Poetry in the Classroom: Developing Reading, Writing, Speaking and Thinking Skills

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In this workshop participants examine the following poetry activities:

• Assertions About Teaching Poetry  
• Memorizing & Reciting Poems  
• Composing & Publishing Poems  
• Reading & Interpreting Poems  
• The Teacher as Poet

Caution: For best results, adapt these poetry activities to your students, school and teaching style.
Overview
When poetry permeates the language arts curriculum, students develop their reading, writing, speaking and thinking skills. This workshop examines three interrelated activities that engage young adolescents: memorizing, interpreting, and composing poems.

Memorizing & Reciting Poems
Have students memorize poems and recite them in class during the year. Evaluate students on the basis of accuracy, expression, eye contact, poise, volume, pace, and overall presentation. For the first three recitations, provide a set of poems from which students can select verses to recite. Later in the year, have students select poems of their own to memorize and recite. Memorize and recite poems along with your students as a positive role model.

Composing Free Verse Poetry
Early in the school year, have students compose several free verse poems. Use examples created by former students as models for your students to emulate. Share your own drafts with students.

Reading & Interpreting Poems
Have students read and then interpret several poems using the OBQUIN method (OBserve, QUestion, INterpret).

Composing Poems
Over eight class periods, provide a different poetic model daily (rhymed couplet, haiku, etc.) and as homework ask students to compose two or three short poems based on the models presented. Typically, students will compose as many as twenty poems.

The Poetry Booklet
Once students have written a number of poems using a variety of forms, ask them to choose the ten best for their own poetry booklet. A foreword, explanations of selected poems, illustrations, and an “About the Author” enhance the booklet. Also, ask students to submit five of their best poems for a class anthology.

The Teacher as Poet
Teachers who consistently share their poetry, both rough drafts and polished pieces, provide powerful coaching for their students. Compose poems that celebrate special occasions during the year and that offer commentary on academic and school wide activities as well as current events. Remember, your students cannot be what they cannot see.

Adapt these Activities
Remember to adapt these activities to your students, your teaching style and your classroom setting.
Assertions About Teaching Poetry
created by Ross M. Burkhardt

• Students should be able to read, write, appreciate and understand poetry and be familiar with our poetic heritage.

• Every student is a poet and has poems she or he wants to create.

• Student poets are more invested in their poems when they select their own topics.

• When students regularly memorize, recite, interpret and compose poems, they become better at all four activities.

• Student poets are inspired by poetic models, particularly those created by classmates.

• Teachers who share their poems with students, both early drafts and polished pieces, provide powerful coaching.

• Student poets discover their voice when they read their poems aloud to peers.

• Student poets should publish regularly for audiences beyond the teacher.

• Writing poetry is a recursive process: invent, rehearse, draft, revise, edit, publish.

• Student poets consider audience, purpose and topic when they compose poems.

• Volume + Verse = Poetic fluency. Simply put, the more poems students write, and the more different forms of poetry in which they compose, the more fluent as poets they become.

Note: These poetry assertions and the classroom activities based on them are explained further in Using Poetry in the Classroom: Engaging Students in Learning by Ross M. Burkhardt (Rowman & Littlefield Education, 2006), available at either www.amle.org or www.rowmaneducation.com
Memorizing Poems - Suggested Guidelines

• Assign a poetry memorization during the first week of school. Allow five school days for students to memorize their poems.

• Discuss with your students the goals of memorizing poems, among which are:
  - developing memorization skills
  - enhancing public speaking skills
  - learning about our poetic heritage

• Provide students with several poems from which to choose the one to be memorized. Include poems used in your opening day presentation (“The Road Not Traveled,” by Robert Frost; “Opportunity” by Berton Braley). “Sea Fever” by John Masefield and “Ozymandius” by Percy Bysshe Shelley are also excellent choices.

• Four days before the first memorization, ask students to read each poem aloud in class and discuss briefly its meaning. Ask students which poems they selected; they like to know what their peers are doing.

• Three days before the memorization, post a Sign-Up sheet (p. 5) so that students can choose when they recite their poem. Assign a journal entry, “Learning My Poem,” in which students respond to the following questions (have this entry due the day before the recitation):
  - Which poem did you select to memorize? Why?
  - What does this poem mean to you?
  - What strategies are you using to memorize it?
  - What else do you have to say?

• Two days before the memorization, distribute the poetry evaluation form (p. 6) and discuss it with students. Make sure they understand the criteria on which they will be evaluated. Have students complete the top part of the form and turn it in before the end of class.

• The day before the first recitation, model appropriate and inappropriate recitation skills for your students. Take down the sign-up sheet, fill in names of any missing students, and have a pupil arrange the evaluation forms in order of sign-up.

• On Recitation Day, the teacher should recite first, setting a model of excellence.

• Share “C Fever” with students the day after the first poetry memorization.

• Memorization #2 - Offer several short poems from which students select a total of 16+ lines to memorize, not including titles and authors.

• Memorization #3 - Offer two long poems (16+ lines) and five short poems from which students select a total of 16+ lines to memorize, not including titles and authors.

• Journal entry after Memorization #3 - “Reciting Poems.” Students respond to these questions:
  - What strategies worked best when memorizing your poems? Explain.
  - What was hardest for you? Explain.
  - Which do you prefer and why -- one long poem or several short poems? Explain.
  - What else do you have to say about memorizing poems or anything else?

• Memorization #4 and beyond - Establish minimum standards for poem selection such as quality, number of lines, subject matter, degree of difficulty, etc. Then, students go to the library during class and find a published poem to memorize. They provide the teacher with a copy three days before the recitation date.

• Later in the year, select one or two poems for all students to memorize, such as “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus or “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost.

