

Sailing the Craft of Children's Poetry/J. PATRICK LEWIS

Poetry in the Inuit (Eskimo) language means “to breathe.”

Haiku in Japanese means “one breath.”

What is Poetry?

Words in tuneful order. (William Wordsworth)

A momentary stay against confusion. (Robert Frost)

Poetry is life distilled. . .and life isn't always nice or proper or normal or happy or smooth. (Gwendolyn Brooks)

Beautiful speech. (William Cole)

When I make a word do a lot of work like that, I always pay it extra. (Humpty Dumpty)

If a man is trying to get culture, he better get poetry first. (Ezra Pound)

A poet is perhaps someone who can remain quiet enough to listen to, and notate, the strange, rhythmic voices that are within all of us. (Roger McGough)

A great poet is someone who, standing out in a lifetime of thunderstorms, gets struck by lightning once or twice. A good poet is someone who gets struck by lightning five or six times. (Randall Jarrell)

Real frogs in imaginary gardens. (Marianne Moore)

If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways to know it. Is there any other way? (Emily Dickinson)

I don't know what poetry is, but I know it when I hear it. (Lucille Clifton)

Poetry without even a ghost of formal metrics is just a jumble of words dumped on the page. (John Updike)

Writing poetry in free verse is like playing tennis with the net down. (Robert Frost)

Metrical poetry is ultimately allied to song, and I like the connection. Free verse is ultimately allied to conversation, and I like that connection too. Not many people can mix the two. (Thom Gunn)

Ear candy. (J. Patrick Lewis)

A blind date with enchantment. (J. Patrick Lewis)

Poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry. (Mary Oliver)

The first man to compare the cheeks of a girl to a rose [said Salvadore Dali] was obviously a poet; the first to repeat it was possibly an idiot.

Ezra Pound's advice to American poets: Make it new.

Introducing Poetry to Children

Probably their earliest exposure to poetry comes when children have nursery rhymes read to them. Children master their first words and phrases with a pulse, an intensity that is closer to song than to common speech, as Norma Farber once said. So it's no surprise that most children associate poetry with rhyming.

My first—and strongest—suggestion, however, is that children be discouraged from writing in rhyme. As teachers, we want to lean toward their strengths, not their weaknesses, and rhyming is the major weakness of young would-be poets.

Encourage free verse. If children develop a strong interest in and sense of poetry, beyond writing the occasional verse, then they can practice rhyming later on. As T.S. Eliot said of the naming of cats, I like to say of rhyming: "It's is not one of your holiday games." Bad rhymes are a penny a pound; good rhymes are priceless. This does not mean that children should not have rhyming poems read to them!. Sound is every bit as important as sense (and even more important, in the case of nonsense rhymes). So let a hundred flowers bloom: Expose kids to every variety of poetry you come across--and on any topic. Remember: there is no subject about which a poem cannot be written.

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HAIKU:

Let's begin with the Japanese haiku, since it is a (deceptively) simple poetic form. Traditionally, haiku, which emphasized nature, had 17 syllables in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables to a line. [Read the one-page introduction to Black Swan/White Crow.] Today, haiku masters writing in English are accustomed to using as few as nine syllables, sometimes in one, two, four or more lines. In other words, almost anything goes in haiku writing. A fourth-grader wondered why I had used 5-6-5 syllables in one of my Black Swan/White Crow haiku. I explained that you must first learn the rules. After that you are allowed to break them.

Writing a haiku
in seventeen syllables
is very diffic-

Listen...somewhere
a wolf is eating
a syllable of wind

Peacock, my boy,
a hundred eyes
are watching you!

A spider yo-yos
down August to a hemlock's
petalworth of shade

The velvet hush of evening
purples Willow Marsh. . .
cicada gossip!

Noon buckles the plains--
Thunderrunner and Stick-tree
melting away

A good haiku captures a single moment in time. To begin, have students stick to the 17-syllable count. They can vary the length later. Ask them to think about something they saw only once in their lives, something that stuck with them, that they can remember as if it happened just this morning. Suggest that they take a picture of that event/object, but only with the camera of their words. It doesn't matter that their first (or last!) efforts won't be the equal of Basho, Buson or Issa—three of the greatest Japanese haiku masters. What matters, as in all writing, is that they get something down on paper. Once there—on paper—they can continue to play with the words until they are satisfied that they can't make the poem any better.

