

Tender Points Teaching Guide

Table of Contents

1	Note to Instructors
2	<i>Tender Points</i> Press Release
3	Context: Reading & Interviews
4	A Note on Healing
5	A Review of <i>Tender Points</i>
9	Discussion Questions
11	Writing Assignment One
12	Writing Assignment Two
13	Writing Assignment Three

Note to Instructors

We're excited that you're thinking of teaching *Tender Points* by Amy Berkowitz. In this guide, we've compiled some resources that may be helpful as you prepare to explore the book with your students, including:

- Supplementary texts
- Discussion questions
- Writing prompts

These materials were designed with Literature, Creative Writing, Composition, Gender Studies, and Disability Studies classes in mind. They were developed in collaboration with instructors who are teaching *Tender Points* in their classrooms.

We invite you to let us know how these questions and prompts worked for you and your students. If you'd like to bring Amy Berkowitz to your classroom, contact us; she may be available for a visit or a video chat.

Timeless, Infinite Light is an Oakland-based small press that publishes contemporary writing with a tendency toward the experimental, radical, and mystical.

Thanks for thinking about adding *Tender Points* to your curriculum. To find out more about Timeless, Infinite Light titles, please contact us at:

forever@timelessinfinitelight.com.

Thank you for your support.

Sincerely,

Joel Gregory, Ted Rees, Emji Spero,
and Zoe Tuck

The editors at Timeless, Infinite Light

“*Tender Points* does precisely what people are always saying can’t be done—it combines a moving, distilled, literary journey with advocacy and even pedagogy, here about trauma, chronic pain, patriarchy, and more... This is firm, high-stakes speech speaking truth to power, radiating beauty and fierceness from its inspiring insistence and persistence.” - **Maggie Nelson, author of *The Argonauts***

Tender Points is a narrative fractured by trauma. Named after the diagnostic criteria for fibromyalgia, the book explores sexual violence, gendered illness, chronic pain, and patriarchy through the lenses of lived experience and pop culture (*Twin Peaks*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, noise music, etc.). Since its initial publication in 2015, *Tender Points* has achieved impressive sales for a small press book and inspired readers with its fearless and intimate interrogations of chronic pain and rape culture. Now in its third and largest printing yet, *Tender Points* is poised to reach a broader audience.

“Any feminist punk, nerd, arty woman who is struggling with ‘mystery’ illness should read *Tender Points*... It’s the heaviest book in the best way, the kind that provides motivation.” - **Sini Anderson, director of *The Punk Singer* and *So Sick***

“Amy Berkowitz poses only perfectly built, unanswerable questions in this evocative lyric essay on illness, memory, and the terror and joy of becoming oneself.” - **Katie Assef, Diesel Books, Oakland, CA**

“Amy Berkowitz is a poet, which lends itself seamlessly to her careful, cutting memoir about fibromyalgia, trauma and identity. In this short, lyrical work the author takes an unflinching eye toward dark moments, bringing about understanding and resilience underneath.” - **The Huffington Post**

“Amy Berkowitz has written a powerful, thought-provoking, and occasionally darkly funny book on trauma and chronic pain. Would recommend to anyone who loves *Bluets*, *The Empathy Exams*, or *Heroines* by Kate Zambreno.” - **Leigh Stein, author of *The Fallback Plan***



About Amy Berkowitz

Amy Berkowitz is a writer and organizer. She is the editor of Mondo Bummer Books and the host of the Amy’s Kitchen Organics reading series, and in 2014, she was a Writer in Residence at Alley Cat Bookstore & Gallery. Her work has appeared in *Dusie*, *VIDA*, and *Uprooted: An Anthology on Gender and Illness*, among other places. She lives in a rent-controlled apartment in San Francisco. More at amyberko.com.

About Timeless, Infinite Light

A small press in Oakland, CA. Our books are spells for unraveling capitalism. We have a heavy West Coast lean towards the experimental / radical / mystical.

Context: Reading & Interviews

Consider sharing these essays, articles, and interviews with your students.

Complementary texts

“The Gender of Sound,” Anne Carson, *Glass, Irony and God*

“Fibromyalgia: Maligned, Misunderstood and (Finally) Treatable,” Bret Stetka, *Scientific American*
<http://tinyurl.com/p9ygx7v>

“Is Medicine’s Gender Bias Killing Young Women?” Maya Dusenbery, *Pacific Standard*
<http://tinyurl.com/jhau9ff>

“The Lifelong Consequences of Rape,” Starre Vartan, *Pacific Standard*
<http://tinyurl.com/z5olg6p>

Interviews with Amy Berkowitz

“The Body Always Remembers,” Amy Berkowitz interviewed by Cassandra Troyan, *The New Inquiry*
<http://tinyurl.com/o5z8y7a>

“A Series of Tender Points,” Amy Berkowitz interviewed by Esmé Wang
<http://tinyurl.com/j2u83ot>

Additional interviews and information can be found at amyberko.com

A Note on Healing

An important theme in *Tender Points* is the process of healing after sexual violence, and reading this book may help others connect with their own pain and progress in their own healing.

