

# Poetry in Ruins

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*Social studies, language arts*

SKILLS.....Knowledge, comprehension, analysis, evaluation  
STRATEGIES.....Observation, discussion, writing, communication, visualization,  
brainstorming, comparing, contrasting  
DURATION.....2-hour field trip to Aztec Ruins; 1 class period afterward  
CLASS SIZE.....Any

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## OBJECTIVES

In their study of Aztec Ruins, students will use sensory perception, imagination, and writing exercises to:

1. Observe and examine the Ancestral Pueblo buildings.
2. Compare and contrast observations about rooms.
3. Speculate on the activities that occurred.
4. Write a poem about an imagined event in the Great Kiva.

## MATERIALS

- Loaner trail guide booklet showing numbered markers on trail

## VOCABULARY

**chinks:** small stones stuffed into the mortar of the walls, sometimes placed in decorative patterns.

**juniper splints:** thin layers of juniper placed above the latillas and below the dirt layer in a roof.

**kiva:** room with distinctive features, usually underground, probably for ceremonial use.

**latilla:** cottonwood or aspen pole placed above the vigas and below the juniper splints in a roof.

**mano:** small stone held in the hand used to grind corn and other substances by rubbing on a larger stone, called a *metate*.

**masonry:** walls made of stone.

**metate:** large stone used to grind corn and other substances by rubbing with a smaller stone, called a *mano*.

**midden:** an area where discarded items were deposited.

**mortar:** the mud used around stones in walls.

**plaza:** open flat area surrounded by the rooms of a structure.

**vent:** small rectangular opening in a wall, usually placed just below the roof, that allowed passage of air.

**viga:** a log of spruce, Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, or juniper, used as the primary support beam for a roof.

## BACKGROUND

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The science of archeology helps us learn about and appreciate prehistoric sites. But there are ways to experience them other than through information gleaned by archeology. One way is to create a poem about a visit to Aztec Ruins through using sensory perceptions, imagination, and feelings. In this way, a very personal appreciation for the area is fostered, and a meaningful reminder of the area is removed without causing it harm.

To prepare for the final poetry writing activity in this lesson, the procedures direct students to practice using their senses fully by remaining quiet and expanding awareness beyond things that are obvious and close. First, students are directed to sharpen their sensory skills by visually noticing everything around them. Instead of focusing on the structure immediately before them, they notice the plants, the sky overhead, details of the structure such as the individual stones, the East Ruin (mostly unexcavated and closed to the public), and the hills beyond. Then students allow one sense – hearing – to explore its full reaches while the others recede for a while. They concentrate on listening to the nature sounds around them, so often ignored because the building initially makes such a strong visual impact.

Students continue practicing their sensory skills by examining details of the structure, some enigmatic. For instance, they notice the green sandstone stripes running along the west wall. Their purpose is unknown, but they may have been symbolic and have had spiritual meaning. Most likely, the inhabitants obscured them by plastering mud on the exterior of the pueblo to seal the walls from the eroding forces

of the weather. Above the stripes, the ends of the vigas, or roof support beams, jut through the walls. Most of the visible wood is original, effectively preserved by the Southwest's dry climate and sheltered by the overburden of rubble that covered the structure before excavation. Other wall details include the vents, or small windows, placed in the upper corners of the rooms to allow ventilation.

Details of the masonry work provide a fascinating study of technique and pattern, and a compelling connection with the inhabitants. The National Park Service has heavily stabilized and altered portions of the exterior walls by adding new mortar, additional top courses of stone, and in some places rebuilding with imported sandstone. Much of the interior masonry is still original. Close study detects mud mortar, chinking (small stones packed into the mortar between the larger stones), bits of plaster, and even finger and hand impressions in the aboriginal masons' work. (Look for the plaster and finger prints in the small doorway of the first interior room at trail marker #7. Remind students to help preserve the walls. Do not touch or lean on them.)

