

# Recursion as an Approach to Understanding Literature

## Recursion

Recursion is a powerful concept used in computer science. The general idea behind recursion is to break down the problem into smaller versions of the same problem and then, by repeated application of the smaller versions, the solution to the bigger problem can be built up. A recursive algorithm is defined in terms of itself. Solutions (Meaning/Understanding) arrives after breaking down the system to ever smaller units.

The thinking behind this is a bit like deconstruction, except the problem is not a computer program, but rather text, often a complicated encounter for students and teachers alike. Under recursion we approach the larger work by taking small chunks of the work and then seeking to reconstruct a meaning by pulling out small key and meaningful elements and then reconstructing these original elements from the text into a new version of the text. It is a little bit like the concept of found poetry. The difference is that we are not looking at creating new meaning, rather we are looking at creating understanding by re-seeing the old text in a new recreated way.

Consider the provided example from Frankenstein. There is some work done with the arrangement to allow the observer to understand the how of this reconstruction . But notice how close the new text, in borrowing elements form the original actually strengthens the understanding for the creator (student), by, in a sense, allowing them to write alongside Mary Shelley.

## The Task

Try with students for their reading of Frankenstein. We will separate out the chapters and students or student pairs will stitch together a new “recursive” version of the text.

At first it might merely be an exercise of pulling understood sentences and phrases and making a miniature— much like Victor does initially before deciding to enlarge the body parts. The idea behind this is to mirror the novel especially in its creative aspects. The students, too, will be creating their “creature.”

## Iteration #1

As a variation perhaps we can begin with a series of art works and have students cut pieces of all to recreate a new version of the creature or a scene, done purely from speculative cultural memory. 6-8 art pieces reconstructed into a new format.

# A Recreation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

## A Lesson on Recursion

**First:** Identify your chapter and set up three columns in a table (1X3).

Letter I To Mrs. Saville, England  
St. Petersburg, Dec. 11th, 17--

Paragraph Poem  
(Draft #1)

(Draft #2)

**Second:** Divide up the selected chapter with your partners. Number each paragraph. Each person takes a specific (set) of paragraphs. For each paragraph your task is to pull one or two sentences that contain the key idea or image or meaning of the paragraph as a whole. They may also stand out in the paragraph as an effectively written sentence. Retype or copy and paste them in the first column. Be sure to identify which paragraph the sentence is coming from.

¶ 1: You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.

¶ 2: I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man.

¶ 3 This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading

¶ 4 Six years have passed since I resolved on my present undertaking.

¶ 5 And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? [B]ut I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path.

¶ 6 I have no ambition to lose my life.

¶ 7 If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never.

¶ 8 Farewell, my dear, excellent Margaret.

**Third:** As a team distill down each of these sentences to a key phrase or small collection of words. These will be placed in the second column:

¶ 1: You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such <u>evil forebodings</u> .	Evil forebodings
¶ 2: I shall <u>satiating my ardent curiosity</u> with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man.	Satiate my ardent curiosity
¶ 3 This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. <u>My education was neglected, yet I was passionately</u> fond of reading	My education was neglected, yet I was passionate
¶ 4 <u>Six years have passed</u> since I resolved on my present undertaking.	Six years passed
¶ 5 And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? [B]ut <u>I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth</u> placed in my path.	I preferred glory to wealth
¶ 6 <u>I have no ambition to lose my life.</u>	I have no ambition to lose my life
¶ 7 <u>If I fail</u> , you will see me again soon, or <u>never</u> .	If I fail . . . never
¶ 8 <u>Farewell</u> , my dear, excellent Margaret.	Farewell



**Fourth:** The third column is a further distillation of the text. This time, you are trying to get it down to a key word or a small group of words that cut right to the heart of the original text. By combining these elements together you get, what will become, the first draft of your collective novel poem.

Evil Forebodings
Satiate my curiosity
Passionate not educated
Six passed years
Glory preferred to wealth
Ambition to life
Never fail
Farewell

The goal then simply stated is to cut the novel down to key words for each paragraph. These words can then be altered, added to, rearranged and finally placed into a poetic form--the novel in miniature. It is truly as if we are creating our own mini-Frankensteins just as Victor does in piecing together his creature. Add in a dash of art and you are talking an original recreation built on the works of others.

¶ 1: You will rejoice to hear that no disaster has accompanied the commencement of an enterprise which you have regarded with such evil forebodings.	Evil forebodings	Evil Forebodings
¶ 2: I shall satiate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man.	Satiate my ardent curiosity	Satiate my curiosity
¶ 3 This expedition has been the favourite dream of my early years. My education was neglected, yet I was passionately fond of reading	My education was neglected, yet I was passionate	Passionate not educated
¶ 4 Six years have passed since I resolved on my present undertaking.	Six years passed	Six passed years
¶ 5 And now, dear Margaret, do I not deserve to accomplish some great purpose? [B]ut I preferred glory to every enticement that wealth placed in my path.	I preferred glory to wealth	Glory preferred to wealth
¶ 6 I have no ambition to lose my life.	I have no ambition to lose my life	Ambition to life
¶ 7 If I fail, you will see me again soon, or never.	If I fail . . . never	Never fail
¶ 8 Farewell, my dear, excellent Margaret.	Farewell	Farewell
Your affectionate brother R. Walton		

# Frankenstein

## The Letters

# A Recursion Poem

## The Novel Retold

### Letter I

Evil Forebodings  
Sate my curiosity  
Passionate not educated  
Six passed years  
Glory preferred to wealth  
Ambition to life  
Never fail

Farewell



### Letter II

Time passes slowly;  
To have no friend is an evil  
On the wide ocean.

Intense brutality is never necessary.

Do nothing rashly,  
Kill no albatross in the land of mist and snow,  
Expect not success.

Intense brutality is never necessary.

*The art to the left is by Rudolph Brink. I found the artist online, and this piece seems to capture the spirit of the first two letters from Captain Walton who is driven to pursue a lonely path. The subject moves determinedly but alone into the unknown.*