



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2003 Volume III: Teaching Poetry in the Primary and Secondary Schools

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## **Presenting Poetry to Children: Poems That Delight and Excite To Write**

Curriculum Unit 03.03.04  
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### **Background**

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In this unit I plan to engage my young students in both the reading and writing of poetry. I have found that children are very open to poetry and naturally like it. They don't require encouragement to read, consider and reflect on well-selected poems read to them or even to enjoy those they themselves read. I see poetry as an effective vehicle for teaching my third-graders to develop skills in oral language, reading and writing. Judith W. Steinburgh, in her book entitled *Reading and Writing Poetry: A Guide For Teachers*, maintains that because poetry demands careful observation, precise language and awareness of the sound of words together, it helps to advance children's language development. That is, the reading, discussing and writing of poetry leads to children's acquisition of an enjoyment of written and oral language and of the ability to express and clearly articulate their own thoughts and feelings (p. 15).

Within my curriculum unit I will include poems written by three popular children's poets: Karla Kuskin, Valerie Worth and Patricia Hubbell. Their poetry has great appeal for children, I think, because of the simple, everyday subjects they write about and the beautiful pictures that they paint with words. This unit will be interdisciplinary in scope, incorporating the teaching of reading, listening, writing, speaking, creative movement, music, and art skills into its design. I have found Steinburgh's aforementioned book, as well as Regie Routman's *Kids' Poems: Teaching Third & Fourth Graders to Love Writing Poetry*, David L. Harrison and Bernice E. Cullinan's *Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight*, Jodi Weisbart's *Joyful Ways to Teach Young Children to Write Poetry*, and Paul B. Janeczko's *How To Write Poetry* to be invaluable sources which have helped me to structure the presentation of skills in teaching poetry to children following a particular sequence that will be most effective.

Steinburgh sees the primary goal of teaching poetry as one of encouraging children "to develop figurative language and metaphoric thinking, an ear for the cadence and music of language, and a willingness to speak from the heart and to take risks that deepen and give force to their own writing" (p. 9). With this in mind, I have structured my unit in the following way:

Section I: Introduction

Section II: Listening to, Reading and Acting Out Poetry

Section III: Reading and Discussing Poetry

Section IV: Writing Poetry

Section V: How Poetry Writing Can Enhance Narrative Writing

I teach third grade in a self-contained classroom at Lincoln Bassett School. My students are primarily of African-American descent, a heterogeneous group with varying abilities in the 8-10 age range. Although I have designed this unit with them in mind, I am confident that it could easily be adapted by teachers to suit the K-2 grades, and possibly grade 4 as well.

The lessons in this unit will be introduced on a daily basis for a period of 45-60 minutes. I anticipate the unit will cover a three- to four-month span of time.

The unit objectives include:

- To develop figurative language and metaphoric and symbolic thinking.
- To develop an appreciation of the music of language found in poetry.
- To develop a willingness to speak from the heart.
- To develop critical reading and analytic skills through the study of poems and discussion of a poem's aspects, content and techniques employed.
- To practice writing free verse poetry.

The strategies that I will use to achieve these objectives will include:

- To expose students to a variety of topics explored in poetry both to read and to write about.
- To expose students to different poetic techniques in order to encourage them to experiment with this variety when writing their own poetry.
- To follow the writing process in writing poetry: brainstorming ideas, opening lines, writing a first draft, conferencing with the teacher, revising, writing a second draft, publishing, and sharing the finished poem with the class.
- To extend the practice of using descriptive, metaphoric language from poetry to that of writing narratives.

## Section I - Introduction

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### Why Teach Poetry To Children?

As Steinburgh says, "Poems often contain powerful feelings in small spaces" (p. 43). Poems can be very intimate and are often given to loved ones as gifts in special moments in their lives. They are an intense expression of the writer's feelings so there is a certain vulnerability which is entrusted to the receiver. Ralph Fletcher, in his book, *Poetry Matters: Writing A Poem From The Inside Out*, likens the writing of a poem for another with giving blood because "it comes from the heart of the writer and goes to the heart of the receiver" (p. 7). In addition to being a medium through which you can express your feelings, poetry also attracts children because it can make you laugh, start you wondering, tell you wonderful stories or send you powerful messages. The images described in poetry often linger in our minds. The special rhythms of particular poems prompt us to clap or stomp or dance to what X. J. and Dorothy M. Kennedy in their book entitled, *Knock At A Star: A Child's Introduction To Poetry*, call the "word music" of poems (p. 50).