Good writing—poetry or prose—depends upon the muscle of strong verbs, unexpected verbs, verbs that sing with metaphor and simile. As the poet John Berryman once said, "I

verbed for 40 years.” Adjectives and adverbs are often mere fat, which most of us would like to shed.

A metaphor is simply a way of comparing one thing with another; a simile does the same thing with the use of “like” or “as.”

A child’s verbal/imaginative skill manifests itself most often in the creation of unusual metaphors and similes, which is what we mean by the remark “Kids say the darnedest things.” By the age of 11 or so, children gradually lose this uncanny sense, which is the envy of all grown-up poets. So it is especially important in K-5 classes to encourage this skill. Haiku is a useful poetic form for doing just that. A haiku is short, succinct, and it forces the poet to get rid of all excess words and to compress his/her rambling thoughts into a single, striking image.

Note: In all the exercises that follow, pay little attention to students’ misspellings and grammatical errors. The idea is to get them writing, not to bring them up short with discouragement at each step along the way. Rewriting, as vitally important as it is, can come later.

EXERCISE: Ask students to complete the following phrases (without rhyming). Make up your own phrases/sentences students could complete. Or have children make up their own.

“Love is a giant. . .”

“Doing math homework is like. . .”

“A spider on water is like. . .”

“. . . is like muscles stretched taut over the bone.”

“Spring is. . .”

“Rock-and-roll reminds me of. . .”

One way of devising metaphors is by using **PERSONIFICATION**, the assigning of human or animate qualities to something that is inanimate. For example: “Spring wings into/the backyard, ready to play/tug-of-worm.” I titled this haiku “Robin,” which really was unnecessary. Or Lilian Moore’s lovely line about foghorns: “I thought I heard the city/crying in its sleep.” Or James Wright on waves: “I bowed my head, and heard the sea far off/washing its hands.” Or the incomparable Emily Dickinson: “It was not Night, for all the Bells/Put out their Tongues, for Noon.”

EXERCISE: Metaphoric verbs can be particularly powerful, especially when they use personification. Make up sentences that include simple “to be” verb forms (is/will be/would have been). Then ask students to substitute stronger, unusual verbs for the “to be” verb. For example,

“She spooned the afternoon into her coffee.” (Donald Hall)

Question: What does that image suggest to you? Was the woman simply sitting there staring at nothing, remembering something beautiful/sad, wishing for something grand, regretting a chance missed?

“The wind stood up and gave a shout.” (James Stephens)

Question: Can you improve on “stood up and gave a shout?”

“I never knew that wind could wrinkle water so.” (Lilian Moore)

“A bee/staggers out/of the peony.” (Basho)

Question: Why “staggers”? Isn’t that the perfect verb here?

“Snow bucketed down from the sky.” (J. Patrick Lewis)

“A pumpkin sun Van Goghed the shocks of hay,” (J. Patrick Lewis)

Substitute stronger verbs for the obvious ones below and then add a metaphor/simile:

“The sun goes down (like). . .”

“Skunks smell (like). . .”

“The Queen was in the palace. . .”

“The wind blew. . .”

“His heart was broken (like). . .”

“My mom laughed (like). . .”

EXERCISE: Colors are terrific poem-starters and metaphor makers. Ask students to choose a color, or have them draw the name of a color from a hat. Then encourage them to write down whatever associations come to mind.

VIOLET IS

my cat’s tongue
lavender out on a holiday
blush pears
bruised peaches
pain gone away
Earth from six miles high
the color of dreams after midnight
the afternoon glancing off a grackle’s back
the flower that bears her name

THE TASTE OF PURPLE

Purple is the color
That your tongue can tell by shape
Go ahead and taste the color purple--
Have a grape.

