

# Writing poetry

## National Literacy Strategy

### Writing Flier 3

Poetry is a central aspect of literacy. This flier covers the main points related to writing poetry.

### Poetry in the NLS

Poetry is included in the NLS *Framework* in every term, as a central aspect of literacy. Its appeal lies in the desire to play with language and ideas, as well as the recreation and preservation of experiences that matter. There is a strong cycle that links reading, discussing, performing, listening and writing.

As writers, pupils should build up a repertoire of forms and stylistic devices that they can call upon to create poetry. In many instances pupils will be focusing upon crafting language within a focused and manageable length and in a known form. Many aspects of sentence level work, plus the skill of revising, can be refined effectively through writing poetry.

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### Creating a poetry climate

It is important to establish a positive climate for poetry. This might feature:

- access to up-to-date collections of poetry so that there is enough for browsing, taking home to read, reading a range in class
- attractive displays that focus children's interest, e.g. poetry posters (including children's own poems) on display
- poem/poet of the week/month
- relating poems to other curriculum areas
- selecting poems to perform, or tape, for other classes – 'poets on loan'
- inviting poets into the school
- creating 'poet trees' with branches for different types of poem plus leaves with extracts
- spreading enthusiasm for poems – recommendations by pupils and teachers
- writing, reading and sharing poems as the teacher
- celebrating National Poetry Day.

### Writing poetry – principles

- Provide a clear focus – usually based on first-hand experiences that interest/intrigue.
- Teach skills of observing the details of experiences, brainstorming and revising.
- Before pupils write, read quality examples to inspire.
- Demonstrate writing class poems.
- Encourage surprising word combinations.
- When responding, identify aspects to improve – focus on word choices and the poem's impact.
- Establish response partners – read drafts aloud to hear the effect.
- Value and respect creativity.
- Provide audiences for the children's writing, e.g. classroom scrapbooks, taped performances.

### Find out more about writing poetry



Further teaching ideas and case studies can be found on the NLS website: [www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy)  
See also pages 154-155, *Grammar for writing* and *Developing early writing*.

## Preparing and planning

### Getting started

- Keep a poetry-writing journal – jot down ideas for poems, things you notice, details, words, similes, things people say.
- Listen to your feelings, thoughts and dreams.
- Write inside or outside – use your senses to listen, touch, smell, taste, look and wonder.
- Write about the following:
  - pictures, photos, posters, film, sculptures
  - intriguing objects, collections, places, creatures, people, moments and events
  - secrets, wishes, lies and dreams
  - pretend to talk with and to people, places, objects, creatures (*Tyger, Tyger burning bright*), both real and imaginary
  - write about your obsessions – what you feel passionately about, dream about, hate
  - use memories of special moments.
- Write in different voices – as yourself or something else.
- Have a clear focus for writing. Do not be vague.
- Begin with what you know. What is true, not true but might be and things which could never be true.
- Be outrageous, boast, plead, imagine, joke.

### Before writing

- Look carefully at your subject. Make notes of the details.
- Become a word searcher. Before writing get used to brainstorming, listing, jotting ideas and words, whispering ideas in your mind.

To exercise and strengthen the imagination play these word games:

#### Question and answer

You write questions and your partner gives crazy or poetic answers.

#### Metaphor game

Choose an animal and compare it to a person, a place, an object, a mood, a colour, e.g. *It is an oak table late at night...*

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### Ink waster

In one minute list as many words as you can think of to do with a subject or write as much as you can about the subject.

### Strange word combinations

Take a word and list as many adjectives and verbs that might go with it.

### Playing with sentences

Take a simple sentence and play around with it – add words in, extend it, reorder it, change all the words, use a simile, alliterate.

### Nonsense words

Invent nonsense sentences.

### Rhythm games

Clap, echo sounds and words, repeat sounds rhythmically.

### Pass the poem

Take a poem with a repeating pattern and pass it round the room, adding ideas.

### Consequences

Pass round a piece of paper on which in turn you write an adjective, a noun, a verb, an adverb, a preposition, an adjective, a noun.

