

Why Poetry for Young English Learners?

By Kenn Nesbitt (U.S. Children's Poet Laureate, 2013–2015)

For primary students of English, poetry written for children is a great way to make learning more effective and fun. While there are many different types of poetry, there is one thing almost all poems have in common: *short lines*. Prose (writing other than poetry) is usually written in paragraphs made up of sentences of different lengths, but poems are most often written in lines of just a few words, making them easier for language learners to understand.

Poetic techniques such as rhyme and rhythm make poems more *memorable*. It is much easier to commit a short rhyming poem to memory than a paragraph of equal length.

Rhythm (called "meter" in poetry) and rhyme can also help students with pronunciation. A poem with a consistent meter helps students identify which syllables are stressed or unstressed, and rhyme can help students see how words with different spelling patterns may still have similar sounds.

But, perhaps most importantly, poetry written especially for children can be playful and fun, engaging students and inspiring them to want to read and write.

Teaching How to Read Poetry

When selecting poems to engage students, it is best to begin with funny poetry. Humor makes children laugh or smile, helping them associate poetry with positive emotions and encouraging them to read more. Funny poems for children usually also have rhyme and meter, making them more memorable and enjoyable to read.

Tip: When choosing humorous poems for English language learners, take care to avoid poems where the humor relies on double-meanings, which most young learners may not have the ability to grasp.

Begin by reading a poem aloud to students or playing the audio recording. Repetition is key to language acquisition, so it is a good idea to read the poem or play the audio (or ideally a mix of both) multiple times over several days to help students become familiar with it.

After reading a poem, discuss the following with your students:

- **What does the poem say?** Does it tell a story? Does it describe something? Or does it express an emotion?
- **How does the poem make you feel?** Ask students if it makes them happy, angry, or surprised. Is the poem serious? Is it funny? Is it sad? What is it about the poem that makes them feel that way?
- **Does the poem rhyme?** If so, where are the rhyming words? Rhymes are *usually* at the end of the lines. Sometimes there will be rhyming words on every line, sometimes every other line, and occasionally in more complex patterns. Encourage students not just to find the rhymes, but to see if they can think of other words that rhyme with the words in the poem.
- **Does the poem have a rhythm?** Most metrical poems have a consistent "beat," where every second or third syllable is emphasized, or stressed. For example, in the poem "Rules I Must Remember," every other syllable is stressed. In "We're Going to Learn to Build Robots," every third syllable is stressed. An easy way to help students find the rhythm is to tap your knee or have students clap along or stomp their feet for each stressed syllable, each "beat" of the poem.

I **must** not **take** a **selfie**

When I'm **running** in a **race**.

I **must** catch **baseballs** **with** my **glove**

Instead of **with** my **face** ...


We're **going** to **learn** to build **robots** at **school**.

I'm **going** to **make** mine look **totally** **cool**.

I'll **build** it with **switches** and **light** bulbs and **wires**,

Computers and **TVs** and **bulldozer** **tires** ...

- Are there any repeated words or sounds in the poem? Rhymes consist in the repetition of the ending sounds of words, but there are more types of repetition in poems. For example, when words that are close together start with the same consonant sounds (e.g., "Polly the Painter"),



this is alliteration. Can your students find any alliterations in the poem? What about repeated words, phrases, or sentences? For example, the poem “We’re Going to Learn to Build Robots” repeats the first line several times throughout the poem.

Reading poems aloud to students is a great way to start. As soon as possible, though, it is a good idea to have *them* read the poems aloud. Not only is it great practice; reading a funny poem that makes their classmates laugh provides a positive emotional reward that inspires children to want to read more.

Once students have come to love poems through humor, begin introducing them to other types of poems. These could be poems that express emotions, such as happiness, sadness, or anger, or they could be descriptive poems or poems that tell other kinds of stories.

Teaching Poetry Writing

There are several poetic forms (types of poems) that are especially well-suited to beginning writers. These include acrostics, concrete (or shape) poems, and cinquains. These forms do not require students to rhyme or worry about meter, and only cinquains require counting syllables.

Acrostics

The easiest way to have students create their first acrostic poem is to have them write their name vertically on a piece of paper, like this:

M
A
R
I
A

Then, for each letter in their name, ask them to find an English adjective that they feel describes them, like this:

Musical
Adventurous
Really nice
Interesting
Awesome!