EXERCISE: Show students weird, unusual, seemingly indecipherable photographs. Ask them to write a poem about what they see. . One teacher I know had her students writing poems to photographs. She called it PHOETRY. Example: Jane Yolen and Jason Stemple’s ONCE UPON ICE (Boyd’s Mill: Wordsong) used a competition among children’s poets for the poems in this book. Which was a fine idea to generate the best work, but is generally not a good idea in the classroom, in my opinion, because it pits one student’s poem against another. And writing poems should not be a test between school friends. That’s why I am reluctant to endorse poetry contests or poetry competitions.

EXERCISE: Here’s a “group poetry” suggestion for teachers who have a difficult time getting students started on a poem, which can be an intimidating task. Tell the class of, say, 20 that you would like to write a 20-line poem. Ask for a volunteer to write just the first line of a poem on any subject at all. The only condition is that the student, and every one thereafter, must be willing to give the line away to the next student. Ask the class what kind of poem they imagine will come from that first line (happy, sad, angry, nature poem, love poem?). If all that is required of the student is to write one line, the task of poem-making will seem less imposing.

SHAPE POEM:

Children are extremely visual, which is why shape poems are an exciting avenue for them to explore. It’s impossible to make great claims for shape poems, apart from their visual cleverness. But it’s the aspect of word play that students find, well, playful—and sets them to thinking.

“A Turtle is a giant hurdle” is not an inspired rhyme. But separate the letters in the word “giant” like so: gi a n t. Make a hump of the word “giant” over a picture of the turtle’s back. Draw a picture of an ant climbing over the “hurdle” of the shell. Voila! A shape poem.

“The day is cold, the earth is mud, but don’t let anything stop you, bud!” This is another shape poem of mine called “First Burst of Spring.” There’s not much to it, until you

draw in the earth, and have all the letters except the last three running along the ground. The last three letters of the poem stand up vertically, as the bud! of a spring's first flower would do.

EXERCISE: Have students use stencils or clip art to put various shapes of animals/objects on paper. What words do these images inspire?

See my interview in the July/August 1998 issue of CREATIVE CLASSROOM Magazine and my collection of shape poems, DOODLE DANDIES (Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, Fall 1998).

EXERCISE: Encourage older children (4-5th graders) to keep a dream notebook. The entries need not be full-blown dreams that go on and on, though they can be if the child is so moved. But dream fragments are enough. When they return to their notebooks later, they may discover there the idea for a poem or the start of a poem.

CINQUAIN:

A cinquain is either a five-line stanza or a poem in five lines. Adelaide Crapsey used the word to name a verse form she invented. The cinquain has five lines, with 2, 4, 6, 8 and 2 syllables, respectively. This is another strict form that students would do well to practice. It's the American alternative to the haiku.

Remember this about the cinquain:

- 1) It's tempting to add extra words, especially those fat adjectives, and to wax eloquently about "life." Encourage young writers to stick with nouns and verbs as much as possible, and, as in the haiku, to capture the moment.
- 2) The cinquain should move toward a climax. The second-to-last line has a sense of surprise in it; the last line carries the surprise itself. Here is Ms. Crapsey's most famous cinquain:

TRIAD

These be
Three silent things:
The falling snow. . .the hour
Before the dawn. . .the mouth of one
Just dead. Adelaide Crapsey

LIST POEM:

The list poem is a very old form of poetry. It consists of an itemization of things. List poems can be rhymed or unrhymed. Children might be encouraged to use this very effective form because it gives them free rein to describe their personal experiences. Or to enumerate their likes and dislikes; the qualities they admire in their friends/neighbors; what's wrong/right with watching television; etc. Ask students to finish these lines with a list poem:

I'm afraid of. . .
People apologize for. . .
What I discovered (at the movies/in church/at my grandmother's). . .

INSTRUCTIONS FOUND AFTER THE FLOOD

Let the red fox quicken the seasons.
Let the zebra buck and clatter in the cage of his skin.
Leave the glass lagoons to the blue heron, whose eye is steady.
Let jungles whisper jaguar, whose paw is velvet.
Let the worm explore the globe, his apple.
Let the spider embroider the air.
Let tongue and belly be called reptile.
Let the bat acrobats tumble till dawn.
Let the lowly slug pearl the footpaths of Asia Minor.
Let seagulls snow down the harbors of the East.
Let the panther surround the quiet panic she has made.
Let the hippos squat and the antelope lope.
Let the rhino bully the bush.
Let the turtle be.
Let the snail nod in the hush of her mushroom room.
Leave the deserts to the one- and the two-humped emperors.
Let the black kite brown the morning mustard fields.
Leave afternoons for music, the bees drilling in the lindens.
Let owls be your night lanterns, geese your compass,
skunks your caution.

