Igniting a Passion for Poetry in Elementary School

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Abstract

This project explores the importance of teaching poetry in elementary school, to erase the stigmatisms that older students often associate with poetry. The project argues in favor of introducing whimsical poetry to younger students and creating a comfortable and safe environment for students to read and write poetry. Four sample poems accompany the research paper, along with teaching ideas and tips for motivated educators.
Table of Contents

4-7: Introduction: Igniting a Passion for Poetry in Elementary School

8-15: The Missing Piece

16-19: The Poetry Friendly Classroom

20-26: Beginning with Laughter

27-30: Give it a Try: “Car Thief”

31-34: Give it a Try: “Doggie Dreams”

35-38: Give it a Try: “Sammy’s Songs”

39-41: Give it a Try: “Guess Who?”

42: Let Them Fly

43-44: Work Cited
Igniting a Passion for Poetry in Elementary School

Walk into most high school English classrooms and say the word poetry. You’re almost guaranteed to hear a lovely chorus of groans. Why do so many students cringe at the thought of poetry? This is because to most students, poetry is a labyrinth: a mysterious, tangled web of intricate metric patterns and rhymes, and an even more intricate code of hidden meanings. Poetry is the Shakespearean sonnet, full of unfamiliar “thees” and “thous.” In their eyes, poetry fits into a neat little, intangible box. These bewildered students do not believe that poetry can be anything you want it to be, and that in the poetry realm there are no right or wrong answers.

The fact is, poetry does not have to fit in a box. It does not have to rhyme or contain complex meter. A poem’s meaning does not have to hide behind a thick velvet veil. Poetry does not have to be romantic or “girly.” Most of all, anyone can be a poet--anyone with a pen and mind. Yet, most students are not exposed to the freedom of poetic expression in their most influential school years.
High school students were not born with a poetry-phobia. Something must have happened somewhere between potty training and the senior prom that stigmatized poetry for these young students. Their fear may have stemmed from the inadequate introduction to poetry received at their most influential point: elementary school.

So what is it that happens in elementary school that gives students a lingering, foul taste of poetry in their mouths? It may not be what happens in elementary school, but more so what does not happen.

In this age of standardized testing and No Child Left Behind, poetry sits in piles in the corner, just slightly above paper-mache, recorders and science experiments. Often, poetry is only taught in April, “Poetry Month,” (if at all) after the standardized tests are stuffed into manila envelopes. What does this tell students? It gives students the message that poetry is not important, or at least not as important as reading comprehension and the five paragraph essay.

Often the first real poetry students are introduced to are the sonnets of William Shakespeare, the twisting and turning poetry of Robert Frost, or perhaps the complex and dark poetry of Sylvia Plath. A poetry introduction like that one can often cause young students to turn their backs on poetry in frustration and confusion. Can you blame them?
In the Danbury, Connecticut School District, the elementary school curriculum was recently changed to remove poetry from grades kindergarten, second, third and fifth. According to Jan Edwards, head of the Language Arts Department in the Danbury District, poetry was previously taught in every grade, as a fun exploration. This year, Edwards says, “poetry just got pushed to the side.”

The new fourth grade poetry curriculum is now a non-fiction unit which combines media and the social studies topic on regions. In this unit, the fourth graders choose a particular region to research in the computer lab and proceed to write a poem about it. I can’t speak for all students, but being required to write a poem about China does not sound like much of an inspirational poetry lesson.

Just a few short years ago, Edwards says, the students were “immersed” in poetry. First, baskets of different genres of poetry were placed on classroom tables. Students were free to read poems about nature, sports, love or even silly nonsense. “We would load up the room with poetry,” said Edwards. The students would read and read and read, then take a nature walk or just look out the window for inspiration. “It was more open,” said Edwards, “more imaginative.”

While Edwards explains that the first grade Danbury curriculum is slightly more open, what do you think will become more deeply etched in the minds of students? What are these students more likely to remember as they sit in a high
school English classroom and hear the word poetry? They will most likely remember writing a poem on Microsoft Word about the Great Wall of China.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with having students write a poem about a world region, that is if the students are exposed to a wide range of poetry possibilities. By having students only focus on a non-fiction poetry topic, students may be given the wrong idea about poetry. To them, poetry may seem distant and cold. These students may not know that poetry can be about anything you are passionate about, that poetry can be pure nonsense or about the slate colored junco flying outside your window. In fact, this is the essence of poetry. This is what students should be learning about poetry.

To fully appreciate poetry, students need to be exposed to its true kaleidoscope of possibilities. With tight schedules and strict district curriculums this may seem daunting to many teachers, but poetry is flexible and can be adapted to fit into any lesson. By appropriately introducing poetry with whimsical, tangible poetry, by creating a positive, comfortable environment, and by allowing students to become poets themselves, teachers can begin to erase stigmatisms that often haunt students through their school careers.
The Missing Piece

It would seem appropriate to now begin to discuss the type of poetry that appeals to children or the methods for teaching poetry, but that would be like starting a backstroke competition in the middle of the pool. The real problem here is that poetry is often absent from the classroom all together. So, before discussing how to teach poetry, we should discuss why.