Poetry truly can delight the reader and excite him/her to write. The great charm of poetry lies in its ability to become a shared experience between reader and writer. Through the power of poetry, readers are able to make connections to the poems they read. By bringing their own background experience to the poem, young readers find more meaning in them and are able to appreciate them more. Through the use of vivid imagery, the poet is able to help the reader envision the picture he/she had painted with words. The beauty of poetry, say Susan and Stephen Tchudi in their book, *The Young Writers Handbook*, lies in its ability to capture "small experiences in a compact and vivid way, so readers can see and feel what the poet has seen or done or experienced. In just a few words, the poetry can give you new insights into something familiar and ordinary or can touch off emotions and recollections" (p. 93).

### Teaching Poetry To Children: The Pitfalls To Avoid

Not all teachers nurture a love of poetry. Instead they actually stifle children's natural attraction to poetry. One way they do this is by limiting the writing of poetry to a series of preset, rule-bound forms like haiku or cinquain that children are to use to express their thoughts. Writing poetry becomes formulaic rather than inspired and the resulting poems are often awkward and stilted. Regie Routman in her aforementioned book praises free verse poetry because it provides the young writer with a lot of freedom to experiment with size, language and content. They are allowed to play with words and images and to create their own rhythms and patterns. "Their voice" says Routman, "--each child's unique and personal style--emerges" (p. 5). Reluctant writers are often especially drawn to such poetry and enjoy writing it.

A second pitfall that teachers should avoid is spending the majority of the class time on over-analyzing poems, pulling out all the symbolic language and parts of speech and thereby, as Fletcher says, "smashing them up into the tiniest pieces" (p. 9). As a result of this kind of approach, children view the study of poetry as tedious and boring.

A third pitfall that many teachers succumb to is to limit a student's experience to poems that rhyme. Writing poems that rhyme is hard for most children and Routman maintains that they wind up "spending most of their time searching for rhymes--whether they make sense or not--and often their poems end up sounding contrived" (p. 5).

## Three Wonderful Poets Who Write For Children

The three poets whose works I have chosen to use in my curriculum unit are: Karla Kuskin, Patricia Hubbell and Valerie Worth. All three poets have written numerous poetry books for children. What follows is a little information about their lives and some advice each one gives to children who want to write poetry.

Karla Kuskin, born in New York City, attended both Antioch College and Yale University. She not only has written but also illustrated many books for children and is the winner of the NCTE Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Presently she resides in both Brooklyn, New York and Arlington, Virginia. Kuskin's advice to young poetry writers is to begin by thinking about a special thing and figure out what you want to say about it. Brief descriptions using phrases will provide a kind of snapshot of the subject. Then she says to listen for the rhythms you hear as you read it. She advises not to worry about grammar at this stage but rather be concerned that you have gotten your main idea or feeling written down. Through many revisions you will shape the poem to your liking. She encourages children to read different poets' works and look for the rhythm used, tapping your foot as you read them. Then she suggests making up a tune to go with your poem and see how it sounds. ([http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/karla\\_booklist.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/karla_booklist.htm), p. 1)

Patricia Hubbell was born in Easton, Connecticut and continues to reside there. She went to the University of Connecticut where initially she planned to study agriculture but wound up studying English. It was way back in third grade that she started writing poems. Hubbell likens writing poetry to gardening, because you have to use the same care to help a poem to grow. Her advice to young poetry writers includes reading a lot of poetry. She suggests experimenting with the length of lines in your poem, weeding out unimportant words and adding some important ones. She says to use comparisons to express some of your ideas but she cautions not to hold on too tightly to a subject. Rather, she says, let the poem do what it wants and allow it to lead you in different directions. Hubbell suggests that a writer should try being what he/she wants to write about. You should experiment with rhyme, repetitions, and the use of lively verbs and interesting words. At the time you are writing, she says, you should write freely and then revise later. (<http://www.kidspoe.com/tips.htm>, p. 1)

