

Kid's Poems: How to Introduce Poetry Into the Elementary School Classroom

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A renowned language arts teacher shares the joy of teaching young children to write — and love — poetry

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Of all the writing I have done with students in elementary school, teaching poetry writing has been the most exhilarating and successful. Kids love it; they are energized by the myriad of possibilities and the total writing freedom. Teachers love it too; it's fun and easy to teach, and all kids thrive.

[Teach all students how to successfully write poetry with *Kids Poems*.](#)

Several years ago, when I began teaching young children how to write free-verse poetry, I was amazed at how creative and insightful all kids became. Students who struggled with forming letters and words and with writing sentences, and who found writing in school burdensome, blossomed in this genre. Free from restrictions in content, form, space, length, conventions, and rhyme, they could let their imaginations soar. Proficient writers also shone. For all children, their choice of words improved, and their joy in innovating surfaced. For some students who felt constricted by the requirements of school writing (journals, letters, and assignments), poetry writing freed them up.

Kenneth, a first grader, was one such student. The act of writing was physically difficult for him, and the traditional process was unsuccessful. Adult expectations for good handwriting also contributed to his dislike of writing. His teacher, Kevin Hill, commented on the impact of poetry writing: "With poetry, Kenneth was unleashed, and his talents were all over the page." Fascinated by the world around him, Kenneth could finally use writing to express himself freely. Poetry writing gave him a creative outlet for his mature understanding of nature in a way that made him feel comfortable, assured, and successful. (See "Spring" below.)

Other children also wrote easily and confidently, about sports, school, friends, pets, nature, likes and dislikes, their families, and what was on their minds. Their poems displayed energy, rhythm, passion, shape, and keen observation.

What's more, the voices of individual students were evident in their poems and convinced teachers that young students could indeed write with "voice" — a personal and unique style. Kevin Hill comments, "I could actually hear individual students' voices. Even without the child's name on the paper, I would often know who wrote the poem."

Introducing Poetry

Teaching poetry writing so that all kids are successful requires an in-depth introduction, including exposure to lots of poetry. While the initial session will last about one hour, follow-up sessions, including student writing, may be shorter as less demonstrating becomes necessary. Typically, the whole class session includes demonstrating poetry writing through one or two of the following:

- Sharing and discussing kids' poems (10–15 min.)
- Writing a poem together (10 min.)
- Teacher writing a poem in front of class (5–7 min.)
- Mini-lesson on features of poetry (5–10 min.)
- Brainstorming before independent writing (5 min.)
- Writing a poem independently (15–25 min.)
- Sharing and celebrating (10 min.)

During our introductory session, I limit the demonstration to sharing and discussing kids' poems. It is these poems most of all that will provide the confidence and models that spur budding poets into confident action. Sharing poems written by other children sends a clear message: "Kids just like you wrote these poems. You can write poems too." I want to dispel any notions about writing being constrained, hard, or requiring strict conventions. I want students to write with ease and joy, and exposing them to kids' poems is the best way I know to accomplish that goal. Or, as one first-grade teacher put it, "they don't see themselves as poets till they see other children as poets."

As students listen to and read poetry, I want them to see and hear immediately that a poem:

- Can be about anything
- Can use few words
- Has a unique form and shape
- May or may not have rhythm and a beat
- Often ends with a punch
- Has a title
- May use invented spelling
- Let's us get to know the poet
- Is easy to create
- May be serious or humorous
- Usually expresses important personal feelings

I read aloud and show at least five or six kids' poems, such as the ones included below. These poems are written by students just like yours — students who excel in school and students who struggle, students who like to write and students who avoid it. These are first-draft poems, thoughtfully conceived but quickly written with minimal revision. Our purpose is for students to discover the fun and joy of writing.

After reading a poem, I ask students, "What do you notice? What do you like?" We often comment on what the writer did and note many of the following as we discuss the poem as a whole:

- Topic
- Word choice
- Expression of feelings
- Rhythm
- Shape
- Line breaks
- Title
- Ending line
- Special or missing punctuation

Pen to the Page

At the beginning of a poetry-writing session, I usually do some oral brainstorming. Rather than asking every student what he or she is going to write about (which is time consuming and allows for only a brief response), I will ask several to talk in detail about what they think they might like to write a poem about. With the whole class "listening in," I talk with each poet. These one-on-one conversations encourage each student to pursue a topic in which he or she is interested, and to think about word choice, beginnings, endings, and so on.

I let them know that we'll have about 15 minutes of "quiet" writing with voluntary sharing afterward. I also tell them to put their name and a date on each poem so we have a permanent record of their work.

Students go back to their seats (or writing places) to begin their poems. Almost everyone settles down and gets to work right away. As they do when writing in other genres, kids quietly share ideas and help one another with spelling.

As children begin to write, I circulate about the room and briefly talk with each student, kneeling down so I am at eye level. My main purpose here is to encourage, support, and affirm each writer's efforts. Sometimes, if a student is having difficulty choosing a topic about which to write, I may need to have a brief one-on-one conference.

Celebrate the Poems

After the sustained writing time, students are invited to share their poems. Because poems are usually fairly short, sharing time goes quickly. All children get a chance to read aloud if they choose to do so.

Sometimes, students will stand at their desks and read their poems. Other times, we gather as a class in the reading-writing-sharing area, and each child reads his or her poem in the "author's chair." Some days we pair up or read in self-selected, small groups.

The purpose of the sharing is to celebrate students' efforts. I point out only what the writer has done well. Sharing the poem congratulates the writer, affirms the effort, serves as a possible

model for other students, and encourages the writer to continue writing. When the writer reads, we also clearly hear the voice of the poet. At times, students instantly appreciate the quality of a poem and spontaneously applaud. Sometimes, to generate conversation, I'll ask: "What did we learn about the poet that we didn't know before?"

There is little critique during sharing time. Once again, our purpose in writing poetry is to free kids up to write, to make poetry writing fun and easy, to play around with language, to write without concern about "correctness," and to give everyone confidence in their abilities as writers. For all of that to happen, our focus must remain on honoring children's writing efforts. Our first poetry-writing session (and all sessions) ends with this celebratory sharing.

For other teachers and me, poetry writing has proved to be the easiest, most joyful, and most successful writing many students have ever done. I wish you the same ease, joy, and success.

"Spring"

Chirping
Chattering
Aromas
Something tells
Something to sing

"My Cats"

Two cats
One hangs
One runs
One dies
One left
I miss that skinny fellow.

"Animals"

Lion
Snake
Leopards
Oh no
Lizards
sea turtle
moose
Oh no
things are scary you know

— Bridget Frantz, Grade One