

I Always Know It's Over When They Say:

You never met a man like me before.
My wife has nothing to do with this.
You remind me of my mother.
I want seven children.
I have three kids.
I'll never get over her.
My ex wouldn't swallow.
Lemme buy you a drink.
I only drink when I'm depressed.
My British accent only comes out when I'm drunk,
Love. Last time, I wrecked the El Camino.
I only bet on college ball.
I haven't finished a book since high school.
I quit the hard drugs.
I can't wait until deer season.

Broads. Dames. Kiddo. Honey

You'd be a knockout if you lost 15
pounds. Flowers just die anyway.
How many men have you slept with? You
like women?
I hate cats.
I hate condoms.
The Beatles suck.
I'm still planning on getting my GED. I'm
a lawyer.
I'm a gynecologist.
I vote pro-life.
Don't call me here.
Call me in the car.
My secretary'll make reservations.
She deserved it.
I have a jealous streak.
You're cute when you're angry.
Where's your sense of humor?
Wanna screw?
I have a Polaroid.
I can't smile without you.
I can't take my eyes off you
I'll be watching you.
I love you.

Melissa McCracken

“I always know...” Pen & Paper Version

This “lowest stakes” exercise uses principles of anonymity discussed in my article “[Anonymity and Authenticity](#)” in the NEA Journal *Thought & Action*. Students write responses on file cards without identifiers, except for speaker’s gender in the relevant part of the activity. Every student gets fourteen file cards.

1. Each student get a copy of Melissa McCracken’s poem “I always know its over when they say...” and writes their immediate response to it on a card. If discussion ensues it is welcome.
2. The instructor collects the cards and either: (a.) shuffles them and reads them aloud or (b.) redistributes them to the class and each student reads one.
3. In keeping with the voices in the poem, if a female student volunteers, she reads the title aloud and then the men read the rest of the lines in turn, one line each. If no one volunteers, the title can go unread.
4. Students write a second card about their responses to the poem read aloud and responses are read as in step 2. Discussion is again welcome.
5. Students are asked to count out ten cards and to mark the upper right corner with the symbol for the gender to whom they are attracted. Heterosexual women and gay men would mark the backs of all ten cards ♂. Lesbians and heterosexual men would mark the backs ♀. Bisexual people would mark 5 each ♀ and ♂, or any other proportion that suits them.
6. For twenty minutes, students write their own version of what someone might say that would let them “know it’s over.” For what comes next, it’s important to stress that responses should stick to what people say, not descriptions of behavior or character. A brief lesson on direct quotation – not “They care more about things than people” but “My car is my best friend!” – can spark creative contributions. Conversation during this part of the activity is often lively and should not be discouraged.
7. When time has elapsed, or when everyone is done, if that isn’t too much longer, everyone comes to the front and piles their cards with dialogue by male voices in one spot and those with female voices in another. Keeping them separate, the instructor shuffles the two decks.
8. Chairs are rearranged so women and men sit facing one another across a space in the center of the room and the instructor hands the ♂ deck to the nearest man and the ♀ deck to the nearest woman, The cards are then passed around the rows of men and women and each person takes one card at each pass until they are all gone.
9. Order is assigned by counting around the rows and then men and women take turns each reading one card aloud. Theatrical expression is encouraged but not required and the instructor should participate. If someone does not feel comfortable reading a card they pass it along the numbers until someone is willing or it exhausts the number of possible readers and the instructor can read or discard it. If one side is out of cards first, the other side reads until all their cards are gone. The instructor collects the cards.
10. A second consideration of the poem opens further discussion. How does the poet organize the responses? What, if any, is the function of the sequence? What is the significance of the last line? Free discussion is encouraged. If discussion is not forthcoming written responses can be solicited and shared as in steps 2 and 4.
11. People write anonymously about their experience of the activity for five minutes and the responses are shared as in steps 2 and 4. In this step some direction can be provided such as asking what responses were most memorable and why but doing so is optional.
12. On the next class day, the instructor brings in the two list poems with lines in arbitrary order. Group editing activity and individual writing can develop from consideration of this work at the instructor’s discretion.