

THE POWER OF POEMS

Teaching the Joy of Writing Poetry

Margriet Ruurs



Maupin House

The Power of Poems
Teaching the Joy of Writing Poetry

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Cover Design: *Maria Messenger*
Book Design: *Billie Hermansen*

ISBN: 978-1-934338-59-9

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CHAPTER 1

Poetry Philosophy

As a writer of children’s books, I am invited into classrooms all across North America. Because I love to perform my own poetry, I am often asked to conduct poetry-writing workshops with kids of all ages. I find that poetry is a wonderful resource: lyrical language and rhythmic patterns provide opportunities for reading out loud in the classroom, for memorization and choral speaking, as well as for independent reading and writing.

What is Poetry?

The dictionary says, “Poetry is. . . a composition produced by creative imagination.” How exciting to be able to allow your students to use their creative imagination to compose a piece of writing *and* help them learn at the same time! Because a poem is a story delivered in a rhythmical format, children who write poetry learn to express their creativity, develop and refine several skills, and, in the process, have fun.

Poetry is a celebration of language, a play with words. It is music for the mind that can help a child to tell a story in a unique way. Poetry is one of the earliest forms of literature to which children are exposed, and they love its natural rhythm and rhyme. Through nursery rhymes, lap games, and songs, children develop language. No wonder they like it: nursery rhymes, folktales, and ballads are some of the most pleasant, and earliest, forms of story telling. These forms of poetry, through rich language, were used to teach

morals and values as they entertained. Some nursery rhymes are, in fact, riddles. What a joy, not only to enjoy the sounds of the rhyme but to discover the power in coming to understand the riddle and the secret message within it.

Too many students have been exposed to a narrow range of poetry. Often, especially by the time they hit middle school, they feel that poetry has to be something serious. They do, however, fondly recall nursery rhymes or Dr. Seuss books.

Many students feel that poetry has to rhyme to be poetry. But it doesn't need to rhyme! Poetry can be whimsical. It can also be serious. Poetry is a form of writing usually written in shorter sentences than prose. The whole poem can be taken to heart and interpreted by each individual.

Poems can bring strong visual images to mind while speaking to the emotions. They help us to look at the world differently, to see something through different eyes. Recently I read an anecdote in "Reader's Digest." A mother who never used makeup had a make-over done. Her five year old looked at her face and exclaimed, "Mom! You look like a sunset!" *That* is poetry!

Why Poetry?

Because poetry can be so satisfying and support a wide range of learning. Because the rhythm of poetry comes naturally to children. Because the potential of poetry lies within the minds of all children. We need to nurture it with an abundance of words and then hand them the skills to refine and polish their poems.

Because the use of poetic language in the classroom brings along a certain energy, a joy that is hard to capture in prose. Stories can be spellbinding, but poems have a special sort of magic that naturally appeals to kids and therefore makes it easy to introduce young students to reading and writing by means of poetry. Writing poetry opens up a way of expressing oneself and allows the student to see the world through different eyes. A poem says something in a neat, different package.



How to Use This Book

When I started writing this book, it was my intent to help you teach the *writing* of poems to children. I soon realized that we can't separate the writing from *reading* lots and lots of poems. So you will find in this book ways to start kids writing and reading poetry.

I suggest you read the entire book first, for your own information as well as to understand fully the structure of the activities. The book addresses the components to writing poetry:

The content: *What* are you writing about? Will your poem deal with an observation or a thought, a feeling, or perhaps it will tell a funny story? Will it have a message or simply be there to have fun with the words? Where *do* you get ideas?

and **The craft:** *How* do you form the words into a poem? What tricks of the trade are there? How can you make use of sounds and rhythms to help shape your poem?

I don't think you can look at one independently of the other. Each builds on the other. You need to know what you want to write about, and learning more about the techniques of poetry helps you to do so more effectively. But what if you knew all of the techniques and had no idea what to write about? So, in this book we will look at both aspects. Look for the icon that indicates whether each activity deals with **craft**  or **content** .

You can adapt this entire book easily to whichever grade level you teach by using different poetry books for younger or older kids. I have aimed the activities at grades 3 to 8, but you can use them with your second graders or ninth graders just as well by adapting the books and poems you use as examples. The main bibliography, at the end of this book, is in alphabetical order by author, and I have indicated which titles are suited for younger and older audiences. I have also added a bibliography at the end of each chapter, with books listed in alphabetical order by titles. I hope that this makes it easier for you to find a title quickly.

The book will take you through the following steps:

- a look at how poetry will help your students and how it fits the curriculum;
- the prewriting process: the tools you and your students need before the actual writing begins;

- generating ideas to create contents: what to write about, where to get ideas;
- practical writing activities to learn the techniques as well as expand the content;
- editing poems: learning the steps of refining the rough poem;
- publishing/sharing poems: the ultimate goal of writing a great poem!

I'll begin by offering you suggestions for creating a poetry classroom, generating ideas, and beginning the prewriting process. The writing activities in Chapter 3 allow you to share different ways of creating poetry with your students. The activities are based on producing content as well as on building technical skills. They are tried and true ways of writing that I have found to work well to get kids committed, and they are aimed at helping you to discover the enjoyment and excitement of using poetry in the classroom on a daily basis. The order in which the writing activities are presented allows students' writing skills to grow throughout the process.

I recommend that you use Prewriting Activities 1-3 and Writing Activities 4 and 5 in that order. The activities that follow these first foundation activities can be used whenever they suit your schedule.

Chapter 4 will help you and your students to critique and edit the poems. In Chapter 5 are suggestions to publish and share your students' poetry, both in print and on the Internet.

How Do We Encourage the Writing of Poetry?

As teachers, we have an obligation to let children experience the *joy* of reading and writing poetry. To do that successfully, the child has to be *motivated* to write. To truly motivate a child to be a writer, we need to do more than teach specific skills. When I was a child, I used to hate having to analyze poetry. I didn't *want* to explain *why* I liked a particular sentence or guess at what the author had meant when he or she wrote that line. I just wanted to enjoy the poem for what it was. I wanted to savor the sounds, the rhythm, and maybe try writing my own poems.