



Yale-New Haven  
Teachers Institute®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
2011 Volume III: The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry

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## **Igniting the Imagination: Playing with Poems in the Classroom**

Curriculum Unit 11.03.05  
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### **Introduction**

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"I don't get it."  
"I'm bored!"  
"I don't have anything to write about."  
"Do I have to keep writing?"

I'm sure we have all heard these famous lines before. Getting children excited about reading and writing can be a challenge. Not all children come to school with a love of books. As teachers, it is our job to develop, instill and nurture their young minds. Today we are competing with video games, computers, smartphones and mp3 players for the students' attention. This makes teaching and sustaining students' attention all the more difficult. One way to keep the students on their toes is to use poetry. Poetry is a great way for students of all ages to become excited about reading and writing in a whole new way. Poetry is short, full of vocabulary words, expressive, full of emotions and provides entertainment. In this unit, students will play with poems to help them become better readers and writers.

Currently I am teaching 24 third graders at King/Robinson International Baccalaureate (IB) Magnet School in New Haven, Connecticut. Our school serves Pre K-8<sup>th</sup> graders. We are a Title 1 school. Students are selected out of a lottery to attend our school from the surrounding towns. As part of the IB World schools, we are accredited in the Primary Years Program and Middle Years Program (PYP and MYP). IB schools are a non-profit organization that was founded in 1968 in Geneva, Switzerland. It was originally developed for elite families and ambassadors who traveled from country to country. The intent of the program was for mobile students, preparing to attend a university, to receive a common curriculum, which encourages students to be life long learners and inquires. Our school uses the IB philosophy and the Connecticut State Standards (we are in the

process of adapting the Common Core Standards) to develop inquiry-based units and lessons for our students.

There are 16 boys and 8 girls in my class. We use the Degrees of Reading Assessment (DRA) to assess the students reading levels. 20% of my students entered third grade reading at a proficient or higher level. Therefore 80% of my class is reading at a basic level. The DRA assesses the students' ability to read words accurately, predict, retell/summarize, recall literal comprehension, as well as reflect and interpret. Reading is an important focus in third grade because the students begin taking the Connecticut Mastery Tests, a state standardized test that assesses reading, writing and math. The students who are not reading on grade level have a difficult time taking and passing these assessments.

Oral language is another area that the students fall below proficiency in third grade. One of the programs in our curriculum is MONDO. We use an oral language assessment to assess the students' ability to retain language and recite it back. Students who do not pass these assessments are most likely practicing the art of communication on a daily basis. During oral language instruction, students look at a picture and discuss what they notice. Teachers encourage the students to build their vocabulary, sentence structure and communication skills amongst each other. The more practice the students have to develop their language skills the better they will become. Poetry can help the students gain confidence in speaking and developing their tone while playing with words and sentence structure.

Third graders are expected to complete narrative expositions, which includes an entertaining beginning, an elaborative setting, at least three main events and a conclusion. Throughout the story the students are to include thought shots (feelings or thoughts that the character exhibits) and snapshots (using descriptive words through the five senses to show the readers what the character is experiencing rather than telling). At the beginning of the year they are given writing prompts that assesses their baseline. Their stories are scored on 1 to 6 point scale. The higher the number the more developed, elaborated and fluent the story is. At the beginning of the year approximately 67% of the students scored at a basic level. By the end of the year there were 20% of the students scoring basic and 33% of the students scoring proficient. These are the students that are lacking in their ideas, voice and word choice. Their elaboration is weak with minimal details. They struggle to include thought shots and snapshots and typically run out of ideas and motivation to continue writing. Students give up quickly and refuse to revisit the work. Writing is an art form that needs to be inspired. It is hard to make a child write when they do not have a lot of background knowledge or experience to write about. This makes even brainstorming activities painful. When the students start to play with words and the sounds that words make they can then see writing as a fun, expressive form rather than just another assignment that has to be done. In this unit you will find ways to motivate students to write poems by playing with words. These activities can easily be carried into their narrative expositions.

## Why Poetry?

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Poems are; short, funny, full of rhymes and rhythms, loaded with vocabulary words, as well as have an unbelievable way of grasping the readers' attention so that they can relate to and understand the meaning. It is a wonderful tool to use when trying to differentiate among the various needs in the classroom. It can be used to build fluency, tone, expression, and voice. Students can engage in repeated readings of the poems to increase their fluency rate, pronunciation, and understanding of words. Poems get to the point. They are full of descriptions and metaphors that allow a child to laugh and the ability to understand the message behind the

words.

