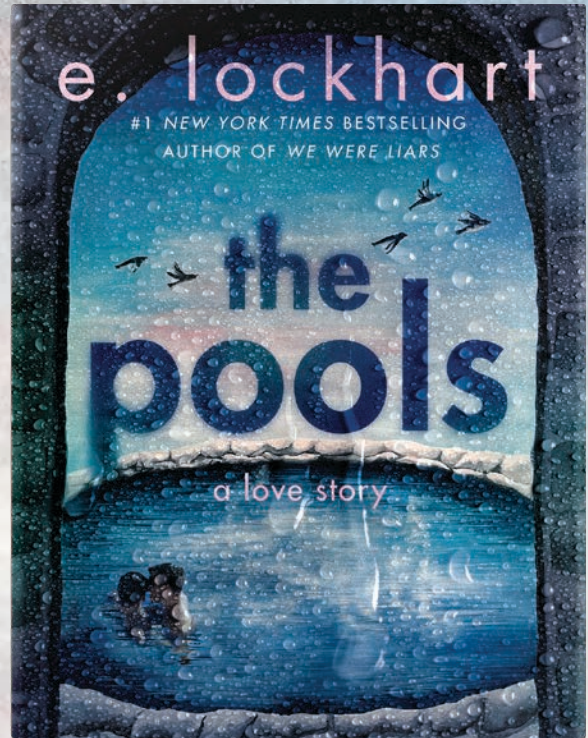
Once, in a small New England town known for its hot springs, something terrible happened. Something that should have been a warning to stay away from the pools, if the stories were to be believed.

But no one is afraid of the water anymore, even if they should be.

When new girl Lexie meets golden boy Chester, their chemistry is undeniable. She's running from a glittering life she won't speak about. He's hiding secrets of his own. Their connection feels bigger than both of them, despite their damage.

One frigid winter morning in that small New England town, five people go for a swim in the pools. Five people, including Chester. What happens there sends shock waves through the town, changing life as Lexie knows it forever.

The book is a quick read, an emotional gut-punch and a meditation on true love, and death and grief, sacrifice and identity.



Themes: Love & Romance,
Myths, Legends & Folklore,
Family & Relationships,
Making Choices, Community



Heather Weston

about the author

e. lockhart is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the *LIARS* novels: *We Were Liars*, *Family of Liars*, and *We Fell Apart*. *We Were Liars* is also an original series on Prime Video. Her other books include *Again Again*, *Genuine Fraud*, and *The Disreputable History of Frankie Landau-Banks*. She has been a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize and the National Book Award and an honoree for the Printz Award. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

a note about the verse novel

The Pools introduces students to the unique possibilities of the verse novel, a form that combines the storytelling of prose with the language and structure of poetry. This introduction explores what makes a verse novel different, how readers construct meaning through imagery, repetition, fragments, line breaks, and white space, and why the genre has become such an important part of contemporary young adult literature. Using *The Pools* as a mentor text, students begin thinking like both readers and writers as they discover how poetry and narrative work together to tell powerful stories.

pre-reading discussion questions

Before students begin reading *The Pools*, they have an opportunity to think about the big ideas at the heart of the novel. These pre-reading questions invite students to reflect on themes such as storytelling, transformation, identity, belonging, grief, love, and community while making connections to their own experiences. Rather than searching for right answers, students begin asking meaningful questions that will continue to shape their thinking as they move through the novel.

- Why do people tell stories that may or may not be true?
- Is it ever okay to keep a secret? Why or why not?
- What does love look like beyond romance?
- Why are people fascinated by stories of transformation?
- If someone told you a place had the power to heal people, would you believe them?
- Based on the title *The Pools*, what do you expect—and what are you most curious about?

pre-reading activity

a poetic contents page

READ: The contents page

FOCUS: Prediction, structure, mood, imagery

FORMAT: Annotation + discussion

Before Part One begins, Lockhart's contents page is already telling a story. The contents does more than organize the novel—it creates mood, raises questions, introduces images and symbols, and invites readers into the strange, suspenseful atmosphere of the text. Because *The Pools* is a verse novel, the structure and language of the contents page matter. The fragments, repeated patterns, and poetic phrasing ask readers to pay attention not only to what is being said but also to what is left unsaid.