In the whirlwind of teaching students to fill in test bubbles, keeping careful running records and grading reading comprehension tests, we are forgetting why we are educators in the first place. We are forgetting what the purpose of school is: to give young children the opportunity to fill their minds with exciting new understanding. Students should be shown that learning can be an adventure, that words are beautiful and that there is a world of information waiting to be discovered. Poetry instruction can open those doors. Kathy Perfect writes in her article, “Rhyme and Reason: Poetry for the Heart and Head,” that poetry “nurtures a love and appreciation for the sound and power of language. Poetry can help us see differently, understand ourselves and other, and validate our human experience” (Perfect 728).

Now, that’s a very heavy statement from Kathy Perfect. A first grader is not going to stand up and report that he understands his or her purpose in life after reading a poem, but, like I said, poetry can open that door. Poetry can prompt
students to begin to curiously examine the world in which they live in and to think more deeply about their own experiences. Don’t underestimate the power of a student’s mind-- or heart. Children are just waiting for that opportunity to show their true selves. Students can write poems about their own home lives, their relationships with their parents or siblings, and their communities. Students may write silly poems, poems full of depth and seriousness or write a heart-felt response to a poem read in class. A student may write about how much he loves pasta, or about how his parents just got a divorce and he only gets to see Daddy on the weekends. “If the appeal is to one’s soul, then response to poetry becomes a highly personal act” (Perfect 732). From a poetry lesson students can learn a great deal about themselves and you, as a teacher, can learn a great deal about your students.

A poetry lesson can be that spark that ignites a student’s passion for reading. A poetry lesson that helps a student see the fun and beauty of reading may be the most important lesson you will ever teach. The playful, interactive nature of poetry can attract students who may not be interested in other genres. “Coupled with increased confidence brought about by their success in oral poetry reading, joy in the spoken word can make students enthusiastic about reading, not just more poetry, but other genres as well” (Perfect 730). Humorous poetry or dramatic poetry, that can be performed, may be just the type of poetry to pull reluctant readers in.
Struggling readers may also benefit from reading poetry. The brevity, rhythm and rhyme that is often a characteristic of poetry can make reading a less arduous task for struggling readers. Reading only a few words per line can make reading more manageable for these students (Perfect 729). Specifically, haikus are naturally short, focused and often appealing to young readers. According to Denise B. Geier, an educator and creator of a haiku project in her school, “the brevity of haiku also appeals to students able to see this as manageable, instead of overwhelming,” Take the haiku “Spring Rain” by Buson: “In the rains of spring,/An umbrella and a raincoat/Pass by, conversing” (1-3). Young readers will enjoy the humorous idea of an umbrella and a raincoat chatting, while also learning the new vocabulary word “conversing.” Often the overwhelming appearance of an entire book of words can be intimidating for struggling readers, who become discouraged, and in turn decide to hate reading. Poetry can be a confidence builder.

The musical rise and fall of poetry can ease reading for both struggling readers and students with disabilities. Reading poetry in sing-song voice can benefit students with speech or language impairments, such as a stutter. Many people who stutter over most words during speech, can sing without a pause or stammer. Memorizing poems and reciting them can also give struggling readers a necessary confidence boost by giving them a feel for fluency. The rhymes in many poems can also help struggling readers to anticipate the words to come in
the following lines. Just imagine of how much more confidence a student can gain from fluently reading a poem aloud to the class. Eventually that student may not see the book of paragraphs quite as overwhelming.

There are few things more important in America as imagination. America has always admired inventors, entrepreneurs, artists, scientists and architects. It seems contradictory to teach science or math, developed by innovators with creative minds, without allowing students to access their own creativity through poetry. Poetry in the elementary school classroom can help fuel the imaginations of children, who will one day be the future of America. If poetry is introduced to students as open for interpretation, they can begin to exercise their dormant imaginations. They can begin to brainstorm ideas for their own poetry, while seeing the power and flexibility of words. Students can begin to think critically about content, which strengthens inquiry skills, as well as the creative mind.

According to Perfect:

Poetry has been written about virtually any topic imaginable, making it a logical and practical source for linking language, imagination, and creativity with other areas of the curriculum. The use of well-chosen poems extends and enhances the atmosphere surrounding more fact-laden subject areas, which
can make content area study for palatable, meaningful, and user friendly (730).

Students can read a poem about frogs for a science lesson or a poem that uses a variety of numbers to introduce a math unit. Teachers must present poetry to students as enjoyment, to be appreciated and not overanalyzed. When poetry is introduced this way, students will not just love the poem about numbers, they may come to love the math lesson as well. A teacher’s passion for poetry is contagious. The enthusiasm of the teacher can be like the difference between being fed chocolate cake or liver.

