

# A GUIDE TO TEACHING POETRY



Curated by



# INTRODUCTION

This guide offers tried and true techniques for bringing poetry into the lives of young people. Like the books themselves, many of the activities listed below can be adapted for use with children from preschool to high school. You are the expert on your students, so tailor the activities to suit their needs. For specific age and grade level recommendations, please consult the bibliography included on this sheet.

Immerse your students in the language

- Read your favourite poems to your students. They'll be inspired by your enthusiasm.
- Ask students to bring in favorite poems from home to share with the class. Either you or they may read them aloud for all to hear.
- Post poems prominently around your classroom or library. Find favorites; copy onto chart paper or use posters available from Penguin and other sources.
- Build a poetry collection in your classroom or library. Display the books in baskets and face-out on racks so children can see the covers. Let children choose titles that interest them.
- Partner kids up. Have them read poetry aloud to each other.
- Encourage memorization, but don't mandate it. Have kids create "Poem in Your Pocket" cards to carry around for quick reference. They can make their own by copying the words onto an index card.
- Check your local library for CDs, videos, and audiotapes of poets reading their work.
- Better yet, invite a poet to your school. Call the Penguin author appearance line at (212) 414-3465, or visit [www.penguinputnam.com/authorappearances](http://www.penguinputnam.com/authorappearances) to find out how to do so.
- Take your students to readings at local public libraries and bookstores.

Integrate poetry into the curriculum

- Begin a social studies session by reading a related poem. *A World of Wonders: Geographic Travels in Verse and Rhyme* by J. Patrick Lewis is perfect if you're studying geography or explorers.
- *Big, Bad and a Little Bit Scary: Poems That Bite Back!* (illustrated by Wade Zahares) is packed with poems about frightful, ravenous animals by such literary luminaries as Ogden Nash, Eve Merriam, and D.H. Lawrence. A perfect start to science class. Brilliant in biology. And an excellent accompaniment to ecological studies.
- Introduce "concrete poetry" in art class. All the poems in Brad Burg's *Outside the Lines: Poetry at Play* use form and shape to illustrate and enhance meaning. In "Frisbee" the words form a circle. The further the Frisbee flies, the smaller the print. Come in for the catch and the print gets bigger. In "Tic-Tac-Toe (a battle plan)" each move on the game grid dictates the sequence of the stanzas.
- Read *Remember the Bridge: Poems of a People* as you study history. Poet Carole Boston Weatherford's work focuses on slavery, the civil rights movement, and African-American culture. Historic photographs and illustrations complement the text.
- Explore the rhythm of poetry in music and movement class. *A Rumpus of Rhymes: A Book of Noisy Poems* by Bobbi Katz will get students singing. Check out her raucous "School Bus Rap" (I'm a bin, bin, bin./ I'm a/ be, bee, beep./ I'm a bus./ A school bus) and the joyous gyrations of "Washing Machine" (I'm a washing machine./ I make dirty clothes clean./ so that nobody has to rub:/ Glubita glubita/ glubita/ glubita glubita/ glubita.../ GLUB.)
- Pack poetry into unexpected places. Read before recess. Read before lunch. Read before you say goodbye for the day. *Nonsense! He Yelled and I Invited a Dragon to Dinner* are unabashedly boisterous and fun.

## Inspire creativity

- Ask: "What do poets write about?" Have students choose a topic to explore through poetry.
- Nonsense! He Yelled is a funny look at children's names. On the final page poet Roger Eschbacher invites readers to participate: "Good-bye! Good-bye!/ We say good-bye./ It's sad we're out of time./ Before we go,/ won't you please try/ Your own name in a rhyme?"
- Nikki Grimes's Bronx Masquerade is a novel with poetry at its heart. Students in a high school English class unveil once-secret identities and form unexpected bonds when an innovative English teacher initiates "Open Mike" poetry readings in class. Share this empowering collection with your junior-high or high-school students, and consider providing them with a similar opportunity. You never know what can happen.
- Soto's Fearless Fernie touches upon the bonds between two friends. Read the book to your students. They may wish to write their own odes to friendship.
- Encourage active listening with Katz's Rumpus of Rhymes. Have students write their own "noisy poems" using onomatopoeia.

