

Using poetry in tutoring K-3

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I. Why poetry?

Many teachers and writers have voiced the necessity of poetry beautifully. In the film *Dead Poets Society*, English teacher Mr. Keating (Robin Williams) tells his students:

We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.¹

But if poetry is why we stay alive, when I ask people about poetry, why do they sometimes tell me, “I don’t get poetry,” or “Poetry is really hard to understand”? I love the movie’s enthusiasm for literature, but it perpetuates some misperceptions about poetry- namely that old dead white male poets represent the universal human experience and that you need a classroom and a brilliant teacher who stands on his desk and recites Whitman to unlock the mysteries of poetry for you². The notion that poetry is something you “get” is flawed.

Poetry is not about “getting it,” says poet Naomi Shihab Nye in a speech on teaching. You don’t need special credentials to read and understand and write

¹ *Dead Poets Society*, 1989, dir. Peter Weir

² This is not to say that brilliant teachers aren’t helpful and important- they are. But you need not be in a classroom or wait to find a teacher who inspires you to learn from poetry.

poetry. Instead, Nye advises teachers: “How can we create an atmosphere of love with kids or participants of any age, so they feel [poetry] belongs to them too?”³

For kindergarten through third graders, poetry’s emphasis on sound, rhythm and patterns makes poetry ideal for teaching many of the components of reading, including phonemic awareness, phonics and vocabulary. Many children’s books already rely on poetic devices, like rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and onomatopoeia- to engage readers. Writing free verse poetry allows students to focus on ideas and expression, rather than becoming stuck on conventions, length and grammatical correctness.⁴ Poetry encourages experimentation while still demanding careful attention how language makes meaning. In the words of poet Dorothea Lasky, poetry demonstrates “that language is not just this agreed upon set of constructed ideas, that it’s not an MLA citation or a five-paragraph essay, that everyone can create new and beautiful language.”⁵ Embracing an expansive, inclusive definition of “good” writing, we can use poetry to honor the differences in the ways people use language.

However, there are also many less quantifiable reasons to teach poetry. According to poet Samuel Taylor Colridge, a poem is “the best words in their best order.” *The best words in their best order* generate surprise, joy and awe at reading something phrased more perfectly than you had imagined possible and the satisfaction of crafting a line where every word feels right. Some of the finest poems

³ Nye, Naomi Shihab. “Naomi Shihab Nye On the Art of Teaching Poetry.” *American Academy of Poets*. Youtube.

⁴ Routman, Regie. “Introduction.” *Kids’ Poems: Teaching First Graders to Love Writing Poetry*. Scholastic, 2000.

⁵ Lasky, Dorothea. Interview with Rebecca Tamas in *Prac Crit*, December 2015.

I have read lately come in response to violence and injustice. John Keats and Mary Oliver both suggest poetry requires mystery and teaches us how to live with ambiguity and uncertainty.⁶ To quote philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." Poetry matters because it expands the limits.

⁶ Popova, Maria. "Mary Oliver on the Mystery of the Human Psyche..." *Brainpickings*.

II. Resources

The American Academy of Poets- poets.org

A free online resource for poets and teachers: a poetry glossary, lesson plans, lists of poems for kids, poem-a-day and teach-this-poem emails, interviews and biographies of poets.

The Poetry Foundation- poetryfoundation.org

A literary organization and publisher of *Poetry* magazine- their website includes a searchable database of poems (with a children's section), free lesson plans, articles, interviews and podcasts.

Dream In Color- Dream In Color

Lesson plans developed by the Poetry Foundation and Dr. Maya Angelou focused on African-American poetry.

***A Poetry Handbook*, by Mary Oliver (Harcourt, 1994)**

Oliver's book is a superb handbook on craft and a wise and moving discussion on the value of poetry. It is short, readable and inspiring.