Examining the larger features of the building, such as the original roof, doorways, and rooms, helps evoke appreciation for their construction and use. The supporting large vigas are Douglas fir, spruce, or ponderosa pine, hauled from at least 20 miles away. They support the smaller poles, called *latillas*, of cottonwood or aspen. Above them are the juniper splints, then a thick layer of mud that serves as the floor of the next story.

The doorways through which the trail passes in the interior rooms are not original, but were constructed by the National Park Service. Original doorways are visible to the south, or right-hand side of the rooms. At times when people inhabited parts of the building, rooms in the rear were mostly for storage, while rooms adjacent to the plaza were for daily living. The uses of the rooms changed over 200 years. In later years, people used the rooms in this building for burial tombs, storage areas, midden deposits, turkey pens, and work areas, while daily living took place elsewhere.

Kivas are usually underground rooms, and are frequently round with special features. People entered small kivas on a ladder through an opening in the roof. Today, Pueblo people still maintain and use kivas for ceremonial activities. The size of the great kiva at Aztec suggests use as a community-wide gathering place for ceremonial or administrative matters. Although widespread in prehistoric times, kivas of this size do not exist in today's pueblos. Aztec's great kiva is reconstructed on the site of the original. It and the other structures at Aztec are sacred today to the descendants of the prehistoric inhabitants, Pueblo peoples such as the Hopi, Acoma, Zuni, Zia, and Laguna tribes of Arizona and New Mexico.



Sharpening the senses and noticing details, small and large, help our imaginations breathe life inside the rooms, on the rooftops, and in the plaza. Within interior rooms, one can smell smoke from woodfires and the aroma of stewed venison; hear the sounds of someone chipping a stone tool, people shuffling through doorways, the voices of old and young, and babies crying; see hides hanging from the doorways, remnants of food preparation and tool manufacture on floors, dried corn hanging from walls, bunches of herbs suspended from ceilings, stashes of clay for pottery making, yucca leaves for weaving into mats and sandals, and middens of food, bone, and pottery discards.

Daily life mostly occurred outside, in the plaza and on the rooftops. This is where one might have seen and heard women replastering walls, men carrying heavy timbers for construction, hunters bringing in their prey, men crafting tools, women carrying water from the river in pots on their heads, children playing with dogs, girls grinding corn using a mano and metate, boys learning how to make projectile points, and travelers from other areas arriving to trade their goods. On ceremonial days, people gathered from the hinterlands for feasting and celebration. Dancers entered the plaza to the beating of drums and shaking of gourd rattles with the people around the plaza intently looking.

Identifying and expressing personal feelings about the area is another dimension of appreciating the site. Feelings about the contrast between being inside and outside can be likened to the inhabitants' daily passages to the outside from inside rooms and kivas. These feelings are explored further when students imagine an event in the great kiva, and then express their feelings and their imagination in a poem.

## SETTING THE STAGE

Before walking through the West Ruin, briefly mention that this place is what remains from the people who built and used the structure nearly 900 years ago. Today, we call them Ancestral Pueblo people. Their descendants are Pueblo peoples from many different tribes who live today in New Mexico and Arizona. One descendant, a man from Santa Clara Pueblo, calls this site "The Place by Flowing Waters." This is a poetic name – we do not know what the people who lived here called it. This man used his imagination and feelings to give it a name that is meaningful to him. The students will journey through the site and do something similar – they will involve their senses, feelings, and imaginations to explore and create a poem meaningful to them.

## PROCEDURE

Follow the interpretive trail to the following trail markers:

### TRAIL MARKER 2

Direct the students to notice all aspects of the area, such as the plants growing in the plaza, the colors of the stones in the walls, the unexcavated East Ruin beyond the walls of the West Ruin, and the cloud formations above. Students discuss their observations.

Students sit or stand quietly at this stop for several minutes. Direct them to listen to the sounds of nature – such as different sounds of the birds in various locations – in the ruin, picnic area, and neighboring fields. Students discuss how many bird voices and other sounds of nature they heard.

### TRAIL MARKER 3

Students discuss their observations about the sandstone wall. Discuss the roof beams projecting from the wall, and the green stone stripes. Students sit quietly and list in their notebooks observations they have made in the course of being outside.