While aesthetic appreciation can be a major pro for teaching poetry, instruction always takes precedence. Most teachers feel they must turn their backs on poetry in order to address reading comprehension strategies, decoding skills and vowel teams. What these teachers may fail to recognize is that you do not have to make that sacrifice; you can use poetry to teach these tools! If I had a megaphone to announce it, I would. Teaching poetry can be a perfect way to build phonological awareness, such as the understanding of syllables, word sounds and components. Rather than using a dense story to teach these valuable skills, a poem can be a tangible way to introduce word sounds, sight words and other important language components (Stanley 56). For example, Stanley, in his article “A Celebration of Words,” uses the example of the poem “Weather” to
address the difference between the words “weather” and “whether” (Stanley 57). An often complicated concept of homophones is instantly transformed into an entertaining lesson on word-play in poetry.

By reading the poem “The Cow’s Complaint” by Alice Schertle students can learn about vowel teams (i.e. “ee”). The poem has multiple, repeated examples of vowel teams, both “ee” and “ea,” that can serve as perfect examples in a phonics lesson. Students will chuckle at the inner dialogue of a cow, while learning an invaluable reading skill. I’m sure if you look closely at the poem, a plethora of other reading lesson ideas will flood your mind. In A Kick in the Head, a selection of poems by Paul Janeczko, and illustrated beautifully by Chris Roschka, you can find the poem “The Cow’s Complaint” accompanied by an amusing illustration of a rather unhappy cow.

How unkind to keep me here
When, over there, the grass is greener.
Tender blades—so far, so near—
How unkind to keep me here!
Through this fence they make me peer
At sweeter stems; what could be meaner?
How unkind to keep me here
When, over there, the grass is greener. (1-8)
Rhyme specifically can be a wonderful tool for teaching about the common sounds in words. Karla Kuskin’s poem “Catherine” uses a consistent rhyme pattern (AA, BB, CC, etc.). New readers can benefit from the pattern, which allows them to anticipate the sounds of the words at the end of each line.

Catherine said, “I think I’ll bake
A most delicious chocolate cake.”
She took some mud and mixed it up
While adding water from a cup
And then some weeds and nuts and bark
And special gravel from the park
A thistle and a dash of sand.
She beat out all the lumps by hand.
And on the top she wrote “To You”
The way she says the bakers do
And then she signed it “Fondly, C.”
And gave the whole of it to me.
I thanked her but I wouldn’t dream
Of eating cake without ice cream. (1-14)
Kuskin’s poem “Catherine” not only presents an ideal example of a helpful, consistent rhyme pattern, but its whimsical nature can inspire children to want to continue reading. For a child, the reward of reading this poem is the pride of reading fluently, along with a hearty laugh.

Reading poetry can certainly be helpful in introducing new vocabulary words and literary elements such as imagery, homonyms, puns and onomatopoeias. All of these lessons lead to an increase in reading comprehension and fluency that can be put into practice during the writing workshop. While students are reading poetry, they are practicing decoding strategies and strengthening reading comprehension necessary to successfully pass required state reading exams. With poetry instruction, the students are still being adequately prepared for state tests, but they are having fun in the process. Reading a rhyming poem about stinky feet can eliminate the tedious nature of teaching language mechanics. Poetry does not have to be a main component of the curriculum to be included in daily lessons. Just like students, teachers must be creative as well, to see the abundance of uses for poetry in the classroom.
The Poetry Friendly Classroom

Poetry, like any other art form, needs considerable room to incubate and grow freely. Creating a comfortable classroom environment is the first step to inspiring little poets. Students need to be able to feel safe and accepted in the classroom because writing poetry is a personal process. They need to know that there are no rights and wrongs, no answer key, that practicing poetry writing is an exploration.

The physical classroom environment is the best place to start. Teachers can use the old “Jan Edward’s method” of immersing students in poetry. The classroom can be packed with colorful baskets full of various styles and genres of poetry: some with rhyme schemes, some free-verse, some about basketball and some about snow covered forests. This allows students to see the wide range of work that is considered poetry, and the world of possibilities at their fingertips. Immediately students begin to see the freedom of poetry. The message is conveyed that poetry can be written about anything you are passionate about.

While writing poetry, students can be given the freedom to work in the environment that is most comfortable to them. One student may work best while sprawled out on the rug, another may prefer to stand and lean against the window sill. One student may prefer to use markers, another may use an erasable pen. You may want to gather a stock of overstuffed pillows and beanbag chairs for just
Weinstein 17

this purpose. Your classroom may have a “Poetry Corner,” a special section of the classroom created to inspire budding poets. The students themselves may even enjoy decorating the “Poetry Corner” with the quotes, colors and photographs that inspire them to delve into their poetry journals.

