

Teaching the “Tools” of Poetry

A poet uses many “tools” to shape language to suit an idea and a purpose. Here are some examples:

- rhythm
- musical language
- sensory imagery
- comparisons
- shape and form
- rhyme

These poetic devices are discussed in more detail on the following pages.

Let’s leave the limericks in Ireland! By middle school, your students have written enough limericks and anagram poems to last them a lifetime. It’s time for some other poetry – rhymed or free verse.

Rhythm

One characteristic that distinguishes poetry from prose is the rhythm and cadence of the language. Some poetry has a strong beat, while much free verse has a subtle or irregular rhythm. It’s very important to expose students to a variety of poetic forms, so they learn to listen for many types of rhythms.

Repetition of sounds, words and ideas adds to the power and precision of poetry. (Now there’s alliteration!) Sometimes the first line of the poem is repeated at the end. Sometimes a word or phrase is repeated internally to enhance the rhythm. Go on a scavenger hunt for effective use of repetition in poetry. Invite students to share the words and passages they chose and talk about how the repetition enhanced the meaning and sound of the poem.

Students sometimes understand this idea better if you make analogies to music. Have them tap different rhythms as they listen to music, then do the same thing as they listen to poetry or read it aloud. Those wonderful archaic terms – *iamb*, *trochee*, *spondee*, *anapest* – come from musical rhythms that existed long before they were applied by the Greeks to poetry.

Musical language

Effective word choice is one of the strongest elements of good poetry. Because poetry is characterized by economical use of language, every word must be deliberately and carefully chosen for its meaning, sound and relationship to the other words in the poem.

Think about the order of the words. Some word patterns are simply more rhythmical than others. There’s a reason we say “peaches and cream” instead of “cream and peaches.” Encourage students to listen for the music of language in their writing and to experiment with the order of words and phrases. Some literary devices that contribute to rhythm and cadence are outlined below.

- **Onomatopoeia** is a wonderful term that means words that sound like the actions or sounds they represent, such as “bang,” “rrriipp,” or “buzz.”
Together with the students, write some “onomatopoeia.” Make noises such as crumpling a piece of paper or scraping shoes against the floor. Have students brainstorm descriptive words that represent those sounds. Work together to put the words into a poem.
- **Invented words** sometimes convey a message more effectively than real ones. For younger students, Jon Scieszka’s *Baloney*, *Henry P.* is full of wonderful words that sound made up, but are actually real

words from other languages. Older students will enjoy reading Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky" and discussing his word choices. Have students take chunks of text and rewrite with their own made-up words.

- **Alliteration** refers to a pattern in which two or more words begin with the same sound. Alliteration was the basis of our earliest poetry in the English language and remains particularly important in languages where rhyming is either too easy or too difficult. Alliterative patterns contribute to the rhythm and cadence of the language.

Look for examples of alliteration in published poetry and share them with the class. Traditional poets such as Tennyson and Walter de la Mare offer good examples, as do many contemporary poets such as Toni Morrison.



MINI-LESSON: *Alliterative Poems*

Alliterative poems enable students to play with words and sounds without worrying too much about meaning. Assign each student a letter of the alphabet – perhaps the first letter of their own names. Encourage them to enlist the aid of a dictionary to generate interesting-sounding words that begin with that letter. They can then put the words together in a way that is rhythmical – and syntactically correct – if not particularly logical.

- **Vigorous verbs** are a key source of energy in powerful writing of any kind; poetry is no exception. Students could use *Hoops*, a book about basketball by Robert Burleigh, as a model to create sound and verb poems based on action-packed pictures from sports magazines.



MINI-LESSON: *Verb Poems*

Create poems out of "ing" verbs! Weather-related topics, such as snow, rain, wind or lightning, work well. Brainstorm "ing" verbs related to the topic, such as *pouring*, *drizzling*, *pelting*. Write each word on a card. Together, experiment with putting the verbs together into a poem. Think about which ones sound good together and convey the meaning most effectively. Delete words that don't work and feel free to add other words, like prepositional phrases. After you have worked through this as a group, have students write their own verb poems.