### TRAIL MARKER 7

Students discuss observations about their surroundings. Is it dark? Humid? Cold? What is the floor like? Notice the plaster, masonry, and components of the ceiling, and discuss.

### TRAIL MARKER 8

Students discuss observations about their surroundings, and then compare this room to the room at trail marker 7. Is it darker? Are there the same number of vents in both? Timbers in the ceiling? Students imagine and discuss what it might have been like when Ancestral Pueblo people lived here.

### TRAIL MARKER 9

Students discuss their observations about the differences in this room. They list in their notebooks everything they have observed within the interior of the building.

Continue through the roofed rooms. Encourage students to make observations as they go and write them in their notebooks.

Now in the daylight, students share how they feel about coming outside. Speculate about where the Ancestral Pueblo people spent their time. Students write everything they feel about coming outdoors.

### TRAIL MARKER 13

This is the edge of the plaza. Students share their observations about its appearance today. Students speculate and record what it might have looked like and what they might have seen from this spot when it was occupied: children playing; women grinding corn with metates and manos; hunters bringing in a deer; someone plastering a wall; a woman creating a pot...

### TRAIL MARKER 18


Students observe an excavated and partially reconstructed kiva. Discuss kivas and their uses among today's Pueblo peoples.

### TRAIL MARKER 20

Prior to entering the reconstructed great kiva, discuss how Pueblo peoples today consider this a sacred site.

Students enter the kiva and explore the building. After exploring, students sit quietly in one area. Explain that this was a place where the people of the area held many sacred ceremonies. The people may have sat here long ago and waited for a ceremony to begin.

Students close their eyes while the teacher reads the following:



**You are back in this pueblo when the Ancestral Pueblo people lived here, in the Place by Flowing Waters. In the kiva, it is dark and warm, a great fire is burning, and you can smell the smoke of juniper. Many people are seated beside you in a circle along the outside walls. You feel the cool stones of the wall against your back. You remember that in the great kiva, the people joined together Earth and Sky, sun and moon, winter and summer. This was the First House created when the people emerged from the earth.**

**The great kiva is the place where all the people meet to celebrate the first story. You can hear the rustling of feathers as the dancers enter the room. The dancers are wearing feathers or horns, masks, and they shuffle and dance into the center of the kiva. You watch them dancing and dancing....**

*Someone presses the button of the taped program (prearrange with a student or chaperone.) Students sit quietly as the drumming and chanting on the tape plays.*

*After it concludes, read:*

**As the dancers vanish into the darkness, you come back to the present. After you return, write a poem about the dancers and about the activities that you saw in your imagination.**

*Students write their poems, either while still in the kiva, or back in the classroom.*

## CLOSURE

Students read their poems aloud. Brainstorm other ways they can appreciate the site without causing it harm. Examples: write a story, draw a picture, write a play, talk to others about your experience, write a song, take a photograph, visit again.

## EVALUATION

Evaluate students' participation in discussion and writing exercises and final written work.



*Poems can be illustrated, and final copies displayed in the school, local newspaper, or at Aztec Ruins.*

## EXTENSIONS

1. Illustrate poems. Prepare final copies, and display for other students in the school to enjoy. Send samples to the local newspaper. Send some to Aztec Ruins, and ask to have them displayed for a couple of weeks.
2. Divide students into small groups, and have each group concentrate on certain rooms or locations along the trail, making and writing observations. Regroup at a specified location to write poems using their lists. Visit the great kiva as a whole class activity.
3. Experiment with writing poetry of different forms, such as haiku, or an anagram poem using words such as "kiva," "Aztec Ruins," or "plaza."
4. Create additional poems using the lists of observations, feelings, and speculations made at the site.

## REFERENCES

*A Trailguide to Aztec Ruins*, Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, Tucson, 1994.

Lister, Robert H. and Florence C., *Aztec Ruins on the Animas Excavated, Preserved, and Interpreted*, Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, Tucson, 1987 Second Edition.

*Aztec Ruins National Monument*, Southwest Parks and Monuments Association, Tucson, 1992.