Every teacher knows the weekly drill. We have objectives that we need to cover. We choose books to use for our shared reading and small group instruction hoping and praying that they will work in meeting the objectives. Sometimes the books are long and sometimes they are short. Usually we never get through the books in one sitting, causing our objectives to linger. The students can become bored with the same books, and if not made clear, they can forget the objective and their reading focus. This then can be difficult for a teacher to stick with and master the objective that was created. Because a poem is short, it allows the teacher to spend more time delving deeper into the meaning of the poem by discussing the reading rather than rushing students to keep reading so that we can assess their comprehension. However, this alone will not help our students, especially our inner city students. By simply using poems in place of books, we are not transforming our students into critical thinkers; we are simply just using a piece of literature to do what we have always done.

I want my students to dig deeper into the meaning of words and the message that they have on paper. I want them to be able to feel confident that they can read words on a page, decode the messages, the meanings of words and then be able to talk about it. Further more I want this to translate in to the students writing, where they can then become the author and practice using the same strategies that the authors are using to translate a message. I believe that if the students can master this they will achieve at a higher level in both reading and writing. In this unit, I will show you how to get students to become critical thinkers through inquiry or as some like to call it, play.

## **Where Do I Fit This In?**

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Teachers can use this unit during the reader's workshop period for shared reading, centers and/or small group instruction. Shared reading is the perfect opportunity to model how you want the students to use poetry to achieve the reading objective for the day. These poems and skills can then be moved into a center so that students can continue practicing on their own.

Marc Polonsky said it best, "poetry is words, chosen and arranged in such a way as to inspire the imagination."

<sup>1</sup> In this unit I will help teachers plan effective lessons using poetry to help students develop their voice and imagination through fluency, role-play and skits, art and interpretation. To conclude the unit the students will have the opportunity to write their own poetry to convey a message to others. In addition the skills that the students have learned will help the students become more motivate and eager to elaborate their narrative stories.

## **Developing a Love for Poetry**

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The first step is to subtly introduce your students to poems. Stack your classroom library with books filled with poems with some of your favorite authors. Choose poems that are fun and entertaining. Encourage the students to visit the library daily and find poems that are fun. When the students enter the classroom in the

morning and are getting settled, encourage the students to choose a book and read in a quiet spot on the rug. Students can read with a buddy during this time as well. Once the students have had some exposure to the poems on their own, start putting some poems up on the chart paper and hang them up in the classroom.

Each day during morning meetings, read a poem that reflects the season, holidays, students' favorite activities, or one that is a favorite or yours. When we choose poems that are near and dear to the heart, the meaning and message is conveyed much deeper. Make it a point to include one poem each day into the morning meeting. This not only sets the tone for the day, but creates the hook that we need to get the students on board. After a while, students can choose their own poems to share with the class. Each day one student can be the reader and take a few minutes to read their poem. This will help students to become comfortable in the classroom and gives the teacher a chance to notice the students becoming excited to read in front of others.

## **Building Fluency During Shared Reading**

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Poems are a great way to build fluent readers. To do this you will need large chart paper and a poem of your choice. Use colored markers to write the poem on the chart paper. Each stanza or line should be in a different color depending on the poem and intent of the lesson. You will first want to model the reading of the poem in your own voice. Encourage the students to watch and listen as you read aloud. Point to each line as you read so that all of the students have the opportunity to follow along. When the poem is completed you may want to read it through one more time if you feel that the students may have not been following along. Repetition is always good in having students follow along and practice their tone and voice. Tell the students to repeat after you as you read the poem line by line. When the students are repeating the lines back to you, point to each word to set the pace for the class. If you do not point to each word the students will set the pace of the poem and the voice level of the classroom will increase tremendously. By pointing to each word you can gauge the students' ability to read the poem and pronounce each word. If you find that the students cannot pronounce a word or a phrase, you must go back and model the word or phrase a few more times. Point to each word as you read it aloud. Exaggerate the words as you read them so that the students can hear all of the sounds. Then make it a point to go back to the beginning of the sentence and have the students read it in their normal voice so they have a chance to hear and feel how the words should be read and spoken.

Example:

Hickory Dickory Dock. (Hick-o-rey, Dick-o-rey, Dock)

The mouse ran up the clock. (ran - up - the - clock)

You will be surprised to find that the students will improve on their fluency tremendously by practicing this numerous times.

Be sure to do this activity with a few different poems. Please reference the student materials for a list of books with poems. Once the students understand the purpose of this activity and can handle it as a class, you might wish to put the students into small groups and directing them to specific lines or stanzas. The students will read their part as you point to each line. You will see the students get excited to try this again. Not only are they practicing their fluency, enunciation and pronunciation of each word but they also working on staying

focused and working as a group.