Because sexual violence is unfortunately very common, we believe that *Tender Points* is an important text to teach, and want to do our best to enable all students to feel safe, supported, and engaged when a class reads it.

With that goal in mind, we provide these suggestions:

- Teachers could remind students that they are available if students have anything they want to talk about. Teachers could be prepared to connect students with counseling resources and/or recommend a book on healing from trauma, such as Wendy Maltz's excellent *The Sexual Healing Journey*.
- Teachers could choose to give students notice before class sessions in which sensitive issues will be discussed, and give students permission to step outside if they need to.
- Teachers could choose to offer an alternate text for students whose PTSD prevents them from reading about sexual violence.

“All I Have to Do Is Tell You”

A review of *Tender Points* by Eric Sneathen
Entropy Magazine

“When I was a music journalist,” begins Amy Berkowitz’s book-length lyric essay *Tender Points*, “I wrote that the best noise music venues are places where you walk in and think: Someone could actually die here tonight.”

Tender Points becomes that venue.

Originating in the Old French for a thrust or a bout in fencing or law, the word venue most commonly refers to the place where something happens. As *Tender Points* attests, a venue is also the structure with an emptiness at its center—“The hole is the story,” in Berkowitz’s evocative phrasing—that lets sound pass through to you. The venue itself is the other half of the attraction, the site of amplification and diminishment, what combines with what’s happening to give it sense and inspire belief.

I’m thinking of the venue as something like a flute or conch shell, a shape that instills in the air passing through the instrument a particular timbre.

But I’m also thinking of the venue as both a void and a holding of that void. In *Tender Points*, Berkowitz gives her story over to that hole while moving the walls of the venue around to modulate and extrapolate the sound. I’m thinking that the venue called *Tender Points* instills in this story nothing less than an experience of time being forced into coherence, the catch of trauma.

I have a wolf in my story. But he will not interrupt my walk through the forest. Which is to say he’s already interrupted it: He’s the reason I’m here, sorting out the aftermath. Which is to say the wolf is eternally interrupting my walk through the forest: emerging from behind the same tree again and again to block my path. Imagine it repeating like a GIF.

Although technically non-fiction, *Tender Points* nevertheless meanders, reverses, circles through the woods, often subverting the expectations for a story with a wolf: a well-trod path through flowers and dangers, a certainty of cause and effect. In *Tender Points*, Berkowitz manages to represent this diffusion of the wolf within the body—and even within the time signature—of her story.

A diffused sense of pain exists already in the title of the book, which borrows its title from the diagnostic criteria for fibromyalgia, an invisible illness that holds the author in chronic pain. As Berkowitz writes,

Fibromyalgia is largely defined by a lack of visible symptoms or identifying lab tests. The only diagnostic criteria are the frustratingly vague Tender Points. Press here and I'll tell you if it hurts. Now press here. Now press here.

All I have to do is tell you. All you have to do is believe what I tell you.

While this contingency of belief and sense-making flashes at the epicenter of *Tender Points* Berkowitz seeks less to speak truth to power (to speak back to any authority who would deny her illness) than to boldly interrogate the conditions for a woman's speech to be acknowledged as truth at all within our own viciously misogynist culture. I read the final two sentences of the preceding passage not as a plea for the reader to believe but instead as the exposure of a vulnerability (a tenderness) within language.

Berkowitz reproduces this vulnerability across genres, frankly rebutting the “oblique nature” of poetry as a failure—colluding with both archaic and psychoanalytic opinions of women's speech as essentially nonsensical—and insisting on prose: “Sentences. Periods. Male certainty. These are the facts. No female vocal fry. No uptalk. No question about what I tell you. No metaphor. Go ahead. Fact check. ‘Did I stutter.’ Fuck off.”

The clarity and force of her prose convey urgency to get the fact of fibromyalgia across—this illness exists, my experience is real—even as doctors and internet trolls arrive to mute and limit such a reaching out.

My body is reading a book and it's in pain. My body is at work and it's in pain. My body is writing this and it's in pain. My body is walking to meet you and it's in pain.

The truth of this pain, everywhere attached to Berkowitz's routines, labor, and intimacies, cannot be told unmediated, conveyed directly from her body in pain to another. *Tender Points* incisively asks, “When you have all this stuff you want to say, how do you get people to listen?”