## Writing your poem

- Settle in a comfortable place to write.
- Work from the brainstorm, selecting and discarding.
- Use your writing journal, a thesaurus, a rhyming dictionary.
- Write on every other line to give yourself space to add in new ideas and make changes.
- Sift words and select the best from your mind. The first choice is not always the best choice.
- When you write don't get distracted – concentrate hard on your subject.
- Write quickly so that the poem flows – you can edit it later.
- The first draft may look messy as you try out words and ideas.
- Poems can be built up, adding a brick at a time, piling up images and ideas.
- Poems can be like jigsaws – moving pieces around to get the best fit.
- Go for quality not quantity.
- Avoid overwriting – especially using too many adjectives or adverbs.
- Keep re-reading as you write. Mutter different possibilities to yourself and listen to how your poem sounds. Look at the poem's shape.
- Don't be afraid to take risks, try unusual ideas and words – poetry is about inventing.
- Take a new line at a natural pause, or to give emphasis, or to maintain a particular poetic form.
- Create strong pictures by using similes, metaphors and personification.
- Create memorable sounds by using repetition for effect, alliteration, onomatopoeia, rhythm and rhyme.
- Create powerful poems by choosing precise nouns. (*Rottweiler* not *dog*) and powerful verbs (*mutter* not *talk*) and words that do not obviously go together so that you surprise the reader, e.g. Not *the old lady hobbled down the road* but try *the old lady jogged!*

## After writing

- Read your poem aloud and listen to how it sounds. Often you will immediately notice places where it might be improved.
- Read your poem to a partner, poetry circle or the whole class – listen to their response and then take the time to work on it.
- Be a good response partner – read through, or listen to the writer, read their poem. Always tell the writer what you liked first. Discuss any concerns the writer may have. Make a few positive suggestions.

Poetry is about celebration and enjoyment. Here are some ways to spread your poems around:

- perform to the class, other classes, the school
- make a poetry programme or video
- e-mail or fax poems to other schools or put poems on the school website
- publish in class anthologies, scrapbooks, homemade books, on poetry display boards
- hold a poetry party performance, or make picturebook poems, for a younger class
- illustrate and create poetry posters
- hold a poem swap
- send poems to magazines, newspapers, literary websites, radio and TV.

## The poet's repertoire

- Over time you will learn different forms that you can select for different occasions, e.g. raps for entertaining, haiku for memorable moments, free verse for serious poems and capturing experiences and ballads for story telling.
- Being true to the experience that you are writing about is more important than trying to squeeze words into a form.
- To write in any form you need to spend time reading good poems written in that form.
- Read like a writer – notice how poets achieve different effects.
- Borrow simple repeating patterns from poets and invent your own.
- Invent your own forms and structures.
- Be careful with rhyme. Forcing a rhyme can lead to dishonest writing. Go for the right word rather than a forced rhyme.
- Keep the writing concrete and detailed.
- Use your own poetic voice. Try to use natural language and invent memorable speech – listen for this in everyday speech.

### The Way I Write

Sometimes if a poem is more complicated it helps me to have an example read out to me or if it is a more descriptive piece to have a picture in front of me that I could refer to. It also helps me to write pieces of writing out in rough because then I can get better ideas and I can add more feeling to it and change words that I don't need or that I don't want.

Lynn Elderred Age 11 years

Before I start a piece of writing I find it helps to talk about it first, because it sort of makes my mind clear of what I've got to do. Some of my best ideas come from my imagination. If an idea appears in my head I quickly jot it down in my rough book and when I have a series of fairly good ideas I begin to construct a piece of writing. I prefer to work in a noisy room because sometimes the words people use in their speech can help create a realistic atmosphere in my poetry. I usually write in rough first, because then I can change words that I think are boring or just don't make sense.

Alison Crock 11 years old

I like doing a poem in a quiet place so that I can think of words to put in the poem. And I would do it in rough first so that I could change the words they don't fit in with the rest of the poem. My best ideas come from the other poems I've done and from the mistakes I've made. I get my ideas sometimes from the scenery around me and sometimes from places I've been to. If I discuss how to do a poem it might help me, sometimes when I haven't got an idea.

Leyla Abdullah 11 years old

**Thanks to the poets and editors who contributed their ideas: Val Bloom, Morag Styles, Jean Sprackland of the Poetry Society, Brian Moses and Philip Gross. You can download this flier from the web and adapt it for direct use by children or to create posters for your writing area.**