Valerie Worth was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her travels with her family included living a year in Bangalore, India. She attended Swarthmore College where she studied English. In 1991 she received the NCTE Poetry Award for Excellence in Poetry for Children. Valerie Worth died in 1994. Worth's advice to young writers is included in a profile written by Lee Bennett Hopkins in a journal entitled *Language Arts*, (vol. 68, October, 1991). In this article Hopkins pays tribute to Worth. Worth advises young writers to write about things they love whether they have beauty or not, are extraordinary or ordinary. What's important, she emphasizes, is that you hold some strong feeling about it. Consider that the subject you are writing about is as important as the feeling you have toward it. She cautions young writers not to allow the subject to get lost in the poetry because in a variety of ways the subject is the poetry (p. 500).

Learning to appreciate and later to write poetry does not happen in a vacuum. We must immerse our students in poetry. In the next three sections I have followed Steinburgh's suggested sequence of skills to teach poetry to children.

## Section II - Listening To, Reading And Acting Out Poet

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It is important to precede the formal study of poetry by informally introducing children to it. This can be done in a variety of ways. Using poems for Shared Reading experiences, where the poem will be read multiple times, allows the students to both hear the poem and then read along with the teacher. In addition to noting word choice or rhyming words, the teacher can point out the poet's use of line breaks and space, repetition and imagery, as well as calling the students' attention to the shape of the poem. In this way, "students will begin to understand the difference between poetry and prose and assimilate the many styles of poetic writing" (Steinburgh, p. 19).

A second way to begin to surround students with poetry is by setting up a poetry corner where a particular bookshelf is filled with poetry books and anthologies for children to peruse. At the start of each day (during meeting time is an opportune time), the teacher can read a poem to the class. One of my favorite anthologies is *Poetry Place*, edited by Rosemary Alexander. In it are over 600 poems addressing varied themes. After a short time, I have found that my students naturally start volunteering to read a poem they have chosen during this time. I stand nearby ready to help the reader with any difficult words. As poems are read I make xeroxed copies for each student to keep in a special poetry folder. Children ask to revisit favorite poems. Just the other day, Kyle, a student in my class this year, shouted out, "Can we hear the poem again about the kid who tried to use an eraser shaped like a knife to cut his sandwich?" He was referring to the poem, "I Brought A Worm" from Kalli Dakos's book entitled, *If You Are Not Here, Please Raise Your Hand: Poems About School*. The class laughed as I read it again as if it were the first time they had heard it. I also encourage my students to reread poems and then illustrate the imagery brought to mind in the poem.

Children often wonder out loud where a writer gets his/her ideas for a poem. As an introduction to this question, I plan to use Karla Kuskin's poem in her book, *Moon, Have You Met My Mother?*, "Where Do You Get The Idea For A Poem?" which describes all the different times in which an inspiration can strike the writer and how it demands the attention of the poet "until it is written" (pp. 226-227).

To increase the level of delight or pleasure in listening to and learning poetry, a teacher can employ movement and music to help accomplish this end. The first activity will involve creative movement so I have chosen three poems that suggest certain movements and have strong rhythms. Kuskin's poem "Sitting in the Sand" is a short poem taken from the book entitled *Dogs & Dragons Trees & Dreams*. It describes the action of sitting on the shore with hands cupped, attempting to get "a sip of the ocean" (p. 34). The rhythm is quick and the sequence of actions well laid out. Using this poem will be a fun way to begin. The second poem I plan to use is from the same book and is entitled "A Dance." It is longer and the rhythm follows a definite beat. Partners are beckoned to waltz, slip, skip, and glide, ending the dance with "a crash to the floor" (p. 12-13). The third poem, written by Patricia Hubbell, is entitled "Double Dutch" and is taken from her book, *City Kids* (p. 16-17). This poem describes the movement of a favorite pastime of many of my students, that of jumping rope. The short phrasing and choice of words like twirl, whirl and twist clearly convey the jumping movement of this activity. As I read each poem aloud, line by line, the students will experiment with movements that fit. Once we have decided on appropriate movements, we will put it all together and while I read the lines, certain students will move to the words. I envision this as an ideal small group activity. Each group will have a different poem to move to and to present to the rest of the class.