Hazel and Wren- hazelandwren.com

Online creative writing community hub based in the Twin Cities. Hazel and Wren includes a calendar of local poetry events, writing prompts, and reviews. While the writing prompts are not specifically for kids, many could be easily adapted.

The Loft Literary Center- loft.org

A Minneapolis literacy center "dedicated to the advancement of writers, fostering and writing community and inspiring a passion for literature"(Loft website).

We Need Diverse Books- weneeddiversebooks.org

An organization promoting diversity in publishing -While not poetry-specific, a great resource for discovering books.

III. Reading Recommendations

In addition to poets like Shel Silverstein, Jack Prelutsky and Dr. Seuss, who have published books of poems specifically for children, kids may enjoy many “adult” poets as well. The following list is intended not as a comprehensive list of poets/poems suitable for sharing with K-3 readers, but as a starting place for further reading and discovery. All of the poems listed by title are available online for free.

Maya Angelou- “I Love the Look of Words”
Basho- “The Old Pond” (haiku about nature)
Elizabeth Bishop- “The Fish”
Gwendolyn Brooks
Lewis Carroll- “The Jabberwocky”
Lucille Clifton
e.e. cummings
Roald Dahl- *Revolting Rhymes*
Emily Dickenson- “Hope is the thing with feathers”
Rita Dove
Robert Frost- “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”
Nikki Giovanni- “Knoxville, Tennessee”
Joy Harjo
Langston Hughes
Edward Lear- Limericks
Marianne Moore- “The Jelly-Fish”
Naomi Shihab Nye
Mary Oliver
Mary Rufe- “The Hand”
Carl Sandburg- “Fog”
Robert Louis Stevenson
William Carlos Williams- “The Red Wheelbarrow” “This Is Just To Say”

IV. Activity Ideas

These are suggestions based on the Minneapolis Public Schools poetry curriculum and my own experience studying poetry. They are intended to provide inspiration, ideas and be adjusted as to meet the needs of different groups. Sections 1 and 2 are mostly warm-up activities, geared toward getting students talking and thinking about poetry, and sections three and four relate to writing and sharing poems.

MPS First Grade Poetry Curriculum:

Poetry: Powerful Thoughts in Tiny Packages, Lucy Calkins and Stephanie Parsons, Firsthand-Heinemann, 2003.

Kids' Poems: Teaching First Graders to Love Writing Poetry, Regie Routman, Scholastic, 2000.

1. "Seeing with Poet's Eyes" (Preparing to Write Poems)

Goal: Help students use surprising, out-of-the-ordinary, fresh and precise language.

A note on examples: Give kids models that they can realistically aspire to emulate. Encourage, introduce new possibilities, but don't dazzle. For lower-level readers and writers, keep it short and simple. Reading poems that other kids have written is a great way to do this. Routman's book includes many poems written by first-graders.

Fog

by Carl Sandburg

The fog comes
on little cat feet.

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
then moves on.

#3 by Sappho, Translated by Mary Barnard

Standing by my bed

In gold sandals
Dawn that very
moment awoke me

Activity Suggestions:

Read Carl Sandburg's poem "Fog" and Sappho's "Standing by my bed" (or another poem that illustrate poetic language) then practice describing objects around the room like poets- for example, a poet might say the ceiling is the classroom's sky or describe trees as slow-motion fireworks. Walt Whitman described grass as "the beautiful uncut hair of graves." Have students write down or share their poetic descriptions with the group.

Bring some special objects (feathers, shells, vegetables) for the students to observe and describe as poets. Discuss the difference between a scientist's observations and descriptions of the natural world and a poet's. What makes them different? Why?

Make a list of "poetry vocabulary" (like active verbs that incorporate all the senses).

"Show don't Tell." For example, writing "I grinned like I'd just won a million dollars" is more engaging than "I was happy."

Older students might enjoy reviewing figurative language: similes (comparisons using *like* or *as*) and metaphors (without *like* or *as*, often but not always, with *is*). Gather some examples from poems.