Students need to know that there is nothing right or wrong about these methods. Like poetry, the environment can be personal. Kenneth Koch successfully created a relaxed classroom atmosphere for his writing students. In his book, “Rose, where did you get that red?” Koch describes his success:

With the help of these poetry ideas, along with as free and inspiring a classroom atmosphere as I could create (I said they could make some noise, read each other’s lines, walk around the room a little, and spell words as best they could, not to worry about it), and with a good deal of praise and encouragement from me and from each other, my students in grades one through six came to love writing poetry, as much as they liked drawing and painting, sometimes even more. (5)

Koch showed his students that poetry is as safe and comfortable as the classroom atmosphere. He treated his students as poets from day one, giving them the confidence to jump in without tentatively testing the water. He made collaboration okay and sharing essential. “The children talked, laughed, looked at
each other’s poems, called me to their desk to read and to admire, or if they were “stuck,” to give them ideas. It was a happy, competitive, creative atmosphere, and I was there to praise them, encourage them, and inspire them” (Koch 20). This is the type of atmosphere that fertilizes and nurtures beautiful, unique poetry from all students.

Of course, students must be reminded that this freedom is a privilege that must be respected to be enjoyed. This can be a gentle reminder, not a threat. Remember, we’re trying to cultivate positive vibes.

Not all students will be immediately inspired by freedom and crates full of poetry books. To write poetry, often students need encouragement, a little push into the pool. Paul Janeczko, author of Favorite Poetry Lessons, a Scholastic Teaching Strategies book, recommends using a Word Box to give students that extra boost. Janeczko describes the Word Box as a collection of “evocative words and phrases” written on slips of paper. Students can reach in and literally grab words to use in their poetry. Also, students can be given a handful of these words and phrases and told to play around with them to create any combination they desire. These poems do not have to make sense, nor do they have to be grammatically correct. Janeczko says to tell your students, “Have fun with the meaning of words, the sounds of words. Surprise yourself!” (Janeczko 9). The
Word Box, or similar tools like Magnetic Poetry, promote aesthetic appreciation of words and reinforces the easy-going nature of poetry.

A comfortable environment can not only inspire creative expression through writing, but can inspire performance as well. A safe space encourages students to share their creative success with their classmates. Students must know that they will not be judged by their work, but rather appreciated and encouraged. A positive classroom environment is like the warm incubator that encourages healthy chicks to break through the hard shells of their eggs. Give students the feeling of safety, and they will thrive as young readers and writers.
Beginning with Laughter

Now for the real meat of the lesson: reading poetry. Kenneth Koch’s argument is that by reading a variety of poetry, students will begin to improve as writers. Reading and writing become merged into one powerful subject area. Through reading, students are exposed to different styles of poetry that they can mimic in their own writing. But here is where the path goes astray in many classrooms: what type of poetry to begin with? Koch introduced adult poems to his young students. He had his students read work from William Carlos Williams, William Shakespeare and William Blake (coincidentally all named William). Koch ambitiously believed that these poems were not too challenging for students, and could bring them great inspiration. Of course, some young children can appreciate adult poetry, but when you decide to start feeding an infant solid food do you put a juicy bacon cheeseburger on his highchair?

Complicated adult poetry, while beautiful and full of great depth, can intimidate elementary students. These poems may seem intangible and foreign to young students. Often the best type of poetry to introduce to beginners is light-hearted, whimsical poetry. By exposing students to poets such as Shel Silverstein and Karla Kuskin, the initial fears can be lifted and blown far away with laughter. Students can relate to this type of poetry that is often about familiar animals, food and children themselves. Whimsical poetry turns on the green light for students,
sending the message that poetry can be anything you would like it to be, even nonsense.

In his article “Reaching the Heart: Quality Poetry Instruction for Young Children,” Michael Ford describes the critical components of a poetry lesson for grades kindergarten through third. He explains that poetry needs to be read in the classroom for aesthetic enjoyment. He says, “Poetry needs to be studied for poetry’s sake” (Ford 3). This immediately sends the message to students that poetry is pleasurable. Ford explains that forced memorization, strict assignments and interrogating questions can turn students away from poetry. By studying the types of poetry that early elementary students enjoy, Ford recognized that they enjoy poetry about familiar topics such as animals, childhood experiences and holidays. He also noted that children enjoyed humorous poems, or nonsense poems, and cites Silverstein as a prime example (Ford 4). Ford explains that it is the teacher’s job to present poetry with “enthusiasm and expression,” to help promote passion for poetry in his students (Ford 5).

The first impression of poetry is crucial to show students its tangible and comfortable nature. A hearty laugh can immediately help a classroom of students to feel comfortable with poetry. Imagine reading this Silverstein poem to a class of second graders (Silverstein, *Falling Up* 11):
Snowball

I made myself a snowball
As perfect as could be.
I thought I’d keep it as a pet
And let it sleep with me.
I made it some pajamas
And a pillow for its head
Then last night it ran away,
But first—it wet the bed. (1-8)

How do you think your first graders will react? After they finish giggling, the teacher can invite students to discuss how this is a poem with a rhyme scheme. The topic of rhyme schemes becomes considerably less intimidating for a classroom of students thinking about a snowball wetting the bed.

