

TEACHER TIPS AND HANDY HINTS

I've worked in schools for over twenty five years leading workshops and encouraging children (and teachers) to write their own poems.

CAN WE TEACH POETRY?

Without doubt, teachers love to read poems to their classes. Without doubt, teachers enjoy reading poems out loud – but also, without doubt, teachers feel less confident about teaching poetry.

Maybe it's the fact that poems are mysterious things in that they often don't adhere to grammatical rules ...

Why start every line with a capital letter even halfway through a sentence?

Why the lack of punctuation?

Why finish a verse halfway through a sentence – leave a line – and carry on ?
(it's called enjambment by the way – but doesn't make a great deal of sense like that).

Maybe it's the fact that the poems "we" had to study at school were more serious poems by classical poets (who weren't writing for children anyway) ...

Whatever the reasons, poetry has that mystique and myth about.

HANDY HINTS AND TOP TIPS

Rather than repeating some of these throughout the manual – here are a few pointers to help you on the way

CHOOSING A POEM

Everybody's different – and you will choose poems for different occasions, different lessons etc. – but one thing must be clear ...

Choose a poem that you like - and that you think the children will like

If you like it, then the chances are your enthusiasm for it will carry over to the children you are working with

PREPARATION

What I mean here is the preparation before getting the children to write their own poems.

Don't be in a rush to get them writing (I know that's difficult time-wise in

schools) but it's really important to get them enjoying the poem and feeling positive about the process before trying to get them "working"

Have fun exploring different ways of performing and bringing the poem to life.

READING AND PERFORMING

One of my favourite poets – John Cooper Clarke – often says "if it doesn't sound any good – it's probably because it's not any good"

Poems only come alive when you read them and perform them out loud – so it's up to you to bring them alive and find a voice

FINDING A VOICE FOR YOUR POEMS

I know from going round schools that teachers love poetry – even if they are not always confident about teaching it. They also love performances. But when it comes to "performance poetry" there is sometimes a block or lack of confidence.

It doesn't have to be like this.

Firstly, I believe that anyone can write poetry. I wouldn't be in the job I'm in if I didn't. There are ways and means of enabling children / teachers / parents to write their own poems. And it's easy – honest! Trust me – I'm a poet!

Secondly, I believe that performance poetry is often the best way into poetry for many people. It doesn't rely on lots of text, metaphors, similes, "poetic words" – it's all about feel and sound.

I think every poem has a voice and when we read and perform poems we bring them to life so it's worth trying different ways of performing the poem until you get the best voice for the poem. I won't say "right" voice, it's what works best for you and what works best for you may not work for everyone.

Our job is to try and find the best voice to do that. Sometimes that will be the voice of a child / parent / teacher / character in the poem. Sometimes, the style and subject matter of a poem will necessitate a certain voice.

One of the great things about performance poetry is its versatility in relation to age groups. Many performance poems work equally well with Reception and Year 6 – simply because it's not about language and vocabulary but about sound and feel.

Try and think of things like:

Rhythm

Beat

Expression

Tone of voice

Loudness or quietness of your voice
Speed of delivery
The mood of the poem
The character(s) in the poem
Repetition – why not find a line that you like and repeat it several times

Remember, every word is important. Poets take time over their words when writing them so it's important to make sure that every word is performed.

With your class I would encourage you to read the poems six or seven times at least and then think about ways of performing. That way, once you are a little familiar with the lines and layout of the poem you can concentrate on the feel of the words and how to best perform them rather than concentrating on just getting the words right.

All poems – with the exception of shape poems / calligrams – benefit from being read aloud and performed. Even “difficult” or classical poems in old fashioned language benefit from being performed as then the rhythms and structures (which are often impeccable) come to life and take on new resonance and meaning.

Get to know the poem with the pupils through the performance you create ...

You could be the leader – say each line for them to repeat – thereby you create the rhythm, mood, tone, speed etc.

You could divide them into groups / tables – each group taking a different line / couplet / verse

Perhaps have a section that everybody participates in – a repeated line or chorus. If there isn't one in the poem why not discuss with your class which lines they would like to repeat and create your own chorus / repeated line.

