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# Integrating the Arts Across the Content Areas



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# Exploring the Language of Poetry

## What Is Poetry?

Poetry is a unique use of language. Meryll Goldberg, in her latest edition of *Arts Integration*, suggests that poetry is “a playing with words” (Goldberg 2012). Poetry suggests rather than tells. It accentuates metaphor and image. Emily Dickinson captures the essence of poetry so beautifully in the first line of her poem “Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—” (Johnson 1960). That’s what poetry allows us to do—to use language with a bit of freedom; to put words together without worrying about rules of grammar and punctuation. “Poetry is a language organized, produced, and experienced as an art form. If someone believes something is poetry, then, as far as I’m concerned, it is poetry” (Morice 1995).

Poetry provides children with a way to perceive the world, to see things in great detail and through all the senses. It’s about paying attention, observing, being awake in the moment, looking for sights, sounds, smells, feelings, and more. It’s a way of playing with language, using image, repetition, pattern, sound, metaphor, and mood. When approached creatively, the result is a passion for writing and listening to poetry. Poetry can provide students a taste of freedom and pleasure with language.

## Why Does Poetry Matter?

Including poetry as an integral part of education can engage students and help them bring together critical thinking and reflection. Listening to beautiful language filled with poetic images captures children’s imaginations and deepens the intricacies of language such as metaphor, simile, and sound patterns created by alliteration. Poetry gives teachers authentic text in which to work on phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, writing, and language development skills such as rhyme, word families, and alliteration (Gill 2007; Perfect 1999; Whitin 1982; Common Core State Standards Initiative 2010). Poems provide a simpler context for students to practice these skills, using text that is at their interest and academic levels (Stickling, Prasmus, and Olsen 2011). Writing poetry temporarily frees students from some of the conventions of writing, which they often find restrictive, and allows them to focus on theme, word choice, and the music of language.

Poetry is a powerful tool to expand content learning beyond the language arts as well. In social studies, reading poetry can bring students to the heart and soul of the culture or era being studied. The rhythm and pattern in poetry are certainly mathematical. And creating poetry about science and mathematics helps students create mental images and

forge new understanding.

A decorative banner with the words "Common Core" written in a bold, serif font. The banner is light gray with a slight shadow and is set against a white background.

## Common Core

### Poetry in the Common Core State Standards

Poetry is a genre that naturally and inherently addresses the Common Core State Standards in language arts. Describe, analyze, narrate, explain, listen, speak, write using alliteration, metaphor; these are all skills found in the ELA and Common Core State Standards that are beautifully addressed through poetry. Reading, writing, and understanding poetry are an integral part of the standards for reading, as well as speaking and listening. Poetry is specifically listed as one of three text types of literature students should read, and skills related to poetry are woven through the standards. For example, students are expected to understand figurative language, word relationships, and nuanced meanings (Grade 8), analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sound (Grade 7), and create audio recordings of poems that demonstrate fluid reading (Grade 3). Although poetry is not among the genres of writing specified in the Common Core State Standards, it provides students an opportunity to apply what they have learned about language through their reading of poetry. Through poetry, teachers can address many Common Core State Standards related to phonics, phonemic awareness, language development, fluency, comprehension, word recognition, vocabulary development, use of metaphor and simile, and imagery.

In addition to strengthening content learning, poetry in the classroom has positive emotional and social effects on students. Through reading and writing poetry, children are free to take risks and express their deep feelings that precede critical analysis.

A high school English teacher in California used poetry with a group of students who struggled with low achievement and low self-esteem. She sensed that perhaps using this strategy might interest them. She began by first reading her own *I Am From* poem (see page 41 for more information). Aware of her students' difficult life situations, she explained that it was not necessary to share every detail of their lives, and in fact, she had carefully decided what to put in her own poem and what details to leave out. She gave her students some topics to explore such as home, memories, neighborhood, particular sayings they remember, or special places. She urged them to bring in details—sights, sounds, smells, etc.

Once the class began working on the assignment, she became aware that one student, who had struggled all year and spent most of his time unengaged and uninterested, was writing with fervor. When he finished, he raced to her desk and asked if he could go to the computer lab and type up his poem. The teacher was astounded. It was the first time he had actually written anything of substance. He returned and proudly turned in an extraordinary poem. The following is an excerpt from his poem:

*I am from the city of God, the land of lords, the foothill of life, the lights of the moon and stars. I am from the city of racism. I am from the land of freedom.*

*I am from the piss in the hallway. I am from the streets, the cold hard streets.*

*I am from the land where people die on corners. I am from the land that everybody wants to live in but where I will die in.*

*I am from the city where you have to watch your back. I am from the land that never dies. I am from a place where they told me I would never make it; never finish. I am from the ghetto and I will make it!*

—High school student, California, 2007

For this particular student, and for many students, writing a poem touches something deep inside. Poetry gave this student a vehicle for expression, voicing the intense frustration and pent-up emotions that hitherto he had left unsaid. His voice, up until that moment, was rarely heard. This poetry exercise opened a door that had previously been closed.