Koch also recognized the tendency for young elementary students to enjoy amusing poetry. He reports, “Third and fourth graders tended to be more exuberant, bouncy, and buoyant than their more serious older schoolmates. One of their characteristic reactions was to write “joke poems,” which made fun of some aspect of the poem or of my poetry idea—of talking to an animals in its secret language, for example” (Koch 25).
As Ford argues, exposing young students to this light-hearted type of poetry can promote affection for the poetry itself. Students will enjoy the sounds of silly words, alliteration and tongue twisters. Shel Silverstein’s poem “Sarah Cynthia Sylvia Stout Would Not Take the Garbage Out” is custom-made for teaching about alliteration. Not only is the title an example of alliteration, but the poem is littered with humorous, alliterative pairs of words such as, “potato peelings,” “brown bananas,” “cottage cheese,” and “globby glumps” (Silverstein-Sidewalk 70). Your students will take extra care when reading these tongue twisters (and most likely take the garbage out after).

Just because a poem is silly does not mean it cannot relate directly to lessons in other disciplines. Poems can be chosen specifically to relate to themes in history or science. The poem “Snowball” can be read as the initiation to a science lesson on winter weather. Other poems may be about specific animals or historical events. Holiday poems are perfect for light-hearted lessons during the week before a school break. A poem about Cinco de Mayo can be tied to a unit on Mexico. As a teacher, you can become a detective, searching for ways to sneak poetry into a lesson at any opportunity.

When venturing on the journey of writing poetry, students may be inspired to make up their own nonsense words, attempt rhymes or alliteration. According to the book, Using Poetry to Teach Reading and Language Arts: A Handbook for
Elementary School Teachers by Richard J. Smith, “ridiculousness is a feature of one type of children’s poetry that delights readers and listeners. It also frees children’s imaginations for writing their own ridiculous thoughts” (Smith 6). Students can be prompted to write silly poems through the use of the Word Box, or a prompt such as, “One day, while I was digging to China…” It is important for students to learn to appreciate the magic and malleable nature of words to begin to become motivated poetry readers and writers. Students are given the flexibility to change around the letters in words or make up names of imaginary creatures or places. A student could write about the sock monster that lives in the clothes dryer or a planet in the Andromeda galaxy named Noodle. Students can also write a silly poem about an experience they once had or something they wish for. The possibilities are endless. “The element of humor in a poem can do much to help students develop positive attitudes towards poetry, and certainly this is an important, often unreached, objective of reading and language arts curricula” (Smith 6).

Just as students should be introduced to a variety of poetry genres, students can practice a wide range of writing styles with simple poetry prompts. For many young students, complete freedom in poetry writing will cause daydreaming, chair squeaking and pencil poking. Most children need some guidance to begin the writing process. Prompts can be a particular phrase which the students are required to complete and expand on, such as “When I go to the
moon I will bring…” or a less specific direction such as asking students to make a list of lies. Often students will read a poem with a similar style before progressing on to the writing portion of the lesson, this can be a published work or a poem written by the teacher. Once the students are given an example and an engaging prompt, you will see a classroom of flying pencils, a line at the pencil sharpener, and certainly giggles and smirks.

Now that question becomes: what next? It’s time to get out the stage because your students are about to become little actors and actresses. With the rhythm and sounds of poetry, nothing provokes a heartier appreciation than a performance. According to the authors of “Out Loud: The Common Language of Poetry,” performance poetry is a “gateway for students to begin thinking about language. Thinking about the beautiful ways that language communicates—the symbol, the rhythm, the simile, the irony—is precisely the goal of a typical poetry unit as well” (Ellis 45). For young students there can be no greater accomplishment than proudly reciting your own masterpiece to the class. If you have created a safe, comfortable environment for your students, they will embrace the opportunity to shine.

Students can simply read their poems aloud, using the appropriate pauses and rhythm, or choose a more elaborate presentation technique. Slam poetry has become increasingly popular for students in all grade levels. In slam poetry, the
poet emphasizes the beat of the poem, and reads it like a hip-hop song. Often, the poem is read quickly and with great emotion. Students may choose to use props or rehearsed movements. “Performing a poem, using the whole body with limbs, facial expression, and voice, requires students to go farther in understanding a poem than does strip-mining poems for technical terms” (Ellis 46). To perform a poem, the student must have a personal understanding of it or a connection, whether it was written by him or another author. The other students in the class can also connect to the poem that is performed, because it is read with passion. Performance allows poetry to come to life.

