



## Getting started teaching poetry in primary classrooms

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Do you have a favourite poem that you return to often and/or share with friends? Or some lines that come to mind often? Or a poet who stretches your imagination?

I reach for poetry at the critical moments in my life, those of intense emotion: the birth of children and grandchildren... the loss of a loved one... a personal 'disaster' or a tragedy on a broader scale...and, also when I'm feeling joyful...or despondent. For example, during the current Covid lockdown I have read and re-read Emily Dickinson's poem about hope:

*Hope is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –  
And sweetest – in the Gale – is heard  
And sore must be the storm –  
That could abash the little Bird  
That kept so many warm –  
I've heard it in the chillest land  
And on the strangest Sea  
Yet – never – in Extremity  
It asked a crumb – of me*

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>

### What is poetry?

There are many definitions and often these have been debated. For example, if you ask children what a poem is they will often reply 'something that rhymes'. Jackie French in Murphy (2021) writes: 'a poem compresses what is most deeply felt into as few lines as possible' (vii). Mandy Tunica (2005) describes poetry as 'word magic'.

You may have heard the following definitions:

#### Poetry

- Is literature in metre form
- has a pattern
- expresses feelings
- is a verbal composition

- always has a repetition of sounds
- has symbolism and imagery
- has rhythm and rhyme
- must be read aloud

All of these relate to some poems. There are, however, a whole range of poetic genres from serious narratives to nonsense poetry, and so it is difficult to find a universal definition.

Sharing favourite poems is an excellent way to begin in the classroom. Learners can be asked to bring in poems or song lyrics that appeal to them and a class anthology can be created to help them enjoy the richness, playfulness and rule-breaking that poetry enables. In time, learners may decide to compile their own anthologies and add what it is they like about the poems they have chosen.

While there was concern in the early twenty-first century that reading poetry was dying, it seems that in the last few years poetry has had a revival – Instagram and other media platforms have provided a new place for poetry to be read and shared. Verse novels are also becoming increasingly popular. Kirly Saunders' (2017) *Bindi* illustrated by Dub Lefler is an excellent example.

It is worrying to hear that some teachers find poetry difficult to teach and others admit that it is rarely a feature of their classroom. Sometimes this is because of personal memories of over-study of nominated poems to try to 'crack' their meanings or an overemphasis on the form of the poem (counting syllables etc) in order to write in different forms (cinquain, haiku etc) rather than focus on language and meaning.

### **Why poetry?**

Poetry can help with understanding our emotions. It can help us think about how powerful, rich and imaginative words chosen precisely to express our feelings and reactions. It can also be important for the teaching of oracy, reading and writing and the ongoing development of listening skills. Sharing favourite poems or reading jointly constructed or original poems aloud in class can often nurture trust and contribute to the development of a collaborative classroom community.

Words have such power. Georgia Heard (1989) uses poetry to help children better understand the importance of careful word choice rather than what she calls tired and overused words. She believes that poetry can be the doorway into literacy for students, especially struggling students, by improving their fluency with short and more manageable texts. She wants to give learners opportunities to see themselves as poets. Her description of poets on her blog is something we can all aim for:

Poets...  
 Observe the small moments around us  
 Find poetry in the ordinary  
 See beauty in the ugly  
 Are curious and filled with wonder  
 Love the meaning the sounds of words  
 Look at the world in a new way  
 Pay attention to and write from all our feelings

Give voice to the unspeakable  
Are empathetic

<https://www.georgiaheard.com/childrens-poetry/>

### **Poetic devices**

There are a whole range of poetic devices and techniques that are not restricted to poetry but are often foregrounded in poems. These include:

- Alliteration
- Anthromorphism
- Assonance
- Imagery
- Metaphor
- Onomatopoeia
- Personification
- Repetition
- Rhyme
- Simile
- Symbolism

Again, shared discussion about these techniques and their effectiveness using examples from poems read aloud will build learners' understanding of how valuable they are to convey meaning.

