The challenge with writing poetry about climate change is getting students to bring personal and universal issues together in a way that is detailed and fresh. This activity draws on Cape Farewell’s visual archive (online at www.capefarewell.com/switch) and encourages engagement with ecology through poetry.

In the past the men who went to sea to work lived in cramped conditions and were allowed only a small wooden container called a Ditty Box for all their personal possessions. In it they’d store keepsakes that reminded them of home – a lock of a child’s hair, a letter from a sweetheart. For these activities, we’ll use the idea of a Ditty Box to explore issues of climate change and the threats it poses to us: the loss of livelihoods, homes and the world we live in.

Seafaring and the oceans have changed beyond recognition. The ocean absorbs around 80% of the heat caused by climate change. Warmer waters sound great when you’re thinking about taking a swim, but the reality is bad news for the plants, people and animals that depend on the oceans. It’s not just fish that are under threat – the whole marine eco-system is in crisis as the sea ice melts, sea temperatures rise and the oceans become more acidic. Everything from algae through to coral, crabs, sea-birds and cod are affected.

Distribute the attached handouts to start the activity, and have the students write or draw three items that they would put in a Ditty Box of their own. Drawing can be a good way to stimulate thinking in a concrete manner and is helpful for those with English as a second language. Ask these students to name objects in their mother tongue and talk about whether the translation is literal or slightly different.

Stress that it doesn’t matter whether the items really ‘fit’ in the box. They should really mean something to them, so rather than things like phones or computer games, urge them to go for objects that provoke a memory or remind them of a particular person, pet, place or time. Have them write down detailed descriptions of their choices- space is given on the handout.

After the exercise, ask some students to share their descriptions and/or drawings.

The art of loss
Read Elizabeth Bishop’s poem ‘One Art’ together. The text can be found online at the brilliant Poetry Foundation website, in the section on Bishop here: www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/elizabeth-bishop.
Have students identify named objects, specific details that catch their attention and unusual language or phrases. Discuss what makes a list poem and look at how the list is constructed: is there a hierarchy in terms of size, value, importance of the objects? How does the poem end?

The poem is a **villanelle**, a form that uses repeated refrain. This device of using repetition is called **anaphora**: discuss what effect it creates in the poem. You can also get the students to identify the rhyme scheme.

**Create a poem**

Set up the writing task by asking the students to describe two items that they would put in a Ditty Box for the Earth. They should also choose one of the objects from their list of personal objects to include. They can then start drafting their poem about loss using these three choices; writing space is provided on the handout attached.

**Tips for poem building**

- Ban rhyme as this helps keep vocabulary and ideas fresh
- Ask students to include a phrase that is slang, or one you wouldn’t expect to find in a poem
- If appropriate, they can also include a word in another language for one of their objects. This empowers students with less English when they realize that poems can include words not everyone understands. Ask them to include only the foreign language word, so that their description is what identifies the object, not a translation.
- To emulate the villanelle ask students to include a repeated refrain
- Where possible, leave time for some class feedback and sharing of poems.

**Cape Farewell**

Cape Farewell (www.capefarewell.com) leads expeditions of artists, musicians, writers and scientists to places like the Arctic and the Amazon so they can see the effects of climate change close up and respond to it in their work.

**Young Poets Network**

The Poetry Society’s Young Poets Network (www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk) has worked with Cape Farewell on the SWITCH project (www.capefarewell.com/switch) aims to add the voices of the voices of young poets aged 11-18 to the conversation.
DITTY BOXES AND CLIMATE CHANGE

1. Fill your own Ditty Box
If you had to leave home, what would you put in your Ditty Box?
Draw a picture or write down three objects that you would keep in your Ditty Box.

Now write a detailed description of each one: (insert dotted lines for them to write longer descriptions; approx 3 or 4 lines for each)

A ......................................................................................................................................................................................................
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B ......................................................................................................................................................................................................
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C ......................................................................................................................................................................................................
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2: A Ditty Box for the earth
If the world was to end, what two concepts or objects would you want to preserve in a Ditty Box? Write a detailed description of each, so we can really ‘see’ what’s there. Be specific – if tuna fish will be lost, then tell us how that relates to you personally- you’d lose “tuna with cucumber in my sandwiches in my lunch box”.

A .................................................................................................................................................................................................................................
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B .................................................................................................................................................................................................................................
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3. Create your Ditty Box poem
Use one item from your personal Ditty Box and both items from your Earth Ditty Box, and draft a poem about what we might lose due to climate change below using these ideas. Try these tips for building your poem:

- Don’t use rhyme
- Use the villanelle form, with a repeated refrain
- Try using slang words or expressions, or words from other languages.

POET’S TIP
Keep it personal; your writing will be more interesting if you make the experience relate to your daily life.