## Recording Students' Voices

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Another activity that the students can participate in during a center is to record poems into a tape player that can be played back. This will give the students the opportunity to hear themselves as they recite poems. They can listen to their rate, tone and expression. Since they have not had much exposure in what tone and expression is, this can help build some prior knowledge and experience that they can bring with them to the class discussion.

## Expression Cards

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You have now developed the student interest in poetry and confidence in reading poems aloud. The next step is to develop the students' tone. Each poem's emotional theme is different depending on the message in the poem; however some poems can be expressed using different tones. The purpose of this activity is to get students to practice projecting different emotions through their voice. This activity will help students become more aware of a characters' feelings through role-play which will allow them to read and write with expression.

You will first need a copy of the expression cards that are located in the appendix. Pictures can be added to the cards as a visual for each expression. You will want to make a set of cards for small groups of students depending on the set up of your classroom. Start with one expression such as happy. You will model by reading the poem with the expression "happy." Show the students with your voice what it sounds like. Your face will express this emotion as well. Once you have modeled this activity with the class the students can then work in small groups reading sentences of poetry. After they have had practice with the sentences and phrases, they can choose poems of their choice. Their expression cards can be placed faced down on a table. The students can choose the cards one at a time as if they were playing a game. Poems can also be placed on chart paper. Each stanza can be assigned an expression

After having had a chance to explore with the expression cards, the students can discuss their voice, tone, expression and body language. Questions can include but are not limited to: how is the character feeling? What is happening in the poem? What would happen if we heard the poem in a different expression? How does our body language change to fit the expression? How is expression used to convey the message in the poem? Here you are beginning to use poetry to build comprehension skills.

## Let's Act it Out!

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Once the students have had a chance to explore expression through voice, tone and art, they can now have an opportunity to have some fun in creating skits. Giggle poetry is the best form of poetry to use with this activity. As an example we will use the poem *Under the Bed*<sup>1</sup> by Penny Tryzynka. The student will choose a poem of their choice and work in small groups. Together they will create mini skit to for the poem. Students will need to include voice, tone and expression in order to convey the meaning of the poem. This may take them a few days to work on. Once they have had time to create their skit and rehearse it allow the students to perform it in front of the class. If there are some students who are typically shy than others, provide them with the option of creating puppets and performing a puppet show. You are looking for the students to demonstrate their understanding of voice and tone. They will need to include details from the poems as well.

In *Under My Bed*, the child is scared of the monster that may be lurking underneath the bed. His long, white teeth create an image that helps the reader feel what the character is feeling. The students can and should be as creative as they want to be for this activity. Encourage them to give the characters a voice. You can use the example below as a model for the class.

**Child** : (talking to himself) I'm so scared! I think there is something under my bed, but I'm not sure. It's only 7:30 at night.

**Monster** : Slurp, slurp, slurp.. I'm so hungry, but it's too dark out there to get something to eat.

**Child** : He-l-l-o-o, is so-mma-one there?

**Monster** : (talking to himself) ohh no! It's a monster! What should I do? I wish that little boy were here. He has that nice soft teddy bear.

**Child** : (talking to himself) maybe if I lie really still and close my eyes, they won't see me...

**Monster** : *creeps out slowly*... I hope he's there...(tap, tap, tap)

**Child** : (opens one eye slowly)

**Monster** : Can I sleep with you? I'm scared.

## Art Can Inspire Us All!

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The World Is Not A Pleasant Place To Be<sup>3</sup>, by Nikki Giovanni is a great poem to use with our next lesson. After the children have had a chance to express themselves using voice, they will now have the opportunity to express themselves with art. Depending on the poem, each child will take a part of the poem or the entire poem. They will read their poem and think about the message and what it means to them. Some students may have trouble at first understanding what this means so you can ask them some questions to help spark their ideas. For example, if we use the first three lines of Nikki Giovanni's poem, we could ask the following

questions. Who would you want to be held by if you were scared? How would this person make the world a pleasant place? How would this world be unpleasant if they were not there for you? How do you feel when this person is with you?

The students will use paints, crayons, markers or colored pencils to create a picture. As the students work they will tap into their imagination and become inspired to add more details. Once their picture is completed, they will use their five senses to describe the story from within the picture. The students will use the graphic organizer below to help them develop their ideas with each sense. If the students write one word answer, encourage them to tell you more. Have them read the poem again and think about what they were thinking or feeling as they were reading it.