Many teachers had given up on this student: “He can’t do anything. Just let him be.” He intuitively knows that and reiterates those beliefs in his poem: “I am from a place where they told me I would never make it; never finish.” Through the vehicle of poetry, a conversation about what was possible began. It allowed his teacher and others who worked with him to view him in terms of possibility and success instead of only failure. Poetry, like the other art forms, not only gives students a powerful voice but also allows students to be successful in ways that, through conventional educational strategies, seemed impossible.

## **Bring Poetry into Your Life**

Many of us read the newspaper daily, peruse magazines, enjoy novels, and dive into nonfiction work with gusto. But how many of us read poetry on a regular basis? Not many, I’d guess. Why not? What has stopped us? Is it too hard? Too complicated? Not accessible? Just too much work to figure out? Perhaps poetry holds unpleasant memories from school when we were required to dissect a poem with such doggedness that it lost all meaning. Now any enjoyment the reading of poetry held for us in the past has disappeared.

On the other hand, I suspect there are large numbers of us who have pleasant memories of chanting jump rope rhymes, nursery rhymes, table graces, nighttime prayers, and a number of other poetic pieces that we can still happily rattle off today, years later. These poetic verses were fun to learn and continue to be a joy to recite. What is the difference? Perhaps it is the love of poetry, the sheer pleasure in the sounds, rhythms, words, and images.

Many teachers avoid poetry, dread teaching it, do not think of themselves as poets, and thus miss the opportunity to use it as an essential teaching strategy. Kenneth Koch (1999), author of the magical book of children’s poetry *Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching*

*Children to Write Poetry*, has taught poetry in New York public schools for years, and feels that children are not given the exposure to valuable writing because teachers are intimidated by it and have the false impression that children are unable to respond to poetry—that it is “too difficult” or too stylized for children to comprehend, never mind articulate on. In fact, Koch’s examples of children’s poetic writing affirms their ability to grasp complicated concepts as well as relate such complexities to their own emotions (Poetry Foundation 2012). Teachers, too, can be renewed by poetry and can see that it speaks to their needs, to their yearnings, to their deepest experiences. One of Koch’s students sums up why poetry is important: “I like poetry because it puts me in places I like to be” (Koch 2012).

Before introducing poetry in your classroom, it is best to begin by bringing poetry back into your own life. Once you feel comfortable and confident reading and writing poetry, you will be eager to share it with your students. Your enthusiasm and experience will transfer to the students, and the students, too, will find similar joy. Step one is to overcome any preconceptions long held about what poetry really is or what it means to write poetry or be a poet.

## Read Poetry

Begin by reading and enjoying poetry yourself. Go to a bookstore or a library and browse contemporary poetry books. See what touches you. Find poems that you like, that please you. You’ll soon discover that there are poets with whom you resonate, who seem to describe experiences like you might have had. If there are poems you like, bring them to class and read them to your students. Avoid teaching about form; don’t try to analyze them, just read them aloud. Poetry can be a presence in a classroom, without any interpretation, without any commentary. Simply make a place for poetry. Enjoy the process.

## Write Poetry

Next, write a poem. Start by drawing a map of the place you grew up. Put everything on it—where the local school was, or church, or your tree house, the park where you hung out, the hill you sledded down. Use this map to connect to your memories. Pick one vivid memory and do a mind map, listing everything you can about that memory. Work through your senses. What sights, sounds, tastes, or smells do you remember? List the details. Who was there? What did it feel like? What was the weather like? What were you wearing? What textures do you remember? What time of day was it? Take the details of this one memory and put it into a loose poetic form. Don’t worry about getting it right. Here are a few guidelines to follow as a way to get you started:

- **Don’t try to rhyme.** Most contemporary poems don’t rhyme. Rhyme is traditionally part of constructing a poem, but let it emerge on its own, and not at the end of lines. Reading poetry out loud to yourself is a good way to hear the rhythm and the rhyme or near rhyme. You might discover that writing poetry is easier and provides much more freedom if you are not saddled with trying to find a rhyming word.
- **Write in phrases, not full sentences.** You are creating impressions, details, and

suggestions of meaning. This is part of the joy of breaking out of standard English syntax and diction. Write in fragments or phrases.