In this activity, you will closely examine the contents page as a text of its own, noticing patterns, making predictions, exploring symbols and themes, and thinking about how the language and structure begin shaping your understanding of the novel before the story officially begins.

Notice:

Read the contents page as a text of its own. Underline words or phrases that stand out. Look for capitalization, fragments, images, repeated structures, and shifts in tone.

Discuss:

- What do you predict the novel will be about? What supports your prediction?
- Why might Lockhart use short fragments for the part titles?
- Which phrase creates the strongest image in your mind? Why?
- Which words or phrases feel mysterious or emotionally powerful?
- Several of the phrases in the titles sound incomplete or unresolved. How does this affect you as the reader?
- How does the contents page create mood before the story begins?

contents

I noticed that contents is not capitalized but all of the PARTS are.

PART ONE

A long car journey. A mountain spa town. Scars and rules.

PART TWO

Two different houses. A love story.

PART THREE

Winter caroling. A quarrel about secrets.

PART FOUR

A bad thing happens.

PART FIVE

A legend. A flight. A kiss.

PART SIX

An escape. A confession.

PART SEVEN

The story of the seven ravens.

Poisonous nettles. Some nasty gossip. A crime.

PART EIGHT

People having parties. A dare. A hunting expedition.

PART NINE

Transformation. A visit to the pools.

PART TEN

Daffodils.

PART ELEVEN

Outside.

Reminds me of Romeo and Juliet. Two households . . .

discussion questions

Select questions based on your instructional focus; there is no need to use every prompt.

Character and Identity:

- What responsibilities does Lexie carry that many teens do not?
- What does Lexie reveal publicly, and what does she keep hidden?
- When does Lexie act according to others' expectations? When does she act for herself?

Relationships, Love, and Grief:

- What does love look like in this novel beyond romance?
- What do characters communicate through actions that they cannot say directly?
- How does grief affect the way characters remember the past?
- What does the novel suggest about accepting change that cannot be reversed?

Transformation and Fairy Tales:

- What does transformation mean beyond physically becoming a bird?
- How does the old legend shape the way people respond to what's happened?
- In what ways is *The Poole* a fairy tale? In what ways does it resist that label?

Verse and Author's Craft:

- How does repetition create meaning?
- How do line breaks and white space affect pacing or emotion?
- What can fragments communicate that a conventional paragraph cannot?
- Where does the structure of a poem reinforce its subject or emotion?
- Why might Lockhart choose verse rather than conventional prose?

Whole Novel:

- What does the novel ultimately suggest about love and sacrifice?
- Which character changes most, and what causes that change?
- Which early detail becomes more meaningful after finishing the novel?
- What question does the novel leave you thinking about after the final page?

activities

character and identity

INVESTIGATING THE BACKSTORY

READ: “Lexie Weiss-Greenberg Arrived in Covington Just Last Week” (pp. 5–8)

FOCUS: Backstory, motivation, inference

FORMAT: Partner timeline

Every story begins before page one. Long before readers meet a character, that character has already lived through experiences that shape the person they are becoming. Writers call this backstory—the events, relationships, losses, successes, and experiences that happen before the story begins. Backstory helps readers understand a character’s motivations, fears, hopes, and choices. Think about the origin stories of superheroes, fairy tale characters, or even characters from your favorite books and movies. Those earlier experiences often explain why characters act the way they do when the story starts. In this poem, Lockhart gives readers pieces of Lexie’s backstory: her father’s death, her mother’s illness, the move across the country, and the family’s financial struggles. None of these details feel accidental. They help us understand who Lexie is and what she is carrying with her when she arrives in Covington.

Backstory includes events that shape characters before readers meet them. Working with a partner, create a timeline of Lexie’s life before the novel begins. Include her father’s death, her mother’s illness, Aunt Ida’s invitation, the move to Covington, and other significant events.

- Which event seems most important to understanding Lexie?
- What information still seems to be missing?
- Why might Lockhart choose not to explain everything immediately?

Directions:

Use an evidence chart like the one below to help organize your ideas.

