

KEY STAGE	AGE
EYFS	3-5
KS1	5-7 ✓
KS2	7-11 ✓
KS3	11-14 ✓
KS4	14-16
KS5	16-18

AT A GLANCE

- READING
- WRITING
- LITERACY
- CONFIDENCE
- SOUND

.....
POETRYCLASS: FRESH IDEAS FOR POETRY LEARNING FROM THE POETRY SOCIETY

TEACHING THE READING OF POETRY: TIPS FROM A POET

BY MANDY COE

Poetry plays a powerful role in increasing students' literacy skills in schools. But unless literacy starts with goosebumps, laughter, or contemplation, none of us would bother to read anything but bills, instructions and road signs. When teaching the reading of poetry the guide words should be: immersion, leisure, enjoyment, fun.

As an art form, poetry has sustained and nourished us for thousands of years. Throughout recorded history people from all cultures have used poems to share the full range of human experience. By associating poetry with pleasure we allow young people to make a connection with the minds of these thinkers and continue this tradition. The following article explores ways in which primary and secondary school teachers can teach the reading of poetry. It looks at resources, makes connections between the writer and reader and suggests practical activities.

The reader as writer

Understanding an artist's technique or process can enhance our appreciation of art. With a painting this might mean considering the use of light or colour; in music it might involve identifying melody or lyrics. But with poetry the reader is already part of the process. The poet's canvas, their musical instrument, is you: the reader; the speaker-aloud. Poets are lost without you. When teaching the reading of poetry, this is a good place to start - from a position of power. In stressing that readers work alongside the poet to discover the poem, teachers will be challenging the belief that experiencing art is an act of consumption rather than one of creation. This approach also invites students to see the poem as provisional, still growing, thereby encouraging rereading.

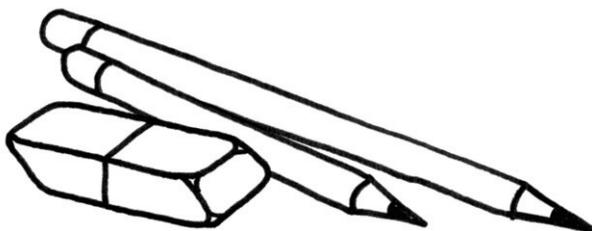
KEY IDEA 1: READER AS WRITER

Remember (and tell students):

- the reader works alongside the poet to unfold the poem
- a poem continues to grow even after publication
- give a poem time: poets structure their poems so they will reveal a little more with each reading
- every reader responds to a poem in a different way

Teacher as role model

Many adults have mixed feelings about poetry. Most of us were not raised being read *Beowulf* at bed time and at school poetry was too often presented as a dry and inaccessible subject. It is no wonder that some of us

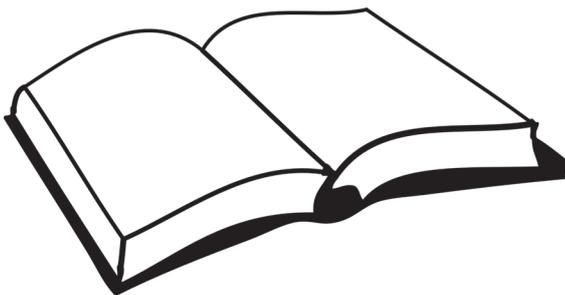


feel that poetry is like an optician's eye chart: a jumble of text designed to test us. "I don't get it" is not an unfamiliar response. But poets are not deliberately hiding the 'it'. A poem is more like a series of questions, a close up of a leaf, or a glimpse of a slightly familiar face. It takes a while for things to come into focus and each reader will find a different 'it' each time they revisit the poem. That is what reading poetry is about: you don't get it – you discover it.

I visit schools as a guest author and like many poets have seen first-hand how a teacher's attitude can influence their pupils. Young people are nearly always keen to write poetry whether their teacher's approach to it is one of pleasure or indifference. But the teacher who "doesn't get it" passes on a reluctance that is hard to shift. This is the class where the word poetry brings a tiny shiver.