**Give it a Try**

Now that you’ve read all about benefits and methods for teaching poetry, test it out in your own classroom. The following are four poems and lesson explanations written as examples for using poetry to teach valuable reading skills. They are naturally malleable and can be molded to fit any unique classroom. Remember to have fun!
Car Thief

Billy’s farm was down the street.
   We went there all the time.
To see the chickens and the cows,
   and buy candy for a dime

But today was different than the rest,
we got more than bargained for.
Today a goat climbed right in through
   our car’s wide open door.

My mom, she did not see a thing,
my brother, too young to speak.
   I did not tell a single soul
for one entire week.

The goat, his hunger grew and grew
so I brought him lots to eat.
He gobbled pizza, fries and Oreos
   And soon he ate the seats!

   He nibbled on the radio,
   the cub-holder and more.
He ate the wheel and windows,
   and then he ate the doors.

By then, my mom, she noticed,
that her car was nowhere to be seen.
She called the cops and neighbors,
who saw nothing at the scene.

   All the people on the block
   got fences and alarms,
but I knew the goat had gone
   Right back to Billy’s farm

   To this day his secret
remains safe with me, I think.
And passing by the farm one day
   I’m sure I saw him wink.
“Car Thief” is a poem written about a real experience that I had as a child, with some elaborations, of course. When I was a child a goat did indeed climb into my mother’s car while we were preparing to leave the local farm. This experience remained deeply imprinted on my mind because of the absurdity and humor of the situation. Just as I used this experience to create a comical, exaggerated poem, students can practice using their imaginations to do the same.

When using this poem in a lesson, the teacher can begin by having students read the poem to themselves once. Then, students can take turns reading the stanzas aloud. The students may want to read the poem more than once, as children often enjoy repetition, by all means, let them. Repetition is a great way for students to retain information and begin to think critically about the text. After reading, the students can be asked if they enjoyed the poem and why. The teacher can ask the students if “Car Thief” reminded them of any of their own personal experiences and whether they believe it to be a true story. Students may begin to volunteer outrageous stories of their own during this discussion.

This is the perfect time to transition into the writing activity. Students will be asked to brainstorm funny experiences that they may have had. Students may write about an embarrassing moment or a parent’s mishap. The brainstorming session may provoke some giggle—embrace it. Encourage students to choose a
story that they enjoy, which will make the poetry writing process even more enjoyable.

Students can be reminded that many famous children’s books (as well as most adult books) have been developed from the life experiences of authors. This can encourage students to work harder to become more like “real authors.” Writing from experience is often the easiest, because you can relate to your writing.

After brainstorming, the students can be asked to choose one story from their list and elaborate on it. Students can be encouraged to ask themselves questions such as, “What would have happened if…?” to consider alternate endings to their true stories. These questions can help students begin to transform their humorous experiences into exaggerated or silly poems, similar to “Car Thief.”

As an additional mini-lesson, the teacher can use this poem to discuss description or imagery. Students can be asked to draw a picture of what they see in their minds when reading this poem. They can be asked, “What made you picture that?” which can guide students to identify descriptive or detailed components of the poem, such as the parts of the car that were eaten. Students can then be encouraged to use imagery in their own poems so that others can visualize the scene while reading. Students may also read their poems to partners,
who will sketch the story as it is being read. Students can then discuss what components of each others poems painted a clear picture and what parts may need additional description.

This poetry lesson can be a great introductory poetry lesson for young students. When students are given the opportunity to write about their own experiences, the writing process becomes considerably less intimidating. Students can become comfortable with writing poems by beginning with what is already familiar to them.
Doggie Dreams

What does a dog dream of,
as he scratches and twitches his paws?
   As he yelps and squirms,
      with eyes closed tight
   and tail whipping back and forth.

Does he dream of chasing rabbits,
in wide open, blooming fields?
   Or eating crunchy biscuits
   under the dining room chairs?

Does he dream of chewing slippers
   or a big, fat, juicy steak?
Does he hope to jump in mud puddles
   and give a destructive shake?

   Or does he have a nightmare,
run from vacuums and thunder storms?
   Or dream of talking to people,
of dancing and chewing gum?

Does a dog remember his dreams,
when he awakes with a start?
   Or does he forget his adventures,
with the smell of grilling pork?

Young children have a favorite question: why? One of the best ways to
motivate young students to practice writing is to allow them to embrace their
natural inquiry. Allow them to ask why. Then give them the freedom to
speculate an answer.

The poem “Doggie Dreams” is an example of a poem created out of
curiosity. Although there is no proven answer to the question “What do dogs
Weinstein 32

dream of?” the poem provides a variety of possibilities. Students can be presented with this poem to help them delve into their curiosity.

First, the teacher can read this poem aloud to her students, while they follow along. Students can discuss what they found interesting about the poem or anything it reminded them of. Some students may even confess to having wondered the very same thing as they watched their pet sleep. The teacher can prompt a discussion about the poem by asking, “What pictures can you see in your mind as we read this poem?” or “What part of the poem stands out to you?” or “Does this poem remind you of anything?” These questions will motivate students to begin to pay close attention to the highlights of the poem and specific visual images presented in each stanza.