Reflect:

- Characterization is a technique writers use to develop a character. Which method of characterization (actions, dialogue, relationships, repetition, etc.) is most important in helping us understand Lexie in this poem? Why do you think this? What responsibilities does Lexie carry that many teens do not?
- How do you feel about Lexie? Do you admire her? Are you worried about her? Why?
- Why does Lockhart repeat “fine/fine/fine” in the poem? What does that repetition suggest about Lexie?
- What emotions does Lexie reveal directly?
- What emotions does she seem to hide?
- What objects, images, or ideas appear repeatedly around her?
- What do those patterns suggest about her character?

What Lexie says/does/experiences	What this reveals about her
Example: Drives the entire trip	Responsible, dependable, capable

WHAT LEXIE CARRIES

READ: "Lexie Weiss-Greenberg Arrived in Covington Just Last Week" (pp. 5–8)
FOCUS: Characterization, symbolism, and the difference between literal and emotional burdens
FORMAT: Evidence chart + visual response + reflection

One of the ways writers develop characters is by thinking about what their characters carry with them. Sometimes those things are physical: a backpack, a phone, a set of keys, a stuffed animal, a favorite sweatshirt. But characters also carry things readers cannot see quite as easily. They carry memories, responsibilities, hopes, fears, grief, expectations, and dreams about the future. In this poem, Lockhart shows us both kinds of burdens. Lexie is carrying her family across the country, but she is also carrying worry about her mother, responsibility for her sister, grief over her father, and hope that the pools might somehow make things better. In this activity, you will use the details Lockhart gives us to imagine the full weight of what Lexie carries. As you write, think about how ordinary objects can become symbols and how emotional burdens can sometimes feel heavier than anything we could hold in our hands.

What does it mean to carry something literally and figuratively?

As you read, pay attention to both the things Lexie literally carries and the things she carries emotionally. Look for details that reveal her responsibilities, worries, hopes, relationships, and experiences. Notice the objects that appear in the poem and think about how those objects might become symbols for larger ideas.

Directions:

Step 1: Collect evidence from the poem that shows what Lexie carries with her (battered car, cheese crackers, maps, stuffed animals, broken heart, grief, responsibility, etc.)

Step 2: Choose a visual element or image (suitcase, backpack, roadmap, a silhouette of Lexie, box, etc.) to use as a base for your visual response.

Step 3: Layer the evidence you collected from the poem on the visual element you selected. You should include images, symbols, words, lines, etc.

Step 4: Incorporate color intentionally. Think about how the colors might represent different parts of Lexie’s life.

Step 5: Weave in at least five lines or phrases from the poem in addition to the words that represent the items and emotions Lexie carries. For example, you might use “Lexie is/fine/fine/fine.” Or “She is silent, nowadays.” Try to weave the lines into your design rather than listing them separately.

Reflect:

After completing your visual response, write a one-paragraph reflection.

Consider which thing seems to weigh most heavily on Lexie. Think about how Lockhart reveals character through details, objects, and responsibilities rather than direct description.

Literally	Figuratively/Emotionally

activities

character and identity

VISIBLE VS. INVISIBLE

READ: “When Ida Goes Up to Bed” (pp. 119–120)

FOCUS: Appearance vs. reality

FORMAT: T-shirt design

Before beginning this activity, reread “When Ida Goes Up to Bed” (pp. 119–120). As you read, pay attention to the difference between what other people see when they look at Lexie and what readers have come to understand about her. One of the things Lockhart does especially well throughout *The Pools* is reveal character in layers. Characters often present one version of themselves to the world while carrying experiences, responsibilities, and emotions that remain hidden.

In this poem, readers discover that Lexie’s life as a singer looked glamorous from the outside, but beneath that public image were loneliness, exhaustion, financial responsibility, and the emotional weight of keeping those experiences to herself.

In this activity, you will explore the difference between appearance and reality by considering what other characters know about Lexie, what readers know about her, and how those hidden truths deepen our understanding of her character.

Directions:

- Reread the poem.
- Design a T-shirt. On the front, show what others see when they look at Lexie. On the back, show what readers know.
- Use the following table to help with your initial planning.