From **Valentine for Ernest Mann**, by Naomi Shihab Nye

You can't order a poem like you order a taco.

Walk up to the counter, say "I'll take two"
and expect it to be handed back to you
on a shiny plate.

Still, I like your spirit.

Anyone who says, "Here's my address,
write me a poem," deserves something in reply.

So I'll tell a secret instead:

poems hide. In the bottoms of our shoes,
they are sleeping. They are the shadows
drifting across our ceilings the moment
before we wake up. What we have to do
is live in a way that lets us find them.

From **The Fish**, by Elizabeth Bishop

I caught a tremendous fish
and held him beside the boat
half out of water, with my hook
fast in a corner of his mouth.
He didn't fight.
He hadn't fought at all.
He hung a grunting weight,

battered and venerable
and homely. Here and there
his brown skin hung in strips
like ancient wallpaper:
shapes like full-blown roses
stained and lost through age.

2. Gathering ingredients for a Poem

Goal: Explore the structure of poetry and practice talking about poems.

Activity Suggestions:

Imagine a poem as recipe. What ingredients make a delicious poem? (sound, rhyme, rhythm, repetition, form, personification...)

Pick a few poems to “read as poets.” Ask students “What words caught your attention? What elements of the poem would you like to ‘steal’ in your own writing?”

Read some free verse poems, paying attention to what a poem looks like on the page: Patterns, line breaks, white space, all-caps, no capital letters, bold or italics. How does the poet emphasize certain words?

Read a poem while tapping or clapping the syllables. Is there a regular pattern in syllables, like in haiku or a sonnet? Does the rhythm ever change or become irregular? How does the rhythm communicate meaning in the poem?

Jump rope while chanting jump rope rhymes. Share the ones you remember and ask your students to teach you the rhymes they know. If you’re stuck, try “The Lady With the Alligator Purse.”

The Lady With the Alligator Purse

Author unknown. Many versions exist.

Miss Suzy had a baby
his name was tiny Tim
she put him in the bathtub
to see if he could swim
he ate up all the water
he ate up all the soap
he tried to eat the bathtub
but it wouldn’t fit down his throat
Miss Suzy called the doctor
Miss Suzy called the nurse
Miss Suzy called the lady with the alligator purse
In came the doctor

In came the nurse
In came the lady with the alligator purse
Mumps! said the doctor
Measles! said the nurse
Nothing! said the lady with the alligator purse
Penicillin! said the doctor
Castor Oil! said the nurse
Pizza! said the lady with the alligator purse
Out went the doctor
Out went the nurse
Out went the lady with the alligator purse

3. Prompts for Writing Poems

Goal: Write poems.

Brainstorm ideas for poems. Have each student make their own list, or work as a class.

Write acrostic poems- choose a word or a name and write it vertically on a piece of paper.

Draw/write shaped poems. For example, a poem about bees might take the shape of a beehive.

Haiku are a simple, short way to write formal poetry. Haiku have three lines, the first with 5 syllables, the second 7, the third 5. Here's a funny non-traditional haiku (Threadless T-Shirts). For more traditional examples focused on nature, read Basho.

Haiku are easy
But sometimes they don't make sense
Refrigerator

Write a group poem where each person contributes one line/stanza.

Draw three words out of a hat and write a poem that uses all three words.

Have a poem of the day/week. Define new vocabulary words.

Read a poem (or several similar poems) and write a poem inspired by or imitating the style.

4. Celebrate Poetry!

Goal: Present work and show students that their writing and effort matters.

Have a class poetry reading! Each poet reads their poem to the group. Practice using a loud presenting voice and speaking with emotion.

“Publish” the final poems outside with sidewalk chalk.

Make a book filled with student’s poems! Bring in examples of books of poetry as a model and have students help create all the parts of a book (cover, title page, dedication page and table of contents). Have each student write an author bio too.