<b>Words or phrases in the poem</b>	<b>Sight</b>	<b>Smell</b>	<b>Taste</b>	<b>Touch</b>	<b>Hear</b>
<b>Example:</b> The world is not a pleasant place to be without someone to hold and be held by	Grandma in her black skirt and black shirt. Her hair is brown with soft, small curls.	Her soft vanilla perfume	The Italian cookies that were hidden within her pocket.	Her strong, soft hands wrapped around me.	Her laughter as she watches the birds in the yard.

Once the graphic organizer has been completed, let the students turn each sense into a detailed sentence that paints a picture. Then have them compile their sentences into a poem. Encourage the students to use words that will help them paint a picture for their readers. You may want to help students by supplying a list of descriptive words so that they are not stuck using the same words over and over again.

Poem Example:

There was Grandma on the porch

Sitting under the bedroom window

Her wool black skirt and ribbed sweater was soft upon her skin

Small brown curls mopped her head

The Aqua Net kept them in place.

Story Example:

I spotted Grandma on the concrete porch sitting under the bedroom window. She was wearing her black wool

skirt and her black, ribbed sweater. Her soft, brown hair had just been curled. It stood perfectly still from the Aqua Net hairspray that she always used.

## Imagery in Words

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Students can be inspired to create poems from other poems that they have read and from their own artwork. In this lesson, the students will have the opportunity to develop their creativity using poems, art and words. For this lesson you will need to choose a poems that is full of images and is possibly filled with various moods such as: happy, sad, excited, and/or angry. You will also need drawing paper and/or paper suitable for paints. You should decide on the art materials based on the level of your students. First you will distribute the art materials to the class. Then read the poem. Have the class close their eyes before you read the poem. Encourage the students to picture what they see and/or feel as you are reading the poem aloud. After you have read through the poem once, you will want to read through it a second time for the students who need more time to process their thoughts. Again, they will close their eyes and create an image in their minds that resembles the poem in some way. The students will now use their image and recreate it on the paper using paints, markers, crayons, and/or other mediums that they would like to use. As the students are working, roam throughout the room. Ask the students to tell you about the picture. Do not assume objects within the pictures. It is best to ask open-ended questions so that the students creativity is not hindered by others thoughts or ideas.

After the pictures have been created, the students can then create their own poems using the images and feelings within their creations. You can display their work on a bulletin board along with their poems and the original poem.

## Sounds in Writing

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Have the students search in books for different words or phrases. Encourage them to read the words aloud as they are locating phonetic sounds such as /ch/, /sh/, /th/, /br/, /ph/. They can choose sounds that they enjoy. After the students have had a chance to jog their thinking, they can begin to brainstorm words that fit under these sounds. The students will write a 3-line poem. Each line must have 3 repeating sounds. They can be the same sound shared among the three lines, or three different sounds. Remember the creativity is in the students' hands. Provide the framework for them and let them play and have fun with words.



## Onomatopoeic

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Children love onomatopoeia. Often times you will hear students saying these words because they love how they sound. This lesson will help student understand that words can convey a sound and an experience. When students start to write stories, we tell them to use snapshots, which means showing the readers using descriptive words rather than telling them. This activity will not only help students with tone and expression, but it will also help students become descriptive writers. First the students will brainstorm objects of their choice such as ball, leaves, pencil, and computer. Then they will brainstorm some sound words that are associated with their object such as zoom, bump, tap, and click. After that they will think about the different things that can be done with this object. You can use the following example as a model for your class to get them to start thinking. Print out the template below for the students to help them organize their ideas and sentences.

<b>Example:</b>	
<b>Object:</b> Ball	<b>Sounds:</b> bump, tap-tap, swish, zoom, whoosh
<b>Sentences:</b> roll and ball and it goes whoosh <b>Other Examples:</b> drop a rock and it goes click, throw a pebble in the puddle and it goes plunk, scuff your barefoot against the floor and it goes zzzit	
<b>Students Work:</b>	
<b>Object:</b>	<b>Sounds:</b>
<b>Sentences</b>	

## Let's Create Some Music

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Place random objects such as; drums sticks, spoons, rulers, boxes, and/ or pencils in a box in the front of the room. Tell the students that they will explore and develop a total of 8 beats using objects to help them. They can look in their desks for inspiration or through the box you have placed in the front of the room. Give the students 5 to 10 minutes depending on their ability to just play with sound. When the students have had time to create a beat of their choice, have them translate the beat onto paper: bang-tap-tap-tap, bang-tap, tap, tap. This is so that they won't forget the beat they've created should they need to come back to this at a later date. Once the beat has been established, the students can add words that will follow the patterns of the beat. The students can and should perform their poems in front of the class. Listen for the beat and the choice of words that the students used. As the students in the class are listening to each other, have them listen for the beats, the words choice, tone, images within the poem, and expression. They can reflect on the poems and provide additional ideas and/or suggestions.