- **Show, don't tell.** Use sensory words. Give an impression of what happened. Bring it to life through emotions and through all the senses. Resist telling the reader what to think or how to interpret what you are saying. There is no need to point to the obvious. Play around. The heart of a poem lies in its images—word pictures that the poet paints in order to recreate a scene, an experience, a memory, etc. Images are drawn from the senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. Poetry is grounded in the tangible world. Using images enables your poetry to *show* what you are writing about, rather than *telling* or summarizing it.
- **Use ordinary language.** Poetry does not require fancy words. The words you use to speak with are strong and will be equally so when you write them down. There is no one to impress. Don't worry about coming up with “poetic words.” They don't exist. Choose every word because it is the best, freshest, least clichéd word you can think of.
- **Use metaphor to compare two things.** Writing using metaphor is an attempt to condense language and vividly connect two unlike things together, making a startling juxtaposition, such as *My words are kites*. A metaphor (or simile, using *like* or *as*, which is weaker than a more direct comparison) helps your poetry to “leap,” that is, to move from one category of thought to another, to easily and powerfully summarize how one thing resembles another, and thus to illuminate the first idea with an economy of words. Metaphors are powerful, and metaphorical thinking is a higher-order thinking skill; it takes some practice.
- **Read your poem aloud to yourself to hear its rhythm.** Rhythm exists naturally in language and most of us are delighted by it. Line breaks can help create a rhythm that supports the meaning of the words you are writing and fosters complex and pleasant thought.

Once you have something on paper, go back and revisit it again and again. Work with it. Edit it. Put it away and get it out again...and again. If you can, read it to someone else and have that person help you revise it.

And finally, share it! Poetry is meant to be read aloud. Honor it by giving it an audience. The final step is to give it away. In this way you complete the writer/reader connection that happens in all art forms, the sharing of the created piece. Poems make delicious gifts.

## Introduce Poetry to Your Students

Once you have experienced the power of poetry for yourself, you will be excited to share it with your students. Begin by reading poetry to students and having them read it to each other. United States Poet Laureate Pat Lowerey Collins argues that reading poetry develops some fundamental cognitive and intellectual skills, and that reading a poem “replicates the way we learn and think” (quoted in Showalter 2012, 63). He sees many parallels between poetry and learning: “When we read a poem, we enter the consciousness of another. It requires that we loosen some of our fixed notions in order to accommodate

another point of view.... To follow the connections in a metaphor is to make a mental leap, to exercise an imaginative agility, even to open a new synapse as two disparate things are linked.” Collins considers poetic form as “a way of thinking, an angle of approach” that helps students understand how information must be “shaped and contoured in order to be intelligible.”

The best way to introduce poetry to students is to have them listen to poems—all sorts of genres of poetry. Today’s students are used to listening to all types of music and they have quite a discerning ear. By listening to poetry, they begin to analyze language and appreciate how meaning is shaped. Listening to a variety of poems also allows them to consider ways in which identity may be perceived and understood as manifested in the poems they hear (Gordon 2009). Ask your students what they remember about the poem they just heard. They are hearing meaning in their own way, through their own ears. What details do they remember? What stuck? Listening to and experiencing poems in sound are important dimensions of engaging with and understanding the meaning potential of texts and the means with which students readily involve themselves.

Our schools are filled with diverse learners and it is important to read a diverse selection of poetry. Integration of culture and the arts into the curriculum for English language learners, and indeed most students, is all too rare. A group of researchers in Canada discovered that poetry was the best practice not only for teaching literacy but also for helping students develop critical thinking and analytical perspectives, and the power of high-interest cultural content motivated language learners beyond all else (Reeves 2009).

Ideally students should read and hear as many poems as possible so they can find their own style of poetry. They should hear traditional poetry as well as contemporary poetry and experience serious and humorous poetry. From this wide variety of poets and poems, students can connect with one or more genres and then move to writing their own poems (Lynch 2009).

As students hear more and more poetry, they hopefully will become more comfortable with it. Assumptions about what poetry is and is not will break down. Just as there is not one genre of music, there is not one genre of poetry. Listening to poems read aloud gives students a chance to feel, think, discover, ask questions, and perhaps get answers. You could begin by simply reading the title and asking students what they think the poem will be about. Ask them to listen to the sounds of the words. Once readers or listeners practice making sense of poetry, they may generalize this useful skill to other texts and genres (Stickling, Prasun, and Olsen 2011).

[Figure 1.1](#) provides some suggested first poems to read aloud to students. Some of these poems have specific forms that can be used by students to model their own writing. It is a good place to help students begin developing their own poetic vocabulary. Musical lyrics can also be analyzed. Bob Dylan’s lyrics are often used because of the ingenious way Dylan stresses syllables and plays with metaphor. [Figure 1.2](#) suggests poetry collections for classroom use. See [Appendix D: Recommended Resources](#) for more information.

**Figure 1.1 Suggested Poems to Read Aloud**

Gary Soto	"Oranges"
Emily Dickinson	"Not in Vain"
Seamus Heaney	"Scaffolding"
	"The Rain Stick"
Rudyard Kipling	"If—"
Judith Viorst	"If I Were in Charge of the World"
Kenn Nesbitt	"The Aliens Have Landed"
Jack Prelutsky	"Be Glad Your Nose Is on Your Face"
Langston Hughes	"Dreams"

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