Sensory imagery

Effective poetry evokes sights, sounds, textures and even smells and tastes. Read this excerpt from Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach":

*Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin.*

Go on a word hunt for strong verbs in poetry. Jack Prelutsky's "The Turkey Shot out of the Oven" is a great example.

Try to imagine this poem without the visual image of the beach and the sound of the waves. You can begin to see how sensory imagery brings the poetry to life. It is for sense, music and language that we read poetry – and these are the qualities we are trying to encourage when our students write.

Read a piece of poetry aloud and have students sketch what they envision as they listen. Then pass out photographs of landscapes (post-cards work well) and ask the children to write about the images they evoke. They can later turn their ideas into poems.

Comparisons

Poets use similes and metaphors to create images by making unusual comparisons that lead us to see things in new, fresh ways. Similes are easier for kids: “He was as happy as a pig a-snortin’ and a-wallowin’ in that there mud”; metaphors require a greater imaginative stretch: “The moon was a ghostly galleon tossed upon cloudy seas.” Both modes of comparison will enrich your students’ language in poetry and in the rest of their writing.

Judi Barrett’s picture book *Things That Are Most in the World* describes the quietest, strongest, wiggliest and softest things in the world. You can use her book as a springboard for your class creating “Most in the World” poems. Nancy Lee Cecil offers this framework in *For the Love of Language*:

The oldest (smallest, loudest . . .) thing in the world is _____
It is (color) like _____
It is _____
And smells (tastes, looks, feels) like _____



MINI-LESSON: *Color Carousel*

Hailstones and Halibut Bones by Mary O’Neill is a wonderful book of poems about colors. Read four or five of the poems aloud to your students and record the color images on separate charts. Post the charts around the room and have students travel in groups of three or four to each chart, brainstorming their own ideas about that color. Every two minutes tell the groups to move to the next station on the circle, or carousel. Remind the students to use all their senses, not just the visual. What does blue taste like? What does red sound like? After each group has visited all of the charts on the circle, there will be a large collection of vocabulary related to each of the colors. Now the students will be ready to create color poems of their own, using some of the words on the charts and adding others of their own. A student might choose to write an entire poem on one color or a rainbow poem with one or two lines for each color.

Shape and form

The white space between (or included in) the line of poetry can be almost as important as the text. Just as a musical composer must choose where to place his rests, so a poet determines where to break lines in order to create the most effective rhythm and sound. Poetry can take many different forms according to the impression the poet wishes to make. Teaching shape and form is an appropriate opportunity to introduce formal structures such as diamante and haiku.

Paul: I thought we just said we should abandon pattern poems.

Lori: They shouldn't be our whole poetry program, but sometimes we can use them for a specific purpose – like demonstrating shape and form with diamante, or practising precise word choice with haiku.



MINI-LESSON: *Diamante Poetry*

Although we caution against overuse of patterns and frameworks, there are times that teaching a pattern can help students learn about specific elements such as shape, form, and economical use of language.

Diamante is a parallel-structure poetry format in a diamond shape: the top and bottom of the diamond are single nouns, the opposite of each other, such as “day” and “night.” The second line consists of two adjectives describing the noun in the first line. The fourth line consists of two adjectives describing the noun in the last line. The middle line consists of four “ing” verbs or gerunds, two describing the first noun and two describing the last noun. Here’s an example you might use with your students.

Winter
Frosty, Frozen
Snowing, Blowing, Flowering, Growing
Sunny, Breezy
Summer

Rhyme

Okay, here it is . . . at last. We’ve deliberately left rhyme till the end to show students that there’s much more to poetry than rhyming text. Nonetheless, rhyming poetry has great appeal for many readers and some students become very skillful at writing rhymes. The thing to remember is not to sacrifice meaning and rhythm for the sake of rhymes. Emphasize that good rhyming poetry generally has a strong rhythm as well.

Reference books such as rhyming dictionaries are useful to help students generate rhyming text that has rhythm and cadence. They also remove some of the mental grunt work required to come up with a rhyme. We suggest that students start with rhyming couplets before tackling more complex rhyme patterns such as *ABAB* or limericks.