They can then do the same with other words, such as their favorite sport or food, and they can try using more than just one or two words in each line. Or they can try aligning letters at different points in words, too, rather than always starting with the first letter.

Concrete Poems

A concrete or “shape” poem is a poem written in the shape of its subject. For example, a poem might describe football by having its words arranged in the shape of a ball. Or it might describe pizza with related words or sentences written in the form of a triangle, like a slice of pizza, as in this example:

Pizza is my favorite food.
I like to eat it every day.
It’s warm and cheesy.
I can’t get enough.
It’s so delicious.
Please give me
some pizza
now!

Cinquains

Cinquains are a great next step for upper primary students because they are one of the easiest poems to teach syllable counting. To write a cinquain, there are only two rules: 1) They are five lines long, and 2) the lines have two, four, six, eight, and two syllables, in that order.

Tip: An easy way to teach students how to count syllables is on your fingers. Read or say words out loud, and raise a finger for each syllable as you speak. For example, if you raise one finger for each syllable as you say, “I like to play football,” you should now be holding up six fingers.

To write a cinquain, have your students pick something they like, such as ice cream, and describe it, or how they feel about it, with two syllables on the first line, four on the second line, and so on, remembering to make their last line two syllables, like this:

Ice cream.
Cold and yummy.
It’s such a tasty treat
to have on hot summer days like
today.

Clerihews

One of the easiest rhyming poetic forms is the clerihew. Clerihews are fun and easy to write because they only have four rules:

1. They are four lines long.
2. The first line is a name, such as a person or fictional character.
3. The first two lines rhyme with each other, and the last two lines rhyme with each other. The first two lines should not rhyme with the last two lines.
4. They should be funny.

Because these are the only rules of a clerihew, students do not need to count syllables or worry about line length or rhythm.

To begin, have students select a name, such as the name of their favorite cartoon character, pet, favorite singer, etc. The first line of the poem can be just the name, or it can end with the name. For example, if I decided to write about a person named "Fred," the first line might be "My friend Fred" or "A man named Fred" or simply "Fred."

Tip: Not every word in English has other words that rhyme with it. If your student selects a name but can't find any rhymes for it, they will need to choose a different name. For example, the name "Frederick" has no single-word rhymes in English, but the name "Fred" has many.

Next, have students think of words that rhyme with the name. In this case, we could rhyme "bed," "head," or "red" at the end of the second line, like this:

*My friend Fred
Has a very large head.*

Because clerihews should be funny, the last step is to think of something funny to say about the character in the poem, like this:

*I find it strange that his giant head would contain
Such a small brain.*

Making It Fun

Having students read funny poems aloud is a super-fun classroom activity, and it is one of the best ways to help students overcome any fear they may have of speaking in public. Here are several ways to make poetry even more fun and engaging.

Poetry Theater

Poetry theater is a group activity where several students read a poem aloud and act out the story in the poem. You can have individual lines read by different students, or lines read by groups of students together.

For example, five students might read "I Found a Buried Treasure Map," with each student representing one character in the poem. The first student is the narrator who finds the treasure map and recites the first stanza. While he or she is reading, the map gets passed from student to student. When the "father" receives the map, he recites his lines of dialogue. After this, each student could recite one line of the poem in turn, with the final two lines being recited by all the students in unison.

Poetry Slams

A "poetry slam" is a poetry performance competition. Plan a date for your poetry slam, and encourage your students to memorize their favorite poem and prepare to act it out. They can use costumes, props, funny voices, and their best acting skills, with prizes for funniest performance, best costume, and so on.

Arts and Crafts

Another way to engage students with poetry is to have them create artwork and handicrafts to complement the poem they are working on. For example, if they are reading "We're Going to Learn to Build Robots," you might have them build their own robots out of tin cans, pipe cleaners, googly eyes, and other craft supplies. If they are reading "Polly the Painter," have them create their own renditions of what Polly's paintings might look like.



Poetry Throughout the School Year

Most poems for children can be read in less than a minute or two. This means that even when you are not teaching poetry writing, you can still share poems with your students without taking a lot of time.

I recommend sharing a new poem with your students at the beginning of each week and reading it a few more times throughout the week until they are ready for the next one.

You can find lots of funny, child-centered poems for use in your classes on my website:

<https://www.poetry4kids.com/>

By making poetry a regular part of your lessons throughout the school year, you will help your students gain confidence in their reading, writing, and speaking abilities.