To extend this idea of movement, in the next activity I will have my students act out the poem. I have chosen two poems which contain several acting parts. The first poem is by Kuskin and is taken from her

aforementioned book. It is entitled "The Porcupine" (p. 7). There are two parts to act out, that of the porcupine and that of a person spying nearby. It begins by describing the movements of a rather sad, lumbering porcupine. The surprise comes when he sends out a flurry of quills toward the hiding stranger, laughing at his bewildered victim as he walks off. Well-chosen action words make this poem ideal for acting out. Secondly, I plan to use Hubbell's poem, "Sidewalks," taken from her book entitled, *The Tigers Brought Pink Lemonade*, (p. 27). This poem describes the movement of many different people, some walking while "shoulder-hugging", others walking "arm-in-arm" talking and others eating hot dogs or holding balloons as they move along the sidewalk. Because it has many parts, it will require a larger number of children to present it. I will preface the first reading of the poem by asking the class to listen for parts that can be acted out. Once we have done this, individuals will experiment with appropriate mime-like movements that befit the part. Steinburgh suggests including the whole class by having some act out the poem while the rest provide sound effects (p. 24). In both of these activities the poem is read several times and then can be displayed on large chart paper in the classroom for students to revisit.

A third activity which further extends the use of creative movement when reading poetry involves the use of music technology. One of our music teachers has created a wonderful program where students write stories and then, using the music keyboard and computer, they add musical sounds to the story. The final step is to add movement to the computerized music and act out the story on stage. The children are very proud of their creations. What I would like to try is to have students choose poems they like, put them to computerized music, add suitable movements and then present them on stage. The presentation would involve one student reading the poem aloud while others act out the poem with the accompanying 'music' in the background. This will allow students to really feel the rhythms of the poem. Two poems that would be ideal for using are both by Valerie Worth and are taken from her book, *All The Small Poems and Fourteen More*. The first poem, "Cow" (p. 3) describes very vividly the movement of a single cow across the grass. Music could be aptly used to describe how it "moves like a mountain" with its hipbones jutting out and its hooves thumping until it comes to an abrupt stop. The second poem, "Kite" (p. 90-91) begins with the kite sitting idly indoors seeming only to be dead paper on light-boned wood." It comes to life when it is flown in the sky and wildly moves around like a "wing, having nothing at all to do with string." Music could be created to convey the changing moods of the kite.

### **Section III - Reading and Discussing Poetry**

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Young children are capable of literary criticism, if only at a very simple level. It is more important to recognize the valuable skill-building nature of such reflection and discussion. Using focusing questions to encourage discussion among young students helps them "to hear the poems more deeply and refine their skills to listen for and respond to the message, the music, the imagery, and the emotion of the poem" (Steinburgh, p. 4). Harrison and Cullinan, in their aforementioned book, suggest displaying the following prompts when discussing poetry:

1. How did the poem make you feel?
2. Did the poem make you see something in a different way? Explain.
3. Tell me a part of the poem that you liked/disliked and why.

4. Which words helped you to see pictures in your mind?

5. What part of the poem surprised you? (p. 18)

These prompts could guide us in our discussions of poems and will be used for both oral and written responses.

Steinburgh suggests using three types of questions when discussing a poem with children. In the first type of question the teacher tries to elicit the young readers' responses by asking what pictures come to mind as they listen to a poem, if the poem prompts them to recall similar life experiences, how the poem makes them feel and whether certain words stick in their minds. The second type of question focuses on the subject of the poem, what it is about, where it takes place, the feelings it conveys and conjectures on why the poet wrote it. The third type of question focuses on the poet's techniques, what senses are appealed to, what comparisons are made (through such devices as simile, metaphor and personification), who the poet might be writing to, what musical phrasing is used and how the poet shaped the poem.

To explore more fully a poet's use of sense images I suggest using Hubbell's poem, "I Know A Tree," taken from the book, *The Tigers Brought Pink Lemonade* (p. 30). In describing a fruit tree Hubbell uses wonderful sense imagery. The tree has a unique odor of "tulips in jam" and "incense in clover." Its silver leaves with ivory-colored veins contrast with its golden blossoms, teak-colored trunk and gray tangled roots. The fruit, although sparse, tastes "so fine." The reader is able to take in this tree with all its splendor using his/her senses. (See Lesson Plan I).