What People See (visible)	What Readers Know (invisible)
Public image, backup singer	Hidden struggles, Lexie is lonely

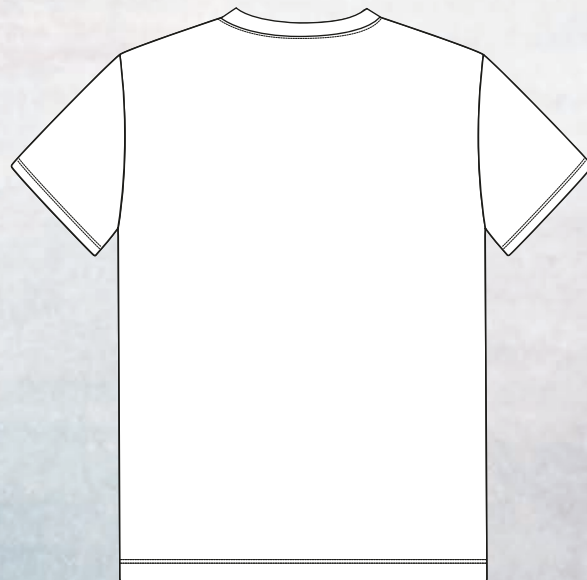
- Use the following T-shirt template to design your T-shirt. Think about how you might use images, lines from the poem, fonts, and graphic elements to illustrate your ideas.

Reflect:

- Why does Lockhart allow readers to know more than Chester at this point?
- How does the gap between public image and private experience deepen Lexie’s character?



FRONT



BACK

activities

character and identity

WHEN LEXIE FIRST SAW THE POOLS FOUND POEM REMIX

READ: “When Lexie First Saw the Pools” (pp. 3–4)

FOCUS: Language, repetition, line breaks

FORMAT: Found poem

One of the things verse novels invite readers to do is pay attention to patterns of language. Certain words, images, and ideas appear again and again, building meaning through repetition and connection. As readers, we are not just following the plot; we are noticing how the language itself works.

Found poetry asks writers to discover new meanings by rearranging existing language. By selecting, repeating, isolating, and reorganizing words, you can reveal ideas that may have been hiding beneath the surface of the original text.

In this activity, you will become both reader and writer by creating a found poem using only words and phrases from Lockhart’s poem.

Directions:

Choose one focus: fear, water, attraction, transformation, or mystery. Using only words and phrases from Lockhart’s poem, create a new poem. You may repeat, reorder, isolate, or remove language and change line breaks, spacing, and visual arrangement.

Reflect:

- What idea or feeling did you emphasize?
- How did repetition, spacing, or line breaks help create meaning?
- What did you notice about Lockhart’s language by rearranging it?

activities

character and identity

PLEASE US: VOICE, IDENTITY, AND BECOMING LEXIE

READ: “The Rest of the Truth That Lexie Has Been Keeping from Chester” (pp. 121–125)

FOCUS: Repetition, performance, identity

FORMAT: Close reading + chart

Until this point in the novel, readers know that Lexie has moved to Covington, that she is uncomfortable talking about her past, and that she has stopped singing. This poem finally explains why. Rather than simply giving readers information, Lockhart reveals Lexie’s backstory through repetition, imagery, and the language of performance. The poem, “The Rest of the Truth That Lexie Has Been Keeping from Chester” (pp. 121–125), becomes more than a biography; it becomes a critique of perfection, performance, and the pressure to become the person everyone else wants you to be.

Notice how the repeated refrain “Please us, / please us . . .” changes as the poem progresses. At first, it sounds like an audition. By the end, it sounds almost like a chorus demanding pieces of Lexie.

As you read, think about how Lockhart uses repetition, lists, and fragments to show the emotional cost of constantly performing for other people’s approval.

Directions:

Reread the poem and locate every appearance of the “Please us, / please us . . .” refrain. Working with a partner, complete the following chart:

Reflect:

- How does the refrain change from beginning to end?
- Why do the lists become longer and more demanding?
- What do the lists suggest about identity and the pressure to perform?

The refrain says	What is being asked of Lexie?	What does it cost her?
Please Us (line 9)	Sing perfectly	confidence

activities

relationships, grief, and change

WHAT PEOPLE SAY VS. WHAT THEY MEAN

READ: “New Birds” (pp. 134–135)

FOCUS: Public language, private emotion, grief

FORMAT: Small-group discussion

One of the most powerful moments in “New Birds” (pp. 134–135) comes when Lockhart separates what people say from what they are actually feeling. The words people speak aloud are brief and practical: *“My son is a new bird.” “My mother is a new bird.”* But underneath those simple statements are emotions that are much more difficult to express, grief, confusion, anger, shame, fear, and uncertainty. Rather than explaining those emotions directly, Lockhart lets readers see the gap between public language and private experience. This is a reminder that conversations are often layered. What people say is not always what they mean, and what they mean is not always what they are ready or able to say aloud.