### **Getting started**

As mentioned above, make a start by immersing yourself in poetry using the many anthologies and websites available, and then choose a wide selection to read aloud in the classroom. Taking time to explain why you liked a poem or what features were important for you demonstrate to learners that you enjoy poetry. Encourage your learners to do the same. Poet Sally Murphy's (2021) recent book provides a wealth of poems and practical activities organised in year levels. The most important thing is to create time and opportunities to enjoy reading, reciting and, where appropriate, enacting poetry.

### **Responding to poetry**

It is always critical to respect different responses to a poem and remember that there will be a range of opinions about any. Here are some ways learners might respond to poems:

- Talking and listening: What are your students' immediate reactions to a poem?

Aidan Chambers (2011) *Tell me* framework (p.177- 181) is helpful.

- Depicting the key moments in a narrative poem through freeze frames or sculpture.
- Choral reading can be lots of fun especially if time is given for small groups to play with meaning through tone, inflection, pace, pitch and gesture. Percussion instruments can be added as well. Some examples of poems that lend themselves to choral reading (and dramatization) include:

- *Jabberwocky* (Lewis Carroll)
- *Isabel* (Ogden Nash)
- *On the Ning Nang Nong* (Spike Milligan)
- *The Hairy Toe* (unknown)
- *Forgiven* (A. A. Milne)
- *The Owl and the Pussycat* (Edward Lear)
- Scripting a poem for readers' theatre can again help students focus on oral reading and fluency but also different ways the poem can be read.
- Drawing, painting, collaging or sculpting in response to the emotion(s) or mood(s) conveyed in a poem.
- Composing a soundscape or movement sequence.
- Keeping a poetry journal to record response to different poems.

### **Writing poetry**

There are many ways to encourage learners to write poetry.

#### Starting with sensory experiences

Bryony who was teaching Year 2 writes about using sensory experiences when introducing poetry writing (for more detail see Latham and Ewing, 2018):

*We basically started by tipping a bag of autumn leaves from the school grounds out into the middle of the mat, and in turns the children came in from the circle to smell them, scrunch them, drop them and try to describe what they noticed as creatively as possible.*

Here are a few of the children's responses:

*Sounds like...drawing with chalk on concrete - butterfly wings tapping together - crunching old bread- crackling in your mouth...*

*Reminds me of...a burnt out house with holes where the light comes through - a snake shedding its skin - an old person - sunlight through the cracks- it used to have life in it - falls like a boat swaying in the wind...*

*Smells like...old sugar smashed on the ground in a lonely house - old cinnamon, mixed with dust – grandpa - fire in old leaves- sour-dough- grassy - old-fashioned...*

From these initial conversations, experienced through the senses, a group poem was constructed and later learners had the opportunity to write individually about the sensations suggested to them by the autumn leaves.

#### Using memory

Starting with joint construction based on students' experiences or memories can be fun.

Each learner can contribute a line around a particular topic.

For example:

*On my first day of school I thought...*

*My mother always used to say....*

*I feel lonely when....*

The lines can later be ordered to develop some kind of sequence to create a group poem.

### Images

Images can also be used as starting points for poetry. Beth Olshansky's (2008) work is very helpful here. Sharing a relevant book then demonstrating her own painting of a particular place, topic or subject, Beth then asks her students to paint their image. Conversations about these paintings focus on feelings. After creating a rich word bank, the students can write poems.

### Modelling

After reading and discussing a poem, the poet's structure can be used as a model or framework around which to 'hang' our own words. Well known author, poet and librettist, Libby Hathorn gave an example in a poetry workshop for pre-service teachers using Mary Duroux's *I am the river*.

I am  
the river,  
gently flowing,  
as I wind my way to the sea.