To consider how a poem conveys strong feelings I suggest using Hubbell's poem, "Gone," (*City Kids*, p. 20) where a child laments the loss of a friend who has gone away. He feels like one of "the smallest things on earth today" and likens himself to the shadow of an ant he is looking at. Although short, this poem expresses a strong feeling of loss and is one that children can easily identify with.

To examine a poet's effective use of comparisons I plan to use Hubbell's poem, "Whales," taken from her book entitled *Earthmates* (p. 17). It describes watching a pod of whales swim by. She uses metaphors to describe them as "waves riding upon waves" as they "roll and arc." The blowholes she compares with white lilies that they are wearing. Hubbell also uses personification to describe their effect on the sun which "shivers" as they forcefully move past. Personification is used a second time to describe the "wind's fat fingers" that plug the ears of the observer, preventing him/her from hearing the whales' song. (See Lesson Plan II).

To understand how a poet can paint pictures with words I will use Worth's poem, "Grass" (*All The Small Poems and Fourteen More*, p. 18). In this poem the reader is invited to hear the stillness and even empty sound of a freshly mowed lawn and to compare that scene with wild growing grass in a field that "whistles" and "slides" and sends up a "foam of seeds." This grass is tangled with all sorts of leaves and provides a safe haven for "rustling schools of mice." The imagery, including sounds, is quite vivid and you can picture little mice peeking out from behind tall blades of grass and tangled leaves and feel the sense of security they must feel in this refuge.

To explore the music of language in poetry I suggest using Kuskin's poem, "Spring," (*Moon, Have You Met My Mother?*, p. 112-113). It is a poem that you want to tap your foot to. It is light and springy, describing joyful inclinations to sing, shout, swing, kick, dance and race. It describes many of the welcomed signs of spring like blossoms, "buzzing black bees," dew on a rose, and a "light leaping goat." It is definitely a poem that makes you want to jump and move to its zesty rhythm.

## Section IV - Writing Poetry

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As Karla Kuskin says in her book, *Dogs & Dragons Trees & Dreams*, "One introduction leads to another. The poetry reader often becomes a poetry writer" (introduction). Teaching children to write poetry helps them to develop both their language and their critical thinking skills. They are called upon to be keen observers of their world, to explore relationships between things, use symbol and metaphor to express meaning and attempt to describe abstract ideas. Because poetry is so concise they must choose their words carefully when they write (Steinburgh, p. 55).

It may take numerous revisions. Teachers should encourage young writers to revise their poems by reminding them that that's what real writers do and that it is part of the whole writing process. Harrison and Cullinan describe revision as a "natural part of composing our thoughts, determining what we want to say and how we'll say it" (p. 106). My students are used to following the writing process format of brainstorming for ideas, writing a first draft (sloppy copy), conferencing with a teacher, writing a second draft (neat sheet), publishing the writing and then sharing it with the class during author's chair time.

Routman suggests using poems written by children to motivate the class to try writing their own. Her book is filled with such poetry. She suggests introducing a poem by reading it twice, first displaying the rough draft written in the child's handwriting, and, during the second reading, displaying the published poem. It is important to discuss the poem as a whole, looking at all its elements in order to "help them internalize the essence of the poetry" (Routman, p. 12). Listening to and looking at these poems will spark students' interest in writing their own poetry.

After this introduction to a poem students are then to write a poem on any topic they choose and are given ample quiet time (20-30 minutes) in which to do it. During this time the teacher walks around to give assistance. During sharing time I do what Routman suggests, which is to "celebrate the writing gems" (p. 16) by calling attention to and reading aloud students' poems that demonstrate effective use of imagery, word play, use of comparisons, etc. This affirms the student's writing at the same time that it shows good examples of poetry for others to imitate.

