

“Looking for
The Gulf Motel”
Exploring Sensory Details



Lesson Overview:

In “Looking for The Gulf Motel,” poet Richard Blanco uses vivid sensory detail—both in the images and in the sounds of the language itself—to immerse readers in a multisensory experience that makes them feel like they are at The Gulf Motel with him, both in the past and in his memory of the past.

All of the prompts and questions are intended to generate conversation in the classroom. Follow your students’ lead as they explore the poem. Note that students won’t identify all the details in this poem on a first read. Instead, aid them as they explore, locate, and begin to understand and connect sensory details. The Annotated Poem PDF includes possible readings and interpretation to support student conversation and questions.

Reading: Students examine sensory details and analyze how they are used to engage readers in Blanco’s experience.

Part I: Making Observations

Activity Intent: Students will watch the animated first stanza of “Looking for The Gulf Motel” by Richard Blanco and establish what is happening in the poem. (10–15 min)

Part II: Enjoying Language

Activity Intent: Students notice the ways in which Blanco uses all five senses in his descriptions of The Gulf Motel. (15–20 min)

Part III: Try it On

Activity Intent: Students use selected moments from the poem and substitute their own sensory details. (10–15 min)

Part IV: Understanding Form and Structure

Activity Intent: Students consider the form of the poem and how Blanco uses language to create a shift at the end of the poem. (10 min)

Preparation:

1. Review the two videos and Annotated Poem PDF used in the lesson.
2. Plan how you will group students for Activity 2.
3. Part IV is an extra activity. If you choose to complete it with your students, the lesson will go beyond the 45 minutes.

Student Lesson Overview

How do you describe something to make people feel like they’re right there in the moment with you, whether or not they share your experiences?

Part I: Making Observations

- a. Play VIDEO 1 (0–1:08)
Blanco reads the first stanza and 2nd refrain (lines 1–19). The video ends with images of the sun setting (before the next stanza about his mother begins).
[Richard Blanco reading the poem](#)
- b. Discuss VIDEO 1 – **WHOLE CLASS**
Help students make initial observations through the discussion. They are not expected to understand the whole poem at this point.

Discussion Questions

- Who exactly is speaking here? Is it one person or two? Why are they different? (*1 speaker, adult remembering a childhood memory*)
- What details in the poem show the two time periods?
- Where are the people in the poem? What are they doing? What do they see?

Possible Responses

1. The speaker is both the child (“I should still be 8 years old dazzled by seashells”) and the adult (“I am thirty-eight, driving up Collier Boulevard”)
2. The adult speaker is sharing a memory about his family’s vacation at The Gulf Motel from his childhood. The family has just arrived at the motel with their luggage and food for the week on the west coast of Florida for their vacation.

Part I: Making Observations

Watch the video and then share your ideas.

1. Who is the speaker in the poem?
2. What is going on in the poem?

- c. Read the rest of the poem (lines 20–55).

- d. Discuss – **WHOLE CLASS**

Give students a minute or two to reflect on questions 3 and 4 and then lead a discussion. For all questions, ask students to share what place in the poem supports their thinking.

- What details in the poem are unique to this family? What are they doing that stands out? Why does this stand out?
- What words or descriptions are unfamiliar to you? Do they relate to the family?
- What details or things does the family do that reminds you of your own family or vacations? Why do they seem similar to you?

Follow along as your teacher reads the rest of “Looking for The Gulf Motel” (lines 20–55).

Think about the following questions and share your responses in the class discussion.

3. What is something that really stands out to you about *this* family?
4. What is something that seems very connected to your family, or a place you remember?

Part II: Enjoying Language

e. Introduce Sensory Details – **WHOLE CLASS**

🗣️ Let’s review the definition of sensory details.

Read the sensory details definition.

🗣️ Now, close your eyes and think of a place you love or hate. What is one sensory detail you would use to describe it to someone who has never been there?

Ask several students to share their sensory details and note the range of answers.

Part II: Enjoying Language

Sensory details: details of sight, sound, touch, smell, and/or taste that evoke a vivid image for the reader.

f. Introduce Activity – **WHOLE CLASS**

🗣️ How does Blanco get us, the readers, to feel like we are at The Gulf Motel with him? The poem doesn’t just show us everything—it also makes us feel the sand in our hair, hear the ocean waves, smell the salt in the air, and taste the arroz con pollo (a Cuban style chicken and rice dish).

🗣️ Let’s explore Blanco’s use of sensory details.

Place students into groups of five so there is one member for each sense.

g. Activity – **GROUPS**

- After students have identified examples of their assigned sensory detail, let students discuss them in their small groups for about 5 minutes. Allow the discussion to grow into a group debate. When there are differences of opinion, have each student defend why “their” sense is the right one for that image.
- Note also that there are no wrong answers! One person might think that “reeking garlic” is more of a smell, while another experiences it viscerally as a taste, while still another has it as a sense of touch (if it makes your eyes water). The point of this exercise is to show how the speaker’s use of a multitude of sensory details creates a rich tapestry that describes his childhood memory.

1. Have each group member select one of the five senses:
 - Taste
 - Touch
 - Hearing
 - Smell
 - Sight

2. Highlight every example you find of your assigned sense in the poem. Be imaginative—even if your sense isn't specifically noted in a particular moment, can you make an argument for why you have to use your assigned sense for that moment to “work”?