In this activity, you will explore the relationship between spoken language and unspoken emotion while considering how Lockhart uses this contrast to deepen characterization and reveal the emotional complexity of grief.

Lockhart writes “That is what people say.” Then, she writes, “But what they mean is . . .”

She then gives readers the thoughts people cannot say aloud. Lockhart separates what people say aloud from what they are actually feeling.

Directions:

Working in small groups, discuss: “I don’t know how to talk about it.” “I grieve her, but she’s here.” “I am ashamed.” “I am angry.” “I feel lost.” “I’m trying to be there for her.”

After you discuss the statements, choose one of the following questions to answer as a group.

- Why do people often say something simpler than what they are really feeling?
- Which statement do you think would be hardest to say aloud?
- Why does Lockhart separate what people say from what they mean?

activities

relationships, grief, and change

READ: “Lexie Hasn’t Been to See Chester Either” (pp. 154–155)

FOCUS: Hindsight, regret, dramatic irony

FORMAT: Comparison chart + close reading

THE LAST TIME: REGRET, MEMORY, AND SECOND CHANCES

In the poem “Lexie Hasn’t Been to See Chester Either” (pp. 154–155), Lexie is focused internally on her own realizations. Much of this poem takes place in Lexie’s mind. There is very little action. Instead, Lockhart explores memory, regret, and the way people replay important moments after they are over. Readers know something Lexie did not know during her last conversation with Chester, that it would be the last time she would see him as a boy. That dramatic irony changes the way we read the scene. Ordinary details, like Chester putting on his wool hat or saying he planned to go for a swim, suddenly become emotionally charged.

In this poem, Lockhart reminds readers that we often recognize the importance of a moment only after it has passed. As you read, think about how memory reshapes our understanding of the past and how regret changes the stories we tell ourselves about the choices we made.

One of the central ideas in this poem is hindsight—the ability to see something clearly only after it has happened. In the moment, Lexie does not understand the events from Chester’s point of view. She is so wrapped up in her own fears and worries that she can’t see his.

Directions:

Read “Lexie Hasn’t Been to See Chester Either” (pp. 154–155). With a partner, complete the chart.

Reflect:

Which ordinary details become significant in hindsight?

- Why does Lockhart repeat “She has lost him”?
- Why does Lexie call herself “stupid girl”?
- Is Lexie’s guilt justified? Why or why not?
- How does grief affect the way people remember past events?
- Why isolate “swim” on its own line? How do the line breaks and white space change the moment?
- Would this moment feel different if it were written as a paragraph? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Lockhart ends this poem with this ordinary statement?

What Happened Then	What Lexie Understands Now

author's craft study

a note from the author

READ: "A Note from the Author" (pp. 371–372)

FOCUS: Genre, form, authorial choice

FORMAT: Annotation + discussion

At the end of *The Pools*, E. Lockhart includes "A Note from the Author" (pp. 371–372) where she reflects on the choices she made while writing the novel. What makes the note especially interesting is that she does not describe herself as a poet. Instead, she calls herself "a storyteller who hijacks a number of the poet's tools" to create effects in prose. She points specifically to line breaks, rhythm, repetition, and internal rhyme—techniques readers usually associate with poetry—and explains that she uses them to shape the emotional and narrative experience of the story. She also describes *The Pools* as "a fairy tale of sorts," suggesting that the form of the novel is deeply connected to the kind of story she wanted to tell and the way she wanted readers to experience it.

This note raises several interesting questions about storytelling, genre, and literary form. What happens when a novel looks like poetry but isn't fully poetry? How do poetic techniques change pacing, mood, suspense, or emotion? Why might a writer choose fragments and white space instead of long paragraphs and detailed explanations? And what does it mean to call a contemporary YA novel "a fairy tale of sorts"?

In this activity, you will dig into part of Lockhart's note, think carefully about the choices authors make, and explore how *The Pools* works as a complex text that exists somewhere between poetry, prose, and fairy tale.

Directions:

Annotate places where Lockhart discusses storytelling, poetry, prose, fairy tales, reading aloud, and form.