### Ideas For Writing Poetry

There are many good books available to teach children how to write poetry so I will only mention a few activities that I have found especially valuable and plan to use in this unit. Because I have already worked many years with haikus, cinquains, clerihews, acrostics and the like, I want to venture out and attempt teaching free verse poetry to children. Free verse poetry has no set rhythm or rhyme. Paul b. Janeczko in his aforementioned book suggests focusing on four types of poems that will give the young writer varied practice in writing free verse poetry: a list poem, a poem of address, a persona poem and a narrative poem.

### List Poems

List poems describe or name things. The writer uses specific details to describe a memorable part of his/her life such as the years he/she lived down South with grandparents or the year spent in kindergarten. This is called a history poem. Another type is the how-to poem which involves listing sequential steps to follow when doing something. The subject may be ordinary like making a model airplane or unusual like giving a flea a bath. Janeczko recommends beginning by listing in a journal all the things related to your chosen subject. It's

a stream of consciousness type exercise and the young writer is to jot down whatever comes to mind about this subject. When reading over the list the student is to look for related things that may help him/her to narrow down the topic. The creation of this list may well take a few days and will involve additions and deletions. When editing the list, the writer should be careful to choose things that give a clear picture of the subject to the reader and choose words that convey the intended meaning. As the poem is refined, the writer needs to consider the order of ideas, where his emphasis will be, the sound of particular lines of words (i. e. putting together words that start with the same consonant) and the rhythm (use of short or long lines). By reading the poem out loud, the writer can hear the sound and feel the rhythm he/she wants to create in the poem.

### Poems of Address

This type of poem is written to a person or a thing. It is important to clarify that it is not about the subject. Janeczko suggests choosing a person whom you may have some unfinished business with such as a relative who has died or a good friend who has moved away. Other possibilities include writing to a pet that keeps chewing on the legs of mom's antique chair or expressing thanks to a teacher who has helped you conquer division or to express anger toward people who continuously litter the city park. In addition, poems of address can be written to favorite rock stars, TV personalities or characters in a book. Things can also be the subjects of poems of address--such as your worn-out sneakers that have accompanied you to each basketball practice. It is particularly apt to try using personification in such a poem. Perhaps those old sneakers cheered with glee when you slam-dunked that ball in the final minutes of the game.

Just as with list poems, Janeczko advises the writer to jot down all the reasons why he/she wants to write a poem to that particular person or thing. It is good to include a salutation in the first line. The teacher should remind the students to use 'you' and 'your' in these poems of address. Word choice should convey the feelings you hold toward your subject.

### Persona Poems

In this type of poem the writer becomes another person or thing and writes the poem from that point of view. Janeczko cautions the writer to first understand the subject before attempting to write the poem. If you plan to write a poem about an infant sibling it would be good to crawl around and see things from his/her perspective. The writer should ask himself/herself, if I were in that person's shoes, what would I think about, how would I feel, what might I say? In choosing subjects it is a good idea to consider people and things that are around you and to use your five senses to experience their world. The subject may also be a favorite character from a book. Imagine writing a poem where you take the point of view of the Big Bad Wolf.

### Narrative Poems

Narrative poems tell a story and a writer chooses as his/her subject some special event in his/her life. A good source of such memorable times can be your diary. When you write this type of poem, you need to describe not only the event but also your feelings toward it. Another source to get ideas from may be a scrapbook or memorabilia box, the contents of which may spark interest in some long lost memory. Janeczko emphasizes that a writer does not need to be strictly factual in his/her poem and can use details that are exaggerated or more entertaining.

One way to get started on such a poem is to write out the chosen event in prose first, adding details, imagery and feelings. In reading through the story, the writer can then circle the words or phrases that are essential to

the story line. These circled items are then copied on a new draft. Revising the list involves a lot of word play and moving around of ideas until the writer is satisfied that the poem expresses the treasured memory well. It is an opportune time to experiment with similes and metaphors in this type of poem.

### Poems That Imitate The Style of A Poet

Routman suggests encouraging students to write in the style of another poet. I have chosen Valerie Worth's style of writing small poems. (See Lesson Plan III). After exposing my class to many of her poems, I will model her style by writing my own poem (thinking out loud as I do it) in front of the class on large chart paper. I will select an ordinary object and in staying true to Worth's form I will keep it short. Then I will ask the class to write their own small poems. To encourage young writers to follow a short format by using phrases rather than whole sentences, Jodi Weisbart, in her aforementioned book, advises using 'poetry paper' which is line paper that is half the width of regular loose-leaf paper. In a minilesson she discusses with the students how using long sentences when writing a poem makes it end up sounding and looking more like a story. She suggests and demonstrates taking out some words, thus making phrases and the writing takes on the appearance and sound of a poem (p. 55).