The teacher can then use this poem to discuss poetry that does not have a rhyme scheme. Students may notice that there is only one rhyme in the poem, in stanza three. The teacher can assure students that this is acceptable. Poetry may have a consistent rhyme scheme, a few scattered rhymes, or no rhymes at all. Many students may be surprised by this information, depending on their pre-conceived notions about poetry. Bringing this characteristic to the attention of students can help them begin to see poetry as flexible and free.

Naturally, this poem sparks a writing lesson. Students can be encouraged to brainstorm ideas of things they are curious about. Students can be asked, “What do you wonder about?” The teacher can remind students that their own
poems may be serious and fact based or silly. Then, students will be encouraged to develop possible answers to their question. Some other examples may be:

- What would it be like to live on the moon?
- Why do people have hair?
- What would it be like to be a tornado?

Just as “Doggie Dreams” does not have a consistent rhyme scheme, the students can be encouraged to make their own choices about rhyme patterns. They may be given the option to include rhymes, or exclude them. This flexibility may be helpful for some students who see rhyming as constrictive.

Students can be encouraged to separate their lines into stanzas for the sake of organization and easy reading. The teacher may choose to discuss this poetry technique used by many poets. She may also introduce some poems that do not use stanza separation, to present a contrast. Again, students can begin to see the flexible nature of poetry through a variety of stylistic examples.

During the writing session, the teacher should make sure each student has a copy of “Doggie Dreams” to refer back to during the process. Students may share parts of their poems with peers and ask for helpful advice. Students may also consult a dictionary, thesaurus or the Internet for additional ideas. Of course, reminding students to avoid plagiarism is essential for students using material on the Internet for inspiration.
After students have written their poems, they may be allowed to illustrate, as Shel Silverstein does so effectively. Then students can present their poetry in “Reader’s Theatre.” Poems can be read enthusiastically to the class as a whole, or in small groups. Presenting in small groups may be less overwhelming for shy or anxious students. The satisfaction that students can feel after reading their own poems aloud can promote confidence and give students the opportunity to inspire each other.
**Sammy’s Songs**

Sammy the snake would slither and slide
And slip through the sand and the sod

But other snakes thought that young Sammy was strange,
As he spent his days singing songs.

Sammy would sing about sharks and sandcastles,
About Super Man, sunshine and snails.

Sammy would sing about soda and sneakers,
About smiles, soup crackers and smog.

Sammy would hiss as he sang about slippers,
About cinnamon, snow angels and stars

And though they would smirk, the other snakes loved
Each and every one of Sammy’s songs.

“Sammy’s Songs” is a poem which uses the literary technique of alliteration. It uses the sound of the letter “s” to build a story about a silly, musical snake named Sammy. This poem can be used in an older elementary school classroom, grades four or five, to teach alliteration as a literary technique or in a younger elementary school classroom to focus on build phonemic awareness.
For younger children, in grades kindergarten to second, this poem can be read to promote awareness of the “s” sound. The repeated “s” sound in “Sammy’s Songs” helps young children to practice connecting the sound with the letter to build phonemic awareness. The first step to building phonemic awareness is identification of the sound in the onset of a word, then blending this sound with the other sounds to create a complete word. Alliteration in “Sammy’s Songs” conveniently lends itself to phoneme identification practice because of its predictability. The repetition of the “s” sound gives a young child a great deal of practice pronouncing the “s” in a variety of words. Students can see how one sound can begin many words with varying meanings. To become proficient word decoders, young students need continuous practice for building phonemic awareness. By providing students with a quirky poem such as this one, they can get their necessary reading practice, while appreciating the poem’s humor.

For older students, “Sammy’s Songs” can be used to introduce technique of alliteration. Students can learn the definition of alliteration, words that possess the same onset, or initial consonant sound. Students can look closely at the poem and circle all of the words that begin with “s.” The teacher may lead a discussion about the different tones in these words (some words may sound harsh, and other smooth). There may also be a discussion about the word “cinnamon” and discuss whether this word fits the pattern of alliteration in the poem. Some other discussion questions for older students may be:
- Does alliteration help make the poem more humorous?
- Why do you think the letter “s” was chosen to repeat in this poem?
- How does this poem make you feel?
- Can you think of any other things that Sammy could sing about that start with “s”?

