

Why poetry?

Poetry can arise for many reasons. In the learning situation it can provide a very effective written response to an experience, particularly one which has an aesthetic leaning. Poems are short, succinct and punchy. Even the less able child is not obliged to sustain the effort required for a longer piece of writing. A child who has difficulty with writing can record his or her work by some means other than writing. (Perhaps by sound recording or dictation to another child or adult.)

Poetry can sharpen perception, encourage close observation and provides a very powerful mode for expressing feelings and making comments about the world.

Reading and writing creative literature helps us to explore our world, ourselves and others. Through reading and writing we can travel into situations and events that are impossible or even dangerous, as well as those less adventurous. As a result of reading and writing we grow, both in knowledge and emotional maturity.

The reading and writing of poetry, in particular, helps us to explore the world of feelings - that is of the senses and of the emotions.

Often it is thought that poetry is less accessible for children than other forms of writing. Yet young children readily respond to rhythm and sensual experience.

The rewards to be gained from an enjoyment of poetry are well worth the teacher's efforts in developing and nurturing an interest and love of this unique form of writing.

What is poetry?

Poetry can be defined loosely as writing which uses figurative (not flowery) language and expresses that which comes primarily from the heart. However it should not be forgotten that poetry is also a highly complex and structured craft, different in shape on the page and different in form from any other sort of writing.

The majority of poetic work by children falls somewhere between these two points.

Writing can be poetic even if it does not have poetic form (consider the short stories of Oscar Wilde, for example) and of course just putting a piece of writing into verse form does not turn it into poetry. Usually, however, poetic writing follows some conventions. These include short lines and versification, in other words, its shape on the page.

What about metre and rhyme?

Should it rhyme? The short answer is not necessarily. A great deal of poetry does rhyme though. The danger is that children will use 'rubbish' words solely to complete the rhyme. A good way to avoid this is to concentrate on meaning and rhythm - in that order. Rhythm and metre can be developed and as children gain confidence they can begin to work within some of the traditional structures.

Poetry is one of the best ways of giving expression to an experience. For children poetry has, perhaps, three stages or levels of appeal . . .

The first appeal, to young children, is that of rhythm. At this stage there is no need to differentiate between poetry and song. Regular rhythms such as hammering, clapping or water dripping can be explored. Many nursery rhymes have this sort of appeal. Children can devise variations on a nursery rhyme, or make new ones. Teachers know all too well how a young child loves to tell a story. Why not in a nursery rhyme, verse form?

The second response is one of all the senses. At this point the appeal of strong imagery becomes apparent.

Finally the intellect comes into play. Older children in particular will add to the sensual the fact that poems can comment on their world. They can use poetry to explore their fears, worries, desires and so on.

When children begin to compose their own poetry (or anyone come to that) it is very important that they start with what they know and draw upon their own very real experience. This is well worth repeating over and over again. Poetry writing skills will develop with age and experience and eventually the world beyond what is known can be ventured in to, but start with where they are and what they know. Even very young children have a whole host of experiences on which they can call - the family characters, the journey to school, the world of their play, school life and so on.

Above all, poetry increases our understanding of ourselves and others. It develops and nurtures our inner selves and increases our depth and use of language - a language which we all need, all of our lives.

Notes on some poetic forms

When children are accustomed to writing poetry it can be useful to explore some more exacting verse structures. The following often produce very pleasing results, as long as a rigid approach is avoided if it means compromising sense or feeling.

Haiku - a three Line Japanese form of writing. Strictly the syllables should number five in line 1, seven in line 2, and five in line 3. However the use of merely three lines is a good exercise in compression.

Cinquain - adapted from its original form, can be quite useful with children. The adapted form consists of five lines of 1, 2, 3, 4,1 words.

Rhyme schemes can be various and often depend on the metre. The following are some examples of different rhymes.

*"Ambrose said that he would help them
to clear the mess he had made,
but they tied him to an armchair
and gave him some lemonade."*

"One, two, three Richard's got the flea, if I can get across the yard he won't catch me."

*"If you listen to you I'll tell, a story I know quite well.
It may not be exactly true,
but what you think is up to you."*

*"In Paddington Station, London Town,
a flock of pigeons came flapping down after someone's unwanted crumbs,
a flutter of wings, some blue, some brown."*

Much very good poetry is written in blank verse and no one should worry too much about special forms except in that they are good fun for the craftsman.

Some starting points for poetry

Bearing in mind that most poetry has some autobiographical content and draws upon the real experience of the writer it is still possible to use starting points for writing. Those listed below have worked quite well with children.

- *Writing poems about a picture.* There is a difference between the use of a photograph and a painting or drawing. Photographs quote from reality and do not interpret, whereas manufactured pictures do interpret. Either way the child will find it helpful to discuss the picture with the teacher or peers before starting.
- *Five things that annoy me & five things that please me.*
- *Nursery Rhymes* can provide good starting points even for older children. They can be adapted or re-written, or new ones made up from scratch.

A poet's observation sheet - children can be encouraged to make notes prior to writing about something. This is particularly useful if the class goes for a walk or looks at a particular edifice and so on but can be used anywhere. By fitting in their observations and feelings about what they see children can build up a bank of words and ideas for turning into poems back in the classroom. An example of a Poet's notebook/observation sheet may be found at www.robinmellor.co.uk. This observation sheet appears, in a slightly altered form, in "Poetry For Projects" Scholastic Publications 1989.

When reading poetry to children be eclectic – draw from as many varied poets that can be found.

Children should be encouraged to draft their work. A poem may go through many drafts before it reaches its final form. These drafts can be shared with peers and the teacher.

It is a good idea to build up a class anthology of the children's work. This becomes a useful resource. When asking children to write the teacher too should have a go at poetry writing. In this way the children will see that their teacher is sharing the struggle with words. Teachers who share and discuss their work with the children often find that the outcome is an increased rapport with their pupils.

Most important of all is the need to capitalise on a child's own world own feelings and experience as a rich source of ideas for poetry.