## Section V - How the Study of Poetry Can Enhance Narrative Writing

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Ralph Fletcher encourages young writers to use their five senses "to capture the world around you" (p. 22). By carefully observing a subject and its surroundings or closing your eyes and 'seeing' an image in your head, you can gather details and specific ideas to include in your descriptions. Taking a snapshot of a scene, a character or an object and then describing it for the reader is a technique also used in writing narratives. Students are instructed to use their five senses when describing the setting of the story. In third grade there is a great emphasis put on the writing of multi-paragraphed narratives in preparation for the Connecticut Mastery Test, where students will have to respond to a timed prompt with a well-organized, descriptive narrative.

Many of the same skills practiced in writing poetry can be used in writing narratives. One example is the practiced use of metaphors and similes. Such use within a description adds flavor and imagery to the story and helps the reader really envision what it is you are trying to describe. The use of strong verbs in poetry is also a valuable skill to employ when writing a narrative. The whole idea of being more selective with word choice to convey your meaning is an invaluable skill that can add clarity to a narrative. In poetry we often try to express our feelings about the subject. That is also true of narrative writing, especially in the suspense and main event sections, where you describe your reactions to what is happening around you. Another similarity between writing poetry and writing narratives is that we view both as writing processes that go through many drafts before they are finished. It is not enough to simply write a poem quickly and judge its value, deciding whether to keep it or not. Poems require reworking just as narratives require upgrading.

It strikes me that teaching poetry to children will provide them with invaluable skills that they can use when writing narratives. Therefore, I have come to believe that the teaching of poetry should be an integral part of the third grade writing curriculum, pointing toward the prescribed mastery of narrative.

## Lesson Plan I

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**Objective:** To listen for and identify the use of sense images in poetry.

**Materials:** Patricia Hubbell's poem, *I Know A Tree* , chart paper, drawing paper, crayons, colored pencils.

**Procedure:**

1) I will begin by reviewing what our five senses are (see, hear, taste, feel and smell) and list them on chart paper. I will then explain that poets use their senses to describe the subject of their poems so that readers can more clearly imagine it.

2) I will present each student with a copy of the following description of setting, a model used in writing narratives:

Susan stood on the hill and looked out at the scene before her. The sweet smell of honeysuckle in the air caused her to close her eyes and smile. The warm summer wind blew gently against her face and she could see playful striped chipmunks scampering in the distant woods. The loud shouts of black crows flying overhead made her suddenly look upward and when she did, her eyes were temporarily blinded by the bright glare of the afternoon sun. Because she will near the ocean, the air tasted salty and she longed to wade in its cool waters.

I would ask my students what they can picture in this description and to identify each of the senses used.

3) On chart paper I will have written the poem *I Know A Tree* and I will introduce it within a shared reading experience where I read it alone the first time, pointing to each word. The class then reads it along with me a few more times.

4) Before exploring sensory images, I will review meanings of difficult vocabulary found in this poem like malachite, incense, sleek, teak, Tokay and globules.

5) Before reading the poem again, I will ask the class to close their eyes and picture the tree being described in this poem. I will then ask such questions as what do you smell in this poem? What can you touch on this tree? What do you see? If the tree could make sounds, what would they be like?

6) Following this discussion, I would ask the students to draw their version of this tree, fitting the poem's description, using drawing paper and crayons or colored pencils. These would later be displayed on the bulletin board, surrounding the poem written on chart paper.

## Lesson Plan II

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Objective: To identify and practice using similes and metaphors in writing.

**Materials:** Patricia Hubbell's poem *Whales* , Harrison and Cullinan's book, *Easy Poetry Lessons that Dazzle and Delight* , chart paper, writing paper

### Procedure:

1) I will begin by saying that poets not only like to play with words, they also like to play with ideas. One way they do this is by showing a relationship between different things, things which at first we may not have thought could be associated together.