How are we to break this chain? I think it is already being broken. Initiatives like Poetryclass INSET sessions, where poets work with teachers through creative writing, indicate how schools now recognise the need for teachers to be given time to explore and celebrate their own creativity. Few writers-in-schools residencies take place in the UK now without INSET time being built in.

Whether you are a teacher who is passionate about poetry or you still feel a little uncertain, here are a few things to discuss with other teachers. These points explore one of the most crucial resources in the classroom when teaching the reading of poetry – you.



KEY IDEA 2: YOU AND POETRY

Ask yourself these questions about poetry:

- the reader works alongside the poet to unfold
- what do you tell yourself if a poem is not clear at first reading?
- what elements of poetry do you enjoy?
- how do you use poetry in your life?
- Can you recall a time when a poem had a particular resonance for you or your family?
- which of the following classroom activities do you feel are most helpful in teaching the reading of poetry?
 - o reading poetry (quietly or aloud)
 - o writing poems
 - o sharing attitudes and responses to poetry
 - o understanding the structures, techniques and thinking behind specific poems
- can you identify two things that would give you practical assistance in teaching the reading of poetry?

If young people are to develop a confident approach to poetry they need to see a positive model of how adults read poetry. Hearing a teacher read a poem out loud (although this is wonderful in itself) is not always enough. Modelling the reading of poetry means that the normally hidden inner dialogue of a reader is made apparent by being spoken aloud.

Reading poetry: a model

Rather than discovering a set of correct answers or identifying poetic techniques, this activity is about showing the pleasures of reflection, question and discovery. Students should see reading poetry as a leisure-time activity. Normally, there are strict demands made on the teacher: analysing teaching material before it is presented to the class, and working within a hierarchical framework of established meanings. In this instance those demands are temporarily set aside, because the modelling of reading poetry is about being tentative, changing your mind, making subjective connections and enjoying the pleasures of imagery, language and form.

KEY IDEA 3: MODELLING READING POETRY

Try reading a poem in class, and follow these points:

- have photocopies of the poems for students to share
- use open comments to help unfold a poem:
 - “That reminds me of...”
 - “That made me see...”
 - “What puzzles me is...”
 - “I wonder if...”
 - “It made me think...”
 - “Tell me...”
- be honest: if you don't understand a poem, ask pupils what they think
- model how your connection with the text continues after the book is closed. Have certain ideas and lines stayed with you? Have you been thinking about the poem at home, or whilst travelling to school?

Coleridge said that “Poetry gives the most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.” Indeed some subjective resonances you might have with a poem can be made less powerful through too much objective dissection. To avoid overanalysing the text, give yourself a time factor: a stopwatch or alarm clock. If it interrupts a good discussion, let students know, that by request, the poem can be revisited next time.

Let some of the poems be unfamiliar. If the poems are new, the whole class is on an equal footing. As a teacher you are a powerful figure and your opinions or interpretations will carry weight. Adults have broader frameworks with which to interpret poems but young people's insights can be just as perceptive. This initial modelling is to signal your role as a gatekeeper and listener and should eventually lead to group readings, readings in pairs and even readers' groups. This will be discussed later on.

Line breaks and stanzas

A poem comes into the world in two ways: how it looks on the page and how it sounds out loud. In contemporary poetry, sentences often run across lines and verses (enjambment). But if lines do not end on a rhyme, a comma or full stop, how are they to be read aloud?

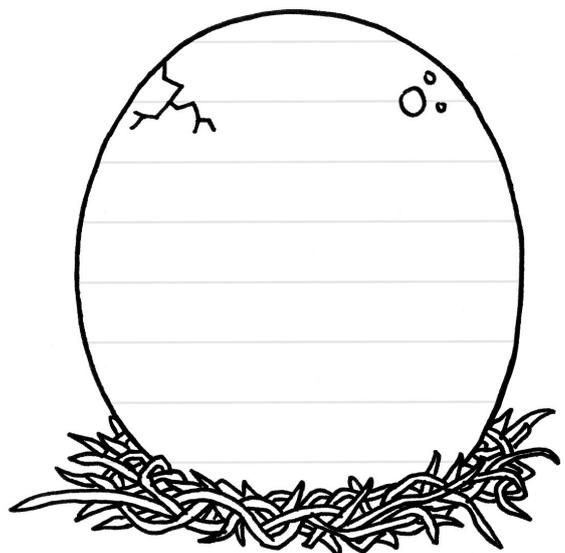
Rather than pausing at the end of each line you should let the poem's punctuation be your guide. Don't worry if you hesitate on the first reading – even poets stumble when reading a new poem.