I am.... (<https://ozpoemaday.wordpress.com/2012/01/01/i-am-by-mary-duroux/>)

After reading Duroux's poem together, Hathorn suggests that learners identify five things (or three if five are too many) that they consider central to who they are. They can discuss in pairs and jot down possibilities. In addition, she suggests learners build up their own 'word wallets' where they store relevant words, ideas and phrases. They may choose to embody these words and reflect on feelings evoked. Once learners decide on their qualities, they can follow Duroux's structure to write their own 'I am' poem.

**Anya** (also discussed in Latham and Ewing, 2018) again, teaching Year 2 had shared a range of poetry including Nesbit's *Thrill ride; Night; Summer Lollipop* with her class. She chose these free verse poems because she felt their content and structure would be relevant for her students. In setting out to write a poem together having shared and discussed these poems, Anya asked the learners as a group to suggest the topic and the form. They settled on Teddies and free verse. The group first brainstormed ideas about teddies while Anya scribed:

Floppy Teddies; Soft Teddies; Brown Bear; Polar Bears; Grizzly Bears A Teddy is like a blanket with ears....

Later the learners would draw on this vocabulary for their own poems about teddies.

### **Concluding comments**

The teaching of poetry should begin with sharing a wide range of poems aloud and lots of talk connecting our own experiences and emotions to those of the poet's. The emphasis should be on enjoyment. And, when it comes to writing poetry, once again playing with rich word pictures to convey meaning and exploring language should be fun – not threatening.

### **References**

Chambers, A. (2011). *Tell me: Children, reading and talk*. Updated and revised edition combined with *The Reading Environment*. Thimble Press. Available online from [www.thimblepress.co.uk](http://www.thimblepress.co.uk)  
[Tell me Framework: downloadable extract available at:  
https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/pluginfile.php/294938/mod\\_resource/content/2/Aidan%20Chambers%20-%20Tell%20me%20questions.pdf](https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/pluginfile.php/294938/mod_resource/content/2/Aidan%20Chambers%20-%20Tell%20me%20questions.pdf)

Hathorn, L. (2010). *The ABC of Australian Poetry: A treasury of poems for young people*. Sydney: Harper Collins.

A rich collection of Australian poetry compiled by Libby Hathorn, including longtime favourites alongside works of contemporary poets.

Heard, G. (1989). *For the good of the earth and sun*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.

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Murphy, S. (2021). *Teaching poetry for pleasure and purpose*. Primary English Teaching Association Australia.

Nesbit, K. *Thrill ride; Summer lollipop; Night* <https://www.poetry4kids.com/lessons/how-to-write-a-free-verse-poem/>

Olshansky, B. (2008). *The power of pictures. Creating pathways to literacy through art*. Jossey Bass.

Saunders, K. (2019). *Bindi*. Magabala.

Tunica, M. (2005). *A passion for poetry*. Primary English Teaching Association Australia.

## **Resources**

Anne Bell

<https://australianchildrenspoetry.com.au/australianpoets/a-e/anne-bell/>

Australian Literacy Educators' Association (ALEA) ( 2016).

*Tadpoles in the Torrens Teachers Edition*

<https://alea.associationonline.com.au/publicresources/browse-alea-publications-for-purchase/tadpoles-in-the-torrens-teachers-edition>

*Tadpoles in the Torrens: Poems for young readers*.

[https://jcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=61ARL\\_JCU:JCU&search\\_scope=MyInst and CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991003477479706376](https://jcu.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=61ARL_JCU:JCU&search_scope=MyInst and CI&tab=Everything&docid=alma991003477479706376)

Aidan Chambers' website

<http://www.aidanchambers.co.uk/tellme.htm#>

Georgia Heard website

<https://www.georgiaheard.com/childrens-poetry/>

Poetry in Action Bringing poetry to life through performance

<https://poetryinaction.com.au/>

The Red Room Company

<https://redroompoetry.org>

The Red Room Company aims to make poetry a meaningful part of everyday life in Australia and accessible to everyone, particularly to those who are more vulnerable. Poetic arts programs are arranged with a range of partners.