Examples of beat poems:

Sound: Bang - Tap, Tap, Tap, Bang - Tap, Tap, Tap  
Poem: Jump - Run and Run, Jump - Run and Run  
High - Low and Low, High - Low and Low  
Sizzle - To and Fro, Sizzle - To and Fro

Once the students have been able to play with poetry and immerse voice, tone and expression they can then apply these skills in their writing. Remind them to create pictures with their words and put expression in their sentences.

## Making up Words; The Art of Spoonerism

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Poets have been making up words and phrases for centuries. Playing with words is what poetry is all about. Why not bring that into the classroom and get the students involved in making up words and playing with the language where there are very few rules. Spoonerism is when initial letters of words are interchanged to create new words. For example the phrase "A pack of lies," can easily be turned into "A lack of pies." By simply switching the /p/ and the /t/ we have a new phrase that is silly and fun. You can easily give students a well-known poem and have them recreate it by using spoonerism. Once the students have been able to play with the words you can have them act out the poem and perform them in front of the class. This is a great opportunity to tie the voice, tone, and expression all into the same activity to see if they students have really grasped the concept.

This last idea came to me after having played with the ideas of spoonerism. The first step is to brainstorm everyday objects that the students are familiar with. Then they will come up with clever, new names for these items. Once they have their new words, they will be creating a poem using their new words to replace the ordinary words. After the poems have been created, these too can be written on chart paper, performed in front of the class, and/or hung up to be shared with others in and out of the classroom.

### For example:

Ordinary Objects	New Words	Poem
Apple	Muncher	Mom told me to each a <b>muncher</b> .
Bread	Carby	That too many <b>carbies</b> are not healthy.
Chocolate	Cocoaloco	But I'd rather each some more <b>cocoaloco</b> because that will turn my frown upside down.

Feel free to add other lessons and activities into your own poetry units. This is a chance for the students to play as they are learning. There are not right or wrong answers. Each child will amaze you with what they can do. It is also a great idea to put the students work up on a bulletin board. Call attention to all the great thinking and hard work that they are doing. You, as well as your students, will never look at poetry the same way. What once looked confusing and just words written on a page has now brought more meaning and life into the lessons in your classroom.

## Appendix

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### Grade 3 Common Core Standards

SL.3.5.

- Create engaging audio recordings of stories or poems that demonstrate fluid reading at an understandable pace; add visual displays when appropriate to emphasize or enhance certain facts or details.

RL.3.10.

- By the end of the year, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 2-3 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

RF.3.4.

- Read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.
- Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding.
- Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression.
- Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary.

### Expression Cards

<b>HAPPY</b>	<b>SAD</b>	<b>ANGRY</b>	<b>UPSET</b>
<b>EXCITED</b>	<b>SHY</b>	<b>WORRIED</b>	<b>TERRIFIED</b>
<b>CONFUSED</b>	<b>EAGER</b>	<b>SHOCKED</b>	<b>JOYFUL</b>

**Writing Rubric - New Haven, Connecticut**

Grades 3-4: Rubric

Score Point 1: An undeveloped response

Typical elements:

Contains few or vague details

Is too brief to indicate sequencing of events

May be difficult to read and understand

Score Point 2: An underdeveloped narrative

Typical elements:

Contains general, unelaborated and/or list-like details

Shows little evidence of sequencing of events

May be awkward and confusing

Score Point 3: A minimally-developed narrative with little expansion of key events and characters

Typical elements:

Has little elaboration with more general than specific details

Shows some evidence of an organizational strategy with some sequencing of events

May be awkward in parts

Score Point 4: A somewhat-developed narrative with moderate expansion of key events and characters

Typical elements:

Is adequately elaborated with a mix of general and specific details

Shows a satisfactory organizational strategy with satisfactory sequencing of events

May be somewhat fluent

Score Point 5: A developed narrative with mostly effective expansion of key events and characters

Typical elements:

Is moderately well elaborated with mostly specific details

Shows generally strong organizational strategy and sequencing of events

May be moderately fluent

Score Point 6: A well-developed narrative expanding on key events and characters

Typical elements:

Is fully elaborated with specific details

Shows strong organizational strategy and sequencing of events

Is fluent

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## Endnotes

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