Poets use line lengths and verse-shapes to enhance sound and rhythm or deliberately work against them to create tension. For the eye, a poem will use the white space on the page as a way of altering pace as well as creating thought-units within or across lines and verses.

KEY IDEA 4: LINE BREAKS AND STANZAS

Explore the shape of the poem using this activity:

- take a poem and remove all the lines and stanza breaks
- present it as one solid paragraph of prose and read it aloud with the class
- compare it with the original poem, read it again. Discuss what changes the spaces and shape make to the piece
- (N.B. Try Pulitzer Prize winner, Gwendolyn Brooks's poem, 'We Real Cool'. The poem is nearly 50 years old, but it is as vibrant and relevant today as on the day she wrote it. Another example of this activity, this time using war poetry, can be found in poet Roshan Doug's Poetryclass resource [Rhythm and pace in poetry.](#))



Shared reading

When reading alongside the students, encourage them to try reading aloud in their heads. A young person might not be aware if they are speed-reading (skimming). Discuss how they read. Ask them to read the poem silently but more slowly – pronouncing the words to themselves as if they were rehearsing it to be read aloud. Think of it as music. If you read notated music you can either say to yourself: “A flat, B sharp, crochet, F sharp major”, or you can read it by hearing the tune.

Poetry books are invaluable resources for shared reading because it is possible to:

- start reading anywhere in the book
- read more slowly and discuss imagery and ideas
- read the book many times
- read aloud
- listen for sounds and rhythms
- enjoy the shapes of poems and (often) illustrations

KEY IDEA 5: SHARED READING

Open a discussion about approaches to reading:

- discuss how students read
- ask students to read to each other in groups or in pairs
- ask them to add thoughts (questions, juicy bits etc) to the page (or comment on displayed poems) with post-it notes
- value listening
- give the poem time
- give the students time
- value everyone’s opinion
- reinforce the broad spectrum of poetry subject matter by using poetry elsewhere in the curriculum such as poems on science, history, geography, music or art

The poet Simon Armitage says, “The best literature, I feel, is a kind of written-down talk. Not talk as might come from between the teeth, but a sort of imagined talk.” (*Short and Sweet*, Faber and Faber 1999).

Although this observation is more about writing than reading it does have a connection: voice. In teaching the reading of poetry we uncover just how many elements of poetry – rhythms, rhyme, the writer’s voice – shine only when the text is viewed as speech.

Building a library and reading groups

There are many wonderful single-author collections and poetry anthologies for children and young people. [The Poetry Society Education team](#) or the staff at the [Poetry Library](#) are always happy to help if you’re stuck for ideas of which books might work for you. Build a class-library of favourite poems. Make a folder and fill it with poems brought from home or the school library. Include poetry written by the students. The poems can then be illustrated and compiled according to theme or mood. Teachers should contribute poems too – ones remembered from childhood as well as poems they enjoy now, or even their own creations. Do not be restricted to poems for children. A teacher sharing a favourite poem is modelling the role poetry can play in your life – not just that particular piece of text.

KEY IDEA 6: BUILDING A LIBRARY AND READING GROUPS

Tips to make your classroom a poetry classroom:

- ensure your class has at least 6 poetry books that remain in your class and can be read and borrowed
- take a fresh look at school library stock and make links with your public library
- build reading poems into the class routine
- reward poetry readers! Children who borrow the most poetry books in a term can be given a readers award by the school library
- form a poetry club in the class or library

A poetry club can read poems, write poems, write to poets (via websites and publishers). They can write reviews, make displays and form an advisory group to select poetry for assembly. If they have internet access there are some fabulous websites where children and young people can engage with poetry. The Poetry Society has some useful lists of websites: [general poetry links](#) and [education-related links](#). It also runs a website for young adults called [Young Poets Network](#).