3. Share what you found with your group.
 - Discuss two places where your sense is best represented.
 - Then decide if the images are clearly matched with one sense, or if there are images where the senses overlap.
 - What are the overlapping images—images that end up in more than one list of senses?

List the overlapping images your group discussed most.

	Overlapping Images (quote, line numbers)	Senses in Each Image (list all that apply)
A.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
B.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
C.	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

4. What do you think Blanco wants the reader to see and feel through the imagery he chose?

h. Discuss Reading – WHOLE CLASS

Use the Annotated Poem PDF to support discussion of 3–4 places students highlighted and discussed in their groups.

- How much agreement is there in your group?
- Why might Blanco use multiple senses in one image?
- Is this a place you would want to experience yourself?

 How do the sensory descriptions make the reader feel about The Gulf Motel?

Ask students to share general responses to the poem's sensory descriptions. Then ask students to share their specific examples of sensory details and explain how each evokes feelings for them.

i. Play and Discuss VIDEO 1 (complete video) – WHOLE CLASS

 Let's watch the animated video of Blanco reading the whole poem. Look and listen for the sensory details, overlapping images, and how they make you feel.

Ask students to share their responses to the video.

j. Optional – INDIVIDUAL or GROUPS

If you have time, ask students the extension question.

Extension Question: Do the sensory details and the feelings they convey change at the end of the poem or do they stay the same? Identify and explain one example.

PART III: Try it On

- k. Play VIDEO 5, (2:29–2:59) – **WHOLE CLASS**

Blanco discusses sensory details in poetry.

[Exploring sensory details](#)

- l. Introduce Activity – **WHOLE CLASS**

🗣 Blanco uses specific imagery to make the reader feel certain ways. The sensory details that are unique to the speaker also become universal because the reader can connect them to their own memories and emotions.

- m. Activity – **INDIVIDUAL**

Students practice the tools used by Blanco in his poem by substituting their own images for the images in the poem.

- n. Discuss – **WHOLE CLASS**

Share students' new lines of poetry with a gallery walk or by asking them to write their lines on a board or chart paper.

Extension Idea

- Allow students to continue this activity and create a complete poem in the style of "Looking for The Gulf Motel."
- Provide students with materials to create an animated storyboard or illustration of their poem.

PART III: Try it On

Watch the video and listen as Blanco describes sensory details and emotions.

1. Choose two of the moments below that have multiple sensory details and convey emotions. Replace Blanco's imagery with imagery from your own memory of a place or person.

What do you want the reader to see and feel through *your* imagery?

Example:

embarrassing us
as they roll the luggage cart past the front desk
loaded with our scruffy suitcases

Could become...

embarrassing us
as they **take too many pictures on the first day of school**
with our matching lunch boxes

Blanco's moments

- A. My brother should still be thirteen, sneaking rum in the bathroom, sculpting naked women from sand. (42–44)
- B. My mother should still be in the kitchenette of The Gulf Motel, her daisy sandals from Kmart squeaking across the linoleum, (20–22)
- C. I should still be eight years old dazed by seashells and how many seconds I hold my breath underwater (44–46)
- D. my father should still be alive, slow dancing with my mother on the sliding-glass balcony of The Gulf Motel. No music, only the waves (33–35)

My moments

Moment 1:

Moment 2:

Part IV: Understanding Form and Structure (10 min)

o. Activity – PAIRS

Students complete the activities to explore Blanco's use of sensory details to build the structure of the poem.

p. Discuss – WHOLE CLASS

Use the Annotated Poem PDF to support discussion of how sensory details connect to form in the poem.

Discussion Questions

- Does Blanco create a structure in his poem? How does he do this? Point to a place in the poem.
- Why would someone use “should” in a sentence? How does it make you feel when you use it to describe something you need to do? Why, then, do you think Blanco repeats “should” when describing his memory of The Gulf Motel?
- How does the poem end? Where is the speaker at the end of the poem? What is different? What has stayed the same? How is this reflected in the language used by Blanco (repetition of language, tense of verbs, and use of sensory details)?

Possible Responses

1. Blanco places his sensory details in a specific order. He creates a structure or form through the repeated refrain “*There should be nothing here I don’t remember...*”, his use of past and present tense verbs, and beginning each stanza with a proper noun (“The Gulf Motel,” “My Mother” etc.).
2. Student answers will vary but in general using the word “should” expresses a desire for something, an obligation, or the anticipation of regret. In the poem, repeating “should” shares this range of meanings, often as nuances, and makes the modal verb tense an important part of the poem.

Part IV: Understanding Form and Structure

1. Is Blanco listing sensory details together or is there an order to how he put them together? Discuss with your partner:
 - Does he choose and organize his details to communicate one feeling or idea?
 - What form did he use to build the poem? How did he arrange the words and phrases?

Form: the physical structure of a poem

2. Look at the repeated refrain, “*There should be nothing here I don’t remember...*” Discuss with your partner:
 - What is another sentence where you expect to use “should”? When do people use that verb tense “should”?
 - Why do you think Blanco chose this verb tense in so much of the poem as opposed to writing, for example, “There is a lot I can remember...”?

Wrap-Up (3 min)

Students consider how the use of sensory details relates to the poem’s refrain.

- q. Activity – **INDIVIDUAL**

Wrap-Up

1. Choose one sensory detail from the poem and explain how it connects to the refrain, “*There should be nothing here, I don’t remember...*”