(from my The Boat of Many Rooms)

MASK POEM

Assume you are someone or something else and tell about yourself in words. I.e., wear a mask. Children “pretend” in this way all the time, so it’s a natural and comfortable form for them to try. Begin with a first line and ask students to finish the thought:

“It’s easy to be a butterfly. . .”
“I dreamed I was a tornado heading for Oklahoma. . .”
“My father woke up this morning as a giant beetle. . .”
“Hello, hello, I am a street light. . .”

THE HORNED OWL’S STORY

I and Lantern Eye,
my book-mad mate,
stay up late
re-reading
The Field Mouse’s
Guide to Midnight,
blinking back the
w o n d e r
of wee words
scampering silently
across a page of
natural delight.
Wind wraps itself
around the ringing
of a bell.

A STREETLIGHT IN JULY

I am the Light on Baker Street,
The Beacon Club where insects meet.

My customers stay out all night--
Moths and mosquitoes hanging tight

Around the suffocating heat
Of Beacon Club on Baker Street.

High fliers, fluttering about
Too carelessly, can get burned out

At Beacon Club, my all-night dive,
Where Bugs would die to stay alive.
(from my The Little Buggers)

Or was it just
the song of night?
I couldn't tell.

APOSTROPHE POEM

How often do children find themselves talking to someone or something that can't talk back? An uncooperative bicycle, a cozy doll, spilled milk? If you write a poem in a voice that addresses something that cannot answer back, this is an apostrophe poem. Children talk, most often when they are alone, in an apostrophe voice, speaking to the Moon, a mouse, a blade of grass, or even an absent human. So let that be the start of a poem. Ask them to speak (and write) to something that can't reply.

SEA, WHO ARE YOU?

A quilt of blue on blue?
An ocean in disguise?
An endless mirror to
The self-important skies?
The city of the strange,
The country of the deep?
The wind's first practice range?
The secret seagulls keep?
The home to buried hills?
Oh what's a mystery for?
An empire that builds
Gold borders on a shore.

WHO IS THE FLEA?

Who is the flea that barks the dog?
Who is the bee that weeps the boy?
Who is the bird that blues the sky?
Who is the moth that burns the light?
Who is the hawk corrects the wind?
Who is the worm connects the field?
Who is the ant that fields the day?
Who is the bat that grows the night?

ACROSTIC POEM

The basic acrostic is a poem in which the first letters of the lines, read downwards, form a word, phrase or sentence. In younger grades, they might begin with individual words:

Libraries
Are
Necessary
Gardens,
Unsurpassed
At
Growing
Excitement

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Spain dispatched three ships
Across the Atlantic on a
Navigator's hopeless dream of
Traveling westward to Asia.
All dreams end in surprise.

Morning, October 12, 1492
Ahoy! In the Bahamas, he had
Reached the wilder shores of
Imagination, lost in the future,
Anchored at the far end of destiny.

Try to avoid simple listings of words, which encourages unthinking responses. For older grades, double acrostics are more demanding:

Many times **I**
Yelled across the cosmo**S**

Not knowing to who**M**
And/or what everlasting top banana**A**
Men had sought in fa**R**
Eternit**Y**. (Ron Padgett)

To begin, write the chosen word(s) vertically, then go back and fill out the lines, using as many words as you like. Students might want to try it by using their own names. The acrostic is good for developing mental and verbal agility, especially when written at top speed. But try not to use this form as an exercise for simply listing adjectives.

EXERCISE: Write a short, skinny poem. So skinny that it must fit on a bookmark. Sign it. Xerox it on heavier stock paper. Laminate it. Keep it in whatever book you are currently reading.

EXERCISE: Write a brief description of yourself for use on a baseball card-sized poem, but call it an Author's Card Poem. Include height, weight, favorite book, favorite saying, hobbies, etc. Laminate it. Show it around.