The right poems for the right age-group

“While there are some good poems which are only for adults, because they presuppose adult experience in their readers, there are no good poems which are only for children.” (W.H. Auden)

Of course there are poems written just for children, but as Mr Auden says, the good ones will give pleasure to children and adults. You will have some input in presenting a wide range of poetry, but your students will be the guide. Younger pupils do adore a dose of rhyme, rudeness and the ridiculous, and older pupils can rebel against all things perceived as ‘childish’. But this is not an absolute. I regularly use adult poetry with young children.

As a child, I saw the library as a refuge and so read poetry indiscriminately. It wasn’t until I was given a children’s poetry book at the age of 13 that I had any idea there was such a thing as children’s poetry. Consequently, most of the poems I read, I experienced as a vital message told in another language. I remember reading Siegfried Sassoon’s poem, ‘Everybody Sang’:

Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on – on –
and out of sight.



Siegfried Sassoon by George Charles Beresford (1915).

I was haunted by those lines and knew there was something important to be understood and that one day I would. As a result I avoid matching poems to age groups too tightly. It would be sad to deny a young person the chance to read a poem they don’t quite understand, because this would be denying them the realisation – a year or two on – that they do. Just as the pencilled lines on a doorframe show a child’s growth in height, these poems can be used to mark our growth in relation to ideas and use of language.

Access live literature

In reading a poem on the page you will discover things like heightened language and metaphor and imagery, but in reading it aloud you will notice that the poet, through using alliteration, assonance, consonance or rhyme, chooses words that challenge your tongue, teeth and breath in a surprisingly physical way.

By creating “memorable speech” as Auden put it, the poem delights even the youngest of children with nursery rhymes, playground chants, dipping games, jingles and songs. Live literature celebrates this and performance poetry is a vibrant element of today’s popular culture. Most cities in the UK have venues where poetry is regularly shared in public. Guest spots will feature well known contemporary poets reading alongside local writers. This is a great opportunity for teachers to see first-hand the range of poetry out there, and the variety of ways a poem can be performed.

KEY IDEA 7: ACCESS LIVE LITERATURE

Try out some of these ways to see and hear poetry:

- take your students to a poetry reading. Some LEA literature events specifically involve readings from poets included in the curriculum, or keep an eye on listings for local theatres for readings by visiting poets
- organise a poetry reading in your school (the Poetry Society’s Poets in Schools scheme can help with this)
- listen to recordings of poets reading and discussing their work at The Poetry Archive
- the former US Poet Laureate, Billy Collins launched a programme called Poetry 180. This site provides one poem for each day of the school year (suitable for secondary students). It also has information on how to read aloud as well as featuring input from pupils.

Writer as reader

Curriculum requirements in secondary education leave little space for creative writing. This imbalance between critical and creative writing is regrettable. The knowledge gained through writing poems gives valuable insight into the more theoretical aspects of poetry. Being asked to appreciate poetry without having an opportunity of writing it is like reading recipes without tasting the food.

The benefits of writing poetry can have a huge impact on students, teachers and the school in general. If you want help with writing poetry in the school, invite a guest poet to read alongside the students, run workshops or deliver INSET. The Poetry Society and the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE) have created databases where you can find poets experienced in working in schools.

KEY IDEA 8: WRITER AS READER

Consider these ways to ensure your students' creative writing is shared and valued:

- invite a poet to visit your school
- display students' poems
- hold a reading of students' work in your class/school
- publish an anthology, or post poems on the school's website
- shrink poems on the computer and copy them on to letters to parents
- ask your school or public library to host a display

Some useful resources

- Poetry Society: www.poetrysociety.org.uk
- Poetryclass webpages: www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/education/poetryclasshome
- Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award: www.foyleyoungpoets.org
- Young Poets Network: www.youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk
- The Poetry Archive: www.poetryarchive.org
- Poetry 180: www.loc.gov/poetry/180/
- NAWE (directory of writers): www.nawe.co.uk/professional-directory.html

Mandy Coe writes poetry for adults and children. Her book, Our thoughts are bees: Writers Working with Schools (Wordplay Press, 2005) is co-authored with Jean Sprackland and can be seen at www.wordplaypress.com