I think that the main thing with performance and poetry is ... have a go. Don't be frightened of “getting it wrong” as a teacher. There is no getting it wrong as such but only by performing the words out loud will you know how they feel and how they sound. If you do this as a class exercise regularly your pupils will get used to it and they will start to think in terms of performance. You – and they – will know if something doesn't quite work. They'll say “It doesn't sound right” or “that line's too long” or “that word is difficult to say” – you don't have to use words like syllables but that is what they'll be talking about. Try the lines / words in different ways and see what's best.

But the important thing is ... HAVE FUN!

IDEAS ! IDEAS ! IDEAS!

It's worth spending as much time as you can on ideas with your class

Talk about them – discuss them – share them – but ...

WRITE THEM ALL DOWN – on the board / whiteboard / flipchart etc –

Have them so the class can see them and refer to them

Follow the ideas if they are good ones – see where they take you

DRAFTING / REDRAFTING

Once you've had your ideas – either as a group / class / individual - there will need to be a drafting a redrafting process.

No poem is ever finished after the first draft.

Poetry is about finding the best words and putting them in the best order
Sometimes that will be replacing words with better ones (thesaurus at the ready!)

Sometimes that will be taking words out

Sometimes that will be repeating a line that works particularly well

However, most drafting and redrafting will begin with reading the poem out loud. Get the sound, the feel of the words. It can be instinctive. Go with what sounds and feels right.

Read them out to each other – sometimes other ears hear things and recognise lines that you don't.

DOES IT HAVE TO RHYME?

Most people associate poems with rhymes – and that's fine. I love rhymes – a great one is extremely satisfying.

However, getting a good rhyme takes time

What usually happens is that children will think of the first rhyme that comes into their mind and then crowbar the rhyme into the poem.

The only criterion is this – *the rhyme must fit the poem* – Don't make the poem fit the rhyme

So I would stay away from rhymes unless they happen naturally and creatively.

WHAT ABOUT PUNCTUATION AND SPELLING etc ?

As poetry tends to bend and break the literacy rules anyway, I wouldn't worry too much about commas and full stops.

Exclamation marks and question marks work appropriately

Ellipses ... a good device to denote space and what is to come

Capital letters – for some reason most poems begin each line with a capital letter. Carry this on and use capitals for the things you'd usually use capitals for.

Capitals can be useful when there's a loud noise or someone shouting in the poem.

BANG ! looks much better than *bang!*

TURN THAT MUSIC DOWN! Looks better than *Turn that music down!*

Spelling – wherever possible the spelling is the same as we'd always do – but sometimes the nature of the poem lends itself to phonetic spelling or exaggerated spelling

Eg.

Doowhyafftoooooo? conveys much more than *Do I have to?*

TUUUURRRRRNNN IT DOOOOWWWNN! looks more like a parent shouting than *TURN IT DOWN!*

It's fun not to follow the literacy rules !

SETTING OUT A POEM

Again, once a poem has been drafted and redrafted there will be a final copy – a neat copy.

Often when children draft their poems it looks like a story – a solid block of writing – yet when they read them out, it sounds like a poem.

It sounds like a poem because of the pace and the pauses, where they stop and take a breath etc.

This must be reflected in the way it's set out on the page. A general principle is – when you take a breath or pause – start a new line

MODEL POEMS

Because we will be following guidelines and structures, when the children have finished their poems many of them might look and sound the same.

Does this matter?

Of course not! We are teaching them the mechanics of how to write a poem – not how to be a poet.

There is this idea that poetry has to be individual and somehow uniquely magical – an expression of creativity ...

Well, yes, that's what we are looking for. Eventually. But in the short term we want children to feel positive and confident about their poems. We want to teach them how to succeed. If that means all the poems are very similar – so be it – it's no problem.

It's not like you say to child 1 – “two plus two” – and they say “four” and then to child two – “two plus two” and when they “four” we don't say “Sorry you can't have that answer – it's already been used”

The right answer is the right answer – simple.

We are teaching achievement and success. No-one has to fail. Everyone can be a poet – everyone can write a poem

This is from my introduction to “Read, Write and Perform Poetry” - Scholastic