For both younger and older elementary students, the lesson can then transition into a writing lesson in which students write their own alliteration poems. While the younger students may not discuss the technique alliteration in depth, they can certainly choose one letter and identify many words that start with that particular letter. For a brainstorming exercise, students can choose a letter and make a quick list of words that begin with that letter. Students will be encouraged to write in a “stream of consciousness” style, without stopping to connect each word or dwell on any word for extended time. Here is an example of the list I brainstormed before writing “Sammy’s Songs:”

- Slither
- Snake
- Hiss
- Stilts
- Silk
- Smooth
- Slime
- Sand
- Slip
- Smell
- Slick
- Sammy
After the brainstorming session has ended (this may last two to three minutes) students can then look back over their lists and begin to formulate a poem idea. As I did when writing my poem, extra words can be added to the poem and not all words must be used. Younger students may choose to place the words in any order they choose, even if they do not necessarily connect. For them, the lesson focuses most on the sounds in words, rather than writing a comprehensive poem. Older students may choose characters or a central idea to focus on in their poem; alliteration should add to the poem. Give students all the freedom they need. As long as they are using alliteration within the poem, at least occasionally, they are successfully completing the exercise.

After students have finished writing their poem, they may work with a peer to practice peer editing. Older students can check for spelling errors and flow. Younger students may not need to check for spelling, but offer suggestions and additional alliterative words that may be used. Students can then read their poems aloud in small groups, or as a class. Reading the poems aloud will help students to hear the true effect of alliteration and appreciate the beauty of repeated sounds.
Guess Who

He twists and turns
   And cries out loud,
   Lets out a giant roar
He huffs and puffs and
   Kicks up dust
   In his fit outside my door
     
I know he can’t control it
But I run and hide none-the-less
   To tell you the truth
   I think he just
   wants a big, warm hug.
     
If I were you,
   I would suggest,
   Seek shelter while you can
He picks up trees and cars and swings
   And hurl s them over his head
     
His wide, quick body grows and grows
   And spins
   And spins
   And spins
     
If you ask me I think that he
   Is just plain misunderstood

The poem “Guess Who” uses the literary devise of personification. It personifies, or gives human characteristics, to a tornado. Once the students have read the poem, either on their own or by listening to the teacher read in a read-aloud, they can guess what the poem is describing. Many students may have guesses other than a tornado, such as a hurricane or monster. The teacher should encourage critical thinking and the use of evidence to support a guess. For example, if a student guesses a monster, he may support this by citing the line
“He picks up trees and cars and swings.” This line may have led the student to believe the poem is about a monster because the behavior is superhuman and destructive.

Students can learn the meaning of the literary element personification after reading “Guess Who.” Students can learn that personification gives human characteristics to a non-human object, creature, etc. A tornado does not cry, roar or hug, yet it displays qualities that can be compared to these descriptions. For example, a tornado may cause a great deal of noise as it destroys homes and business, which may be likened to a roar or cry. Students can discuss the characteristics of a tornado and compare them to the human characteristics mentioned in the poem. Some students may even choose a few additional characteristics that were not mentioned in the poem.

Students can then begin to transition into a writing lesson in which they personify an object of choice. The writing activity should be flexible. Students may choose their own poem length, style and rhyme scheme (or none at all). The lesson should focus primarily on the practice of personification rather than a specific style of poetry. The freedom given in this lesson allows students to focus on developing creative ideas. Some examples that can be given to help students see the range of options available to them are:

- Personification of a piece of furniture
- Personification of an electronic (computer, phone, etc.)
• Personification of plants or flowers

Students should be encouraged to use as much description and be as specific as possible without saying the name of the chosen object. A motivating brainstorming activity can help students get their creative juices flowing. Students can make a list of adjectives that can be used to describe their chosen object and then, on the other side of the list, the student can write a human quality that can be similar to this adjective. For example, if the object personified is a computer, a student can write:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Human Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>precise</td>
<td>intelligent, strong memory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quick</td>
<td>fast (runner or thinker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bright</td>
<td>innovative, smart, talented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loud</td>
<td>talkative</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After each student has written a short poem, poems can be shared with partners. Each student can take turns guessing what object is personified in his partner’s poem. After a few minutes of guessing, the correct answer can be revealed. Students may then draw a picture to accompany their poems. These decorated and creative poems can then be presented around the classroom for students to admire and take pride in (great for open house!).
Let Them Fly

I am sure you didn’t become an educator to grade tests, make spread sheets of scores and give time-outs (and you certainly didn’t do it for the pay check). Think back to your first inkling of passion for the teacher profession. What did it feel like? Where were you standing? You might remember a child’s smile or the simple words “I like having you here.” You may remember the bright cheeks of a new learner, sitting with anticipation at the edge of his seat. Don’t forget that moment. It may be easy to forget, with the pressure of falling test scores that threaten budget cuts. Teach a lesson that will remind you of why you stand in front of the blackboard every day, covered in finger paint and paper-mache. Teach a lesson that will be fun for both you and your students.

Poetry can be that bridge that reminds you why you teach, and reminds children why they like to come to school. Immerse yourself in poetry: read poetry, write it yourself, read your poetry to your students and encourage them to do the same. Set an example and let them soar. Show them what learning can be about. Show them what success feels like, what pride feels like. Give them the freedom to fly with poetry, let them fly, and there is no doubt that they will.
Works Cited