Reflect:

Why might Lockhart call herself a storyteller rather than a poet?

- What does she mean by "the poet's tools"? Choose one and explain its effect.
- Why might rhythm, repetition, or line breaks matter in a story meant to be read aloud?
- What does "a fairy tale of sorts" suggest about *The Pools*?
- How does the way the story is told become part of its meaning?

author's craft study

a note from the author

READ: "The Three Biggest Fights" (pp. 65–71) and "Outside" (p. 369)

FOCUS: Constraint, compression, image

FORMAT: Close reading + poem

In "A Note from the Author," E. Lockhart explains that the ending of "The Three Biggest Fights" and the entire poem "Outside" are written as American cinquains. She chose this form because she wanted the two poems to feel connected and because "defamiliarizing the language" helped create a particular emotional effect. Unlike free verse, an American cinquain is highly structured. The writer has only a few words and a fixed number of syllables to tell the story. That limitation forces every word to matter.

One of the interesting things about verse novels is that they often slow readers down. Rather than telling an entire story, they capture a single moment, emotion, or realization. American cinquains work in much the same way. They ask writers to distill an experience into its essential parts.

In this activity, you will experiment with the same poetic form Lockhart uses by writing your own American cinquain. The American cinquain is a five-line non-rhyming poem with a fixed syllable pattern:

Line 1: 2 syllables

Line 2: 4 syllables

Line 3: 6 syllables

Line 4: 8 syllables

Line 5: 2 syllables

Directions:

As you read, notice:

- How does the short form slow your reading?
- How does the changing lengths of the lines in "The Three Biggest Fights" change what seems important?
- Which words seem most important?
- What emotion does the poem leave you with? Consider each one separately.
- Why might Lockhart choose such a tightly controlled form for these moments?

Reflect:

Choose one important event from your life. It might be the first day in a new school, winning or losing a game, the birth of a sibling, waiting for a text, saying goodbye, performing on stage, or any moment that stayed with you.

Write an American cinquain about that moment. Remember, focus on only one moment. Use concrete images. Make every word count.

Drafting:

- List five possible moments you could write about.
- Choose one of the moments you listed. What moment are you thinking about?
- What emotion do you want readers to feel?
- What image best captures that emotion?

Draft Template:

Line 1: _____ (2)
Line 2: _____ (4)
Line 3: _____ (6)
Line 4: _____ (8)
Line 5: _____ (2)

Line 1	Line 2	Line 3	Line 4	Line 5
2 syllables	4 syllables	6 syllables	8 syllables	2 syllables

author's craft study

terza rima and the challenge of communication

READ: "Lexie Brings Only a Book That Lies Flat" (p. 137)

FOCUS: Form and meaning, rhyme, communication

FORMAT: Close reading + poem

In "A Note from the Author," E. Lockhart explains that the poem, "Lexie Brings Only a Book That Lies Flat," is written as a terza rima. She chose this poetic form because the chapter is about the struggle to communicate, and she wanted the structure itself to help create that feeling. Lockhart writes that the interlocking rhyme scheme made the language feel "interlocked in a cool way." In other words, she didn't choose the form simply because it sounded beautiful; she chose it because the structure reinforced the meaning of the poem.

This is one of the things writers think about all the time. Form is never just decoration. The way a story is told can shape the way readers experience it. In this activity, you will explore how the interlocking structure of terza rima creates movement, connection, and tension before trying the form yourself.

A terza rima is a poetic form made up of three-line stanzas (tercets). The rhyme scheme for a terza rima is interlocking:

ABA / BCB / CDC / DED

Each stanza reaches forward into the next stanza. The ending rhyme on the middle line of one stanza becomes the outside rhyme of the following stanza. The poem keeps pulling the reader forward because of the rhyming pattern.

Directions:

Write three short tercets using this pattern. Your poem should be about *trying to communicate something that is difficult to say*.

ABA

BCB

CDC

Reflect:

How did the interlocking rhyme scheme affect what you wrote?

- Did the form make it easier or harder to express your ideas? Why?
- How does this help you understand Lockhart's choice to use terza rima in a chapter about communication?

Dr. Melanie Hundley is a Professor in the Practice of English Education at Vanderbilt University's Peabody College where she teaches courses in reading, literature, and writing methods and young adult literature.



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