Before she is diagnosed with fibromyalgia (“before the pain diffused throughout my body”), Berkowitz has ongoing, localized pain as a result of vulvodynia. Through a LiveJournal group of persons with vulvodynia, Berkowitz is “introduced to a woman who was doing a survey about vulvodynia for her PhD thesis.” At the end of a series of related questions, this woman asks Berkowitz, “Have you ever been raped or sexually abused?” to which Berkowitz responds, “I... don’t... know.”

I was shocked by my answer. I thought I knew. I thought I knew I hadn’t. But no one had ever asked me that, and the question was an invitation to feel something I had been trying not to feel for a very long time.

At some point following the interview, Berkowitz remembers being raped during a medical exam years after it happens. It is this rape that lies at the root of Berkowitz’s fibromyalgia (Berkowitz goes on to cite findings that “more than half of women with fibromyalgia have experienced childhood sexual abuse.”)

The venue of *Tender Points* structures itself around a void. But we risk misreading *Tender Points* if we are to reduce this void to either Berkowitz’s rape or her fibromyalgia. It is their complicated interaction and the systems of power which allow both to proliferate and remain unrecognized, unrecognizable, reflecting the venue itself as a point of tenderness. So it is not only Berkowitz’s body kept in pain, made coherent by capital and gendered violence, but also it has been her story and her memory molded by such institutionalized nonsense as linearity and progress: the conditions of masculine authority. *Tender Points* twists and turns between events and temporal vantages (“The story of my pain is not an easy story to tell... I mean the plot itself is confusing. Trauma is nonlinear.”), but Berkowitz gives the details of her story as authoritatively as she can—knowing that the genre of her remembrance will affect the force, the thrust of her authority.

Perhaps surprisingly, considering her earlier disavowal of poetic speech, Berkowitz takes to the lyre,

One of the most persistent lies is that boys are angry

And the shadow lie: that girls aren’t angry

But even though we aren’t formally trained to hate
like boys are, every girl is a natural expert:

We have so much to hate

Listen:

A growl that tastes like blood

Black reservoir
Of anger splashing
Closer than you think
Beneath the slimy dock of everything I say
In my person voice
Nice woman voice

Does the inclusion of poetry recuperate poetry to a certain extent? Does this inclusion raise an enthusiastic middle finger raise to masculine authority and the violence of its sense-making? Such a proliferation of genres exemplifies the artfulness of Berkowitz's achievement in *Tender Points*—a deliberate amalgam of prose, poetry, quotation, even internet forms such as the listicle: whatever is necessary in whatever genre to convey her story to us.

In this way, the fragments of *Tender Points* are a sequence of thrusts, parries, offenses, rigged by different modes and temporalities. Taken together, these fragments marshal their own negation of cohesion, linearity, the doctor's diagnostic truth. I read the venue that is *Tender Points* not as an immobile or passive point of entry, but as a dynamic, crafted instrument that blasts Berkowitz's story in high definition.

Discussion Questions

1. Watch “Fibromyalgia: Screening for the 14 Tender Points” (just two minutes long). Then, watch the book trailer for Amy Berkowitz’s *Tender Points*. The book trailer was inspired by the screening video. How are these videos similar? How are they different? (Optionally, direct students to the Esmé Wang interview to read Berkowitz’s thoughts on the screening video.)

“Fibromyalgia: Screening for the 14 Tender Points”

<http://tinyurl.com/jfyzhhs>

Book trailer for *Tender Points*

<http://tinyurl.com/jbuwsgb>

2. What is fibromyalgia? What does it feel like to have fibromyalgia? What parts of the book conveyed this most clearly to you?
3. In what ways does the lyric essay engage topics of misogyny and sexual violence differently than another approach, such as a traditional essay or a newspaper article?
4. Discuss the use of italicized, collaged language borrowed from anonymous Internet users (examples include pages 12, 38, and 106). What does this language depict? What does it add to *Tender Points*, and how would *Tender Points* be different without it?
5. Discuss the extensive use of quoted texts and pop culture references. What does this material add to *Tender Points*, and how would *Tender Points* be different without it?
6. On the first page of *Tender Points*, the author takes us inside the cement walls of a noise show, where it feels like “someone could actually die here tonight” and tells us that it’s here where she wants to tell her story. Why do you think the author wants to begin here? How does this setting inform everything that follows? What would a place or atmosphere like this look like for you?
7. *Tender Points* is a document of memory fractured by trauma. What argument do you think the book is making about the role of memory in the process of experiencing, recalling, and healing from trauma?
8. The book tells its story out of order. Why do you think the events are recounted this way? How does this affect how we read them, and what would it feel like to read the story told from beginning to end instead?

9. Consider the author's choice to include a comment correcting an error in her book (on page 55) rather than correcting the error. Why might she have made this choice? What do the comment and the uncorrected error add to the story?
10. A poem in the book argues that "Doctors are cops" (page 52). What is meant by this statement, and what evidence does the book provide to support it? The statement is made in a short rhyming poem. How does this form affect its meaning?
11. What were your thoughts about disability before reading *Tender Points*? After reading the book?
12. A crucial theme of the book is the question of whose story is believed and whose is doubted. Identify places where the book describes voices that are believed or voices that are silenced or doubted. What do you notice? How does this relate to the book's narration?