## Investigate the form

- Find out what students know. Ask: "What is poetry?" List student responses on chart paper. Post in your room to see how ideas evolve over time.
- Extend the concept. Ask: "What is the difference between poetry and prose?" and then ask, "Why write in verse instead of prose?"
- Ask: "How does the shape of a poem affect its meaning?" Explain to students that the way a poet breaks up the text clues the reader in to how it should be read. Give an example by reading a favorite poem aloud. (Shorter poems are best for this exercise.) Then, using chart paper or an overhead projector, show the students the text in story form. Explain that the way you've copied the poem is different from how the author wrote it. Read the poem again. This time, ask students to listen carefully. Can they determine where each line of poetry begins

and ends? Read the poem again. Students raise hands when they think there should be a "line break." Put a slash after the words to indicate the break. When finished, show the students the text as the poet intended. Like your first example, have this ready for display on chart paper or an overhead projector.

## Compare

- Explore the use of simile. *Big, Bad and a Little Bit Scary* is a good place to start. First read D. H. Lawrence's poem "Bat," focusing on the way in which Lawrence uses inventive language to describe this creature of the night: "like a glove, a black glove thrown up at the light,/ and falling back." In "The Sparrow Hawk" poet Russel Hoban describes the bird in his opening line: "Wings like pistols flashing at his side." Then, explain to your students that descriptions using "like" or "as" are called similes. Challenge students to use similes to enliven their own poetic efforts.
- Explore metaphor with Gary Soto's *Fearless Fernie: Hanging out with Fernie and Me* as an example. First, ask students to brainstorm "common" ways of describing a weightlifter. "Beefy," "brawny," and "muscled" are a few examples. Then, read aloud Soto's description of the weight-lifting Fernie in *Fearless Fernie*: "Big plates on his chest, ropes in his arms,/ Trout shimmering under the skin/ of his brown shoulders." (p.32) Explain to students that a metaphor is a writer's way of vividly describing his or her subject. Again, challenge students to use metaphors in their own work.

## Connect with the Community

- Display students' writing not only in your classroom but in the hallways as well. Let the whole school know about their good work!
- Host a poetry reading. Invite teachers and parents, even another class, to hear your students read.
- Arrange for your students to read their poetry at your local library, café, or bookstore.

## **POETRY TITLES OF INTEREST**

All Ages

A Brighter Garden

Karen Ackerman

Poems by Emily Dickinson

Illustrated by Tasha Tudor

"A group of Emily Dickinson's poems, selected especially for children and arranged in a seasonal sequence, is illustrated in Tasha Tudor's sentimental style." -The Horn Book

0-399-21490-9 - 64 pp. - \$19.99 hc

### **My Daughter, My Son, The Eagle, The Dove**

Ana Castillo

Illustrated by S. Guevara

Inspired by ancient Aztec chants, these poems trace the milestones of growing up and reflect parental joy in the process. The illustrations stylistically combine Aztec elements with strong contemporary images on bark.

0-525-45856-5 - 48 pp. - \$12.99 hc

Mi Hija, Mi Hijo, el Aguila, la Paloma

0-525-45867-0 - 48 pp. - \$12.99 hc - Spanish Edition

### **Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**

Robert Frost

Illustrated by Susan Jeffers

"Frost's poem inspire[s] Susan Jeffers to a dreamily benign winter landscape." -Booklist.

For this special edition with new jacket design, trim size, and three additional spreads, Jeffers has added more detail and subtle color to her frosty New England scenes.

0-525-46734-3 - 32 pp. - \$15.99 hc

Ages 12 & up

Bronx Masquerade

Nikki Grimes

When Wesley Boone writes a poem for his high-school English class, some of his classmates clamor to read their poems aloud, too. Through the poetry they share, they reveal their most intimate thoughts about themselves.

0-8037-2569-8 - 176 pp. - Ages 12 up

## **Jump Ball: A Basketball Season in Poems**

Mel Glenn

"In [this] 'story' in poems, Glenn introduces a chorus of distinct voices from an inner-city high school, each with a personal take on the sport and dreams for the future. It is a richly emotional book that brings readers face-to-face with issues in their own lives, such as heartbreak and violence." -Booklist

0-525-67554-X - 160 pp.

ALA Best Book for Young Adults

ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers

## **The Taking of Room 114: A Hostage Drama in Poems**

Mel Glenn

"[Young adults] will find their interest piqued, and reluctant readers will be particularly drawn to the excitement of design and content." -School Library Journal

0-525-67548-5 - 192 pp.

ALA Best Book for Young Adults

ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers

## **Who Killed Mr. Chippendale? A Mystery in Poems**

Mel Glenn

Told in a series of interlocking poems, this suspenseful story will keep readers guessing who the killer is right up until the last page. "More than a whodunit, this unique offering explores a multitude of issues in its pages." -School Library Journal

0-14-038513-4 - 112 pp.

0-525-67530-2 - 112 pp.

ALA Best Book for Young Adults

ALA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers

IRA-CBC Children's Choice

IRA-CBC Teachers' Choice

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