2) In introducing similes I would begin by saying that similes are directly stated, using the words 'like' and 'as'. Similes help the reader see something described more clearly. I plan to use two poems for Harrison and Cullinan's book which will clearly demonstrate the use of similes to make comparisons. One is called *First Snow* by Marie Louise Allen (p. 44) which, for example, says that snow covered bushes are "like popcorn balls". A second poem is entitled *Some People* by Rachel Field (p. 44). In this poem the writer describes how meeting some people causes your thoughts to "shriveled up" like dry leaves whereas meeting other people causes your head to be full of thoughts that are "as thick as fireflies". Together we would identify and discuss the similes used in these poems.

3) Simile practice would involve choosing a subject such as a sleeping snake and imagine what it could sound like (a hissing teapot), look like (a patterned, moving piece of rope) etc. Students would be paired together to create similes for their chosen subject which they would share with the group.

4) We would continue our simile practice using a list of what Harrison and Cullinan call "simile jumpstarts" (p. 43) such as:

The storm clouds looked like

Swinging high in the air is like

A river with rapids is like

Embarrassment is like

Green sounds like

The mall during the Christmas season is like

5) Following this practice we will look at Hubbell's poem *Whales* written on chart paper. I will first ask a general question about what they can picture in this poem and then ask them to find the simile in it. The line, "They wear white lilies in their blowholes", will lead us into a discussion of metaphors where comparisons are made more directly, In fact, the object actually becomes that other thing.

6) There are two warm-up activities suggested by Harrison and Cullinan that I plan to use (p. 45). One involves looking in the classroom and turning things there into other things (pencils are writing sticks, fluorescent lights are artificial suns, the intercom is a talking box). Because we are creating metaphors, I will remind the class that we do not use like or as in our statements. A second warm-up involves taking a celebrity and saying what he/ she would be if he/ she were an animal, an insect, a weather condition, a car, a bird, etc.

- 7) We would then go back to *Whales* and look again at the metaphor used in this poem.
- 8) This poem also makes good use of personification so on another day we would revisit this poem and learn what this device is and how the poet has used it in this poem. We would go on to read other poems that use personification.

## Lesson Plan III

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**Objective:** To write a small poem patterned after the kind Valerie Worth wrote.

**Materials:** Valerie Worth, *All The Small Poems and Fourteen More*, chart paper, notebook paper cut in half lengthwise, poetry journals, pencils.

**Procedure:**

- 1) I will begin by reading a number of Valerie Worth's poems asking the students to use their senses and tell me what they notice. We will also look at her use of similes and metaphors, economy of words and her use of descriptive words.

- 2) Because I want the students to see these poems, the use of single words and short phrases and the actual shape of each poem, I will have them written out on chart paper.
- 3) One poem that I plan to use is *Asparagus* (p. 149). The lines are only two to three words long and include very vivid descriptive words (long-necked, sharp, scaly, alert). Both similes and personification are used in this poem and we would discuss these devices as well. In our discussion of this poem I would include such questions as: In what ways does the poet compare asparagus with snakes? What movements does asparagus make? What can you see and taste in this poem?
- 4) After looking at a number of Worth's small poems, noting that she uses very ordinary subjects for her poems, I will ask each student to choose a subject they would like to write about. I will do the same, as I will be modeling the writing process in this lesson.
- 5) In their poetry journals they will brainstorm words and phrases that describe their chosen subjects. They will then brainstorm some similes. Comparing their subject with other things using like or as.
- 6) In rereading their notes they will then select the descriptive words and phrases that they like best and play with their positions in the poem. A simile or two taken from their notes will then be added and I will encourage them once again to play with the position of these similes within their poem. I plan to model this process on chart paper stressing that it may take numerous rewrites before one is satisfied with the poem.
- 7) In later conferencing with each student I will help him or her refine his or her small poems.

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## Teacher Bibliography

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Weisbart, Jodi. *Joyful Ways To Teach Young Children To Write Poetry* . New York: Scholastic Professional Books, 2001. In this book the author describes the method and program she uses to encourage very young emergent writers to write poetry. Such topics as writing poetry with small groups, with partners and by yourself, finding meaningful topics, and publishing their poetry are included.

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