Writing Assignment One

Essay: Experimental Narration and Organization

From Marie Buck's First Year Writing Class at NYU

For this assignment, you will write a 1,500-2,000-word essay on a topic that both means something to you personally and suggests a larger social phenomenon. You will utilize unconventional, hybrid-genre strategies, as Claudia Rankine and Amy Berkowitz do in *Citizen* and *Tender Points* respectively.

With regard to topic: You may find it interesting to pursue a topic you've already written about in this class and see where these new formal strategies take you. You can also go in a totally new direction. We'll be doing some brainstorming exercises in class, and you should feel free to run topics by me in class or over email if you like.

The following strategies are mandatory for your paper. You'll notice that some of them may overlap—i.e., maybe you'll use a quotation (research) that is associatively tied to what comes before it (associative logic).

- Mixing of narrative; associative logic; and lucid, straightforward analysis
- Found/appropriated/collaged text
- Unconventional use of research
- Disjunctive form

You can also use any of the below strategies, though it's not mandatory:

- Repetition
- Italics to set off some text from the rest
- Bullet points or other graphic interruptions to set off some text from the rest
- All caps
- References to popular culture
- Metaphor
- Motif (like tennis in *Citizen* or noise music in *Tender Points*)
- Emphasis on the visual/graphic aspects of the page
- Pictures/art
- Use of a form generic to another medium, but repurposed (think of Berkowitz's listicles)

Writing Assignment Two

In-Class Writing Assignment: An Encounter Between Realms

Adapted from Stephanie Young's Small Press Traffic Poetry Workshop; used in Tomas Moniz's Berkeley City College Creative Writing Class, Nico Peck's San Jose State Composition Class, and Jordan Karnes's High School Creative Writing Class at Oakland School of the Arts.

"Writing poetry [like landscaping, like landscape painting, like cartography] isn't only about the imitation or recreation of experience. Rather it is an encounter between two or more realms, in which each realm is deterritorialized."

Tonya Foster, "A Mathematics of Chaos"

de-ter-ri-to-ri-al-i-za-tion, *noun*

The severance of social, political, or cultural practices from their native places and populations

How can we write the encounter between realms? There are many ways to approach this. One might be to write something that engages several different realms of thought or place or relation or language or movies or objects or feeling or history. Another might be to write something that engages several different forms, a combination of sentences, lyric poetry, dialogue, quotations, lists, etc.

For this assignment, you'll start by free-writing about four topics. You'll have three minutes to write about each one. I'll announce the topics as we go.

1. Ask students to free-write for three minutes about: their favorite song this time last year.
2. Ask students to free-write for three minutes about: an injustice they see again and again in the news.
3. Ask students to free-write for three minutes about: the ocean.
4. Ask students to free-write for three minutes about: moments when words are misheard or misunderstood or not heard.

Now, you have the next 15 minutes to write something that engages realms of thought from two (or more) of the topics you wrote about. You are also invited to engage different kinds of forms as well (i.e., sentences, poetry, lists, etc.).

Writing Assignment Three

Writing Assignment: Language and Power

Revisit pages 25 – 26 of *Tender Points*. On page 25, Berkowitz quotes Anne Carson's essay "The Gender of Sound." Carson writes, "Woman as a species is frequently said to lack the ordering principle of sophrosyne." (Sophrosyne is defined by Carson as a masculine virtue: the use of moderation and self-control in speaking.)

Carson's choice to call women a "species" may be telling here—women and men are of course not separate species, and so this may be a nod to the fact that women's and men's tendencies in speech are not biologically determined.

Instead, such tendencies are a product of socialization, and as men (specifically, white able-bodied heterosexual cisgender men) hold the power in our society, it's their speech that is obeyed, is taken seriously, is listened to, is not doubted.

Power is not simply about the gender identity of who is speaking—it also informs and is informed by the tone and style and content of the speech itself, such that we often think of a piece of writing or a way of speaking as masculine or feminine.

Berkowitz's interest in the power associated with masculine speech is what motivates her to vow to write her book exclusively in "straight masculine prose" (page 26).

(You might take a moment to discuss: What do you think of the author's choice? Does the author maintain this vow throughout the book?)

Think about a time that you felt disempowered and write about that time. Recognizing that masculine language is the language of power in our society, make a list of qualities associated with masculine writing. Try writing about the same time in your life again, but now incorporate those qualities or techniques. Which piece feels more powerful to you? Which do you like better? Do you think that one piece would be taken more seriously by readers, even though they describe the same experiences?