

A Teacher's Guide to Poetry in the Classroom

WHAT IS POETRY?

Poetry is a special kind of writing. It differs from prose in form and purpose. Prose has the luxury of communicating at great length and in depth, while poetry says a lot in a little. A poem is a concisely-worded, yet mind-expanding expression of ideas or feelings. A poet tries to capture the very essence of an idea, a mood, an observation, or a life experience, and then crystalize it.

Most language is used in an everyday, ordinary manner, while poetry uses language in an extraordinary manner. A poet is much like a painter and composer in one, mixing pretty word pictures for the mind to see and creating wonderful sound effects for the ear to hear.

Good poetry will: 1) blend thought and feeling effectively; 2) present the poet's special or unique way of observing or experiencing ordinary things; 3) employ pleasant speech sounds and vocal rhythms as well as interesting word choices and sensory expressions; 4) have a certain cohesion and unity of content and composition; and 5) stimulate one's imagination.

Poetry is written in many moods and on many levels, each of which provides its own pleasure. Some poems can make us laugh while others let us learn from them. But all of them are meant primarily to be enjoyed.

There are two basic types of poetry:

1. Lyrical, which expresses a personal feeling or strong emotion and is often spontaneous in mood.
2. Narrative, which tells a story with plot and characters.

Some traditional forms of poetry are: couplet, triplet, quatrain, cinquain, acrostic, sonnet, haiku, tanka, and ballad. These forms have definite patterns and rules for construction. But modern poets, because what they want to express doesn't fit into the traditional forms, sometimes prefer to develop new forms. Free verse is an original form of poetry.

Poetry makes use of pleasing rhythms or musical beats called meter, and also uses rhyme to support the rhythm. However, rhyme is not always necessary in the composition of poetry.

SHARING POETRY WITH CHILDREN

1. Poetry should be read to children whenever possible as a first step toward developing an awareness and appreciation of its unique nature. Children need a basic grounding in this special use of language. Exposure to different forms and rhythms of poems will help them as they begin their own exploration and composition in verse.
2. The appreciation of poetry is cumulative. The teacher who realizes the importance of taking advantage of special occasions or children's moods to introduce poetry should have an ample supply of poems on hand. A card file or two of good anthologies can capitalize on those special moments when it's just right for a poem! Some poets who write especially for children are Eve Merriam, Aileen Fisher, John Ciardi, Shel Silverstein, and Elizabeth Farjeon.
3. Encourage children to repeat poems aloud, memorize them, and treat them as friends.
4. After experiencing the sound of poetry, children can then be turned toward sensing what the poetry is about. Show them what the poet is trying to express — the beauty of something, the feeling about an experience, or the fun of seeing the ordinary in a special way. Children can relate to this because they often feel the frustration of a vocabulary too limited to express their own feelings. Pointing out how a poet was able to do that develops the beginning of appreciation.
5. When children write poetry, start them with sensory appeals and personal feelings. Simple rhymes and rhythms should follow. After all, poetry is the sister art to music, and children should be aware that it can sing and dance! Children also love to write nonsense poems, and the feeling of being silly (in a controlled way) is exciting.
6. The traditional patterns and forms of poems can be introduced slowly. Imagery and figurative language are important in the later development of writing skill, producing more polished poems.
7. One of the most important points to consider is the reserving of time for children to read their creations in class or in special programs. Poetry is written to be read and listened to for full effect and enjoyment.
8. Children should keep a collection of their favorite poems which they have copied, as well as a collection of their own creative efforts. Class booklets make impressive gifts for parent visitation nights.