SUGGESTION: Every child should read or have read to him/her at least one poem each day. One way of doing this, if it is not already being done at your school, is to ask students, by class or grade, to read a POEM-A-DAY on the school intercom when announcements are being read in the morning. Or ask for "poetry people"—volunteers who would be willing to read a poem regularly on your school's Morning News. The volunteers could include students, teachers, administrators, secretaries and custodial staff.

Better yet, whether you are teaching reading, social studies, math, science, or physical education, read to/with your students a poem a day. Make it a habit, make it an expectation for students, either at the beginning or at the end of the hour. Children don't gravitate to poetry automatically. This is the perfect way to introduce them to it, to get them to participate in it. Assign a day of the month to each student, and make it a requirement whereby s/he is responsible for bringing a poem to class. There are any number of math and science poems out there, probably in your own school library. Here's a math poem for the upper grades:

X AND Y

If I were X
And you were Y,
I'd stand by you
And . . . multiply.
And once the two
Of us were paired,
Why, they would call us
 XY^2 .

Have students read aloud the work of great/good poets. Since poetry affects the ear first, ask students to read/recite poems in front of the class. Don't let them mumble or read the poem rapidly. Pretend they are on stage. Encourage acting, whether it's a dramatic poem or a humorous poem. Demand enunciation.

EXERCISE: Learners shouldn't be afraid to IMITATE! Young pianists learn by practicing other peoples' work, so why not ask young poets do the same? Have students write out a poem or two—in a journal, if they keep one. You can get very "close" to a

poem by actually taking the time to write it out longhand and to see how it is put together. (I would also encourage children to memorize poems, but I know that's rather farfetched these days.)

EXERCISE: Ask students to choose a famous or infamous person—from history, science, sports, entertainment. Or encourage them to write about their favorite teacher (excluding present company) in a biographical poem. Encourage them to describe not only the obvious characteristics—physical features, brains, prowess—but to describe the person by describing an odd or unusual event/example of how s/he influenced the writer. Follow the first rule of character (and plot) development: Show, don't tell.

EXERCISE: Children seem to love riddles because they allow interaction with the listener. Let children try their hands at their own riddle poems. They will soon discover that writing riddles is no walk in the park. Encourage them to avoid the outlandishly silly. Emphasize that a good riddle depends upon its cleverness, not its silliness.

HUMBLE SUGGESTION: Read poetry yourself. The more you read, the greater infectiousness you will convey to your students—and the better you will be able to distinguish good poems from bad. Needless to add, mere publication is no guarantor of excellence or even mediocrity. Parents know only what is given to them by the market. The market is far from infallible. Teachers must bring discernment and discrimination if the cream is to rise.

Thanks so much for your time and attention.

A Few Books to Consider

Myra Cohn Livingston, POEM-MAKING (Margaret K. McElderry Books) hardback.

X.J. and Dorothy Kennedy, KNOCK AT A STAR: A CHILD'S INTRODUCTION TO POETRY (2nd edition, Little Brown), paperback.

Randall Jarrell, THE BAT POET (Collier Books), paperback.

Kenneth Koch, ROSE, WHERE DID YOU GET THAT RED? (Vintage) paperback.

_____, WISHES, LIES AND DREAMS: TEACHING CHILDREN TO WRITE POETRY (Vintage) paperback.

Paul Janeczko, POETRY FROM A TO Z (Orchard) hardback.

Stephen Dunning and William Stafford, GETTING THE KNACK: 20 POETRY WRITING EXERCISES (NCTE) paperback.

Carolyn Feller Bauer, THE POETRY BREAK (H.W. Wilson) hardback.

Nancy Larrick, LET'S DO A POEM: INTRODUCING POETRY TO CHILDREN (Delacorte).

PLEASE NOTE: If you are interested in an AUTHOR VISIT to your elementary school (K-5), library or literature conference,

- 1. Visit my website at www.jpatricklewis.com and**
- 2. Contact me at 440-247-0123 or Jplewis42@aol.com or sjplewis440@aol.com or info@jpatricklewis.com.**