• Assign at least ten poetry recitations a year.

• Near the end of the year, ask students to reflect in a journal entry on the value of memorizing and reciting poetry.
### Poetry Sign-Up Form

**Memorization #______**

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Poetry Memorization Evaluation Form

Student _________________________  Period ____  Date _______ Mem. # ____
Title of poem ______________________________________________________
Author ___________________________________________________________

Recitation Evaluation Criteria

Accuracy:  

Expression:  

Eye contact

Poise:

Volume:

Pace:

Other comments:

Grade: ________
The First Day
by Ross M. Burkhardt

It's the first day.
In they come --
Some pausing hesitantly
At the door,
Wondering and waiting;
Others boldly asserting
Their presence
As they stride to seats.

Heads swivel,
Eyes contact the classroom:
Posters and pictures,
Multi-colored images
Meet curious glances.
Saving seats for friends,
Adjusting clean-cover notebooks
Filled with clean ruled sheets,
They sit, expectantly,
In crisp clothing.

For some, the boredom of August
Gone at last.
For some, the restraints of structure
Unwillingly accepted.
For most, an unexplored world awaiting.
New seats permit new perspectives,
New possibilities, new patterns.

The student asks:
"What does he expect of me?
What is this room all about?
Who is this teacher?"
The teacher asks:
"Who are these people?
What are they all about?
What do they expect of me?"

A simultaneously shared journey
Through days and months ahead
Beckons. But for now,
All is new and trembling
Because
It's the first day.

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Composed in 1980, The First Day enabled me to introduce myself as a poet to my students at the beginning of each school year.

Questions: What difference does reciting “The First Day” on Day One make?
What is introduced? What is gained?
C Fever
by Ross M. Burkhardt (with sincere apologies to John Masefield)

Note: Students improve over time as they do successive recitation. With this in mind, share the following poem the day after the first memorization.

My grade goes down to the C’s again, to the lowly C’s and the D’s, And all I ask is memory and an end to knocking knees. And the first line of the first verse and my knees now shaking And the second line and it’s getting worse and my voice now breaking.

My grade goes down to the C’s again for the call to recite a poem Is a clear call and a fearful call that sets my mouth afoam. And the clenched hands and the blank stare while I’m up here dying, And the missed word and the blown line and the fear of crying.

My grade goes down to the C’s again where the grades are below C level, To the bozo’s way and the mumbler’s way – recitations are works of the Devil! And all I ask is a straight face from a laughing poetry lover, and a quiet room and polite applause when the long task’s over

© Poems For All Occasions: 1980

The Teacher as Poet

• Create a poem that celebrates students on the first day of school, new beginnings, the promise of starting together on a ten month journey, and all that might happen ahead. Save all drafts. Read this poem to your students on Day One. A week later, introduce the concept of revision by sharing your drafts and the process you went through to create your introductory poem.

• When assigning poems as homework, write some along with your students. Save all of your drafts.

• Compose “occasional” poems for special occasions. Use familiar poems such as “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (Clement Clarke Moore) and reword them to include the names of your students:

  On Schappert, on Jackson, Garcia, Cantelmo,
  On Brickley, Fitzgerald, on Smith and Manino!

• Have special poems ready to share: “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (Frost) for the first snowfall; “Casey at the Bat” (Thayer) on baseballs’ opening day; “C Fever” (as above).

• Create and share with your students each Friday a poem that recycles the ideas and activities of the previous week. After a year or two, you will have a set of poems that speak to specific occasions (such as “The First Day”) and which can be used school year after school year.
Composing Free Verse Poetry

• This activity requires two class periods. First, distribute four “model” free verse poems (select the best of last year’s free verse poems and pass them off as “average”).

• Ask two students to read the same free verse poem aloud to the class. Then ask all students to read that poem silently three times, circling unfamiliar words or terms, underlining favorite images or sentences, and jotting notes in the margins.

• Discuss the poem with students. Give them complete freedom to express their interpretations. Then move on to another “model” free verse poem.

• After discussing all four poems, ask students to point out the common elements that all four poems share. Ask students to construct a definition of a free verse poem. Important: Do not use the term “free verse poetry” until after you have discussed all models provided to the students.

• As homework, ask students to compose two or three free verse poems on topics of their own choosing. Remind students to date, number, and save all drafts. Do this assignment along with your students.

• Assign a journal entry -- “Writing My Poems”:
  - What did you like best about writing free verse poems?
  - What was the hardest part of writing free verse poems?
  - Which of your free verse poems do you like best? Why?
  - What did you learn when composing free verse?
  - What else do you have to say?

• In class the next day, begin by asking students to share excerpts from their journal entries or to paraphrase what they wrote in their journals.

• Then, share a draft of one of your own free verse poems. Show students your revised drafts. Invite comments and suggestions for revision.

• Next, ask for a volunteer to read one of his/her free verse poems aloud. Be patient -- someone will raise his or her hand.

• As time allows, call on as many students as possible to share their own free verse poems. Often, once a student breaks the ice, others want to read their poems, and you may run out of time.

• As homework, ask students to revise one of their free verse poems. Remind them to save all drafts.

• Invite each student to select one poem to be published in a class anthology of free verse poetry.
Interpreting Poems - Suggested Guidelines

• As preparation for interpreting poems with your students, read *Love That Dog* by Sharon Creech (HarperCollins 2001), a delightful story about a boy who doesn’t like poetry and a teacher who won’t give up on him.

• Time required: five to six class periods. Select several appropriate poems and, on a daily basis, discuss and interpret one or two of them with your students.

• Have students prepare for a class discussion by using the OBQUIN approach (OBserve, QUestion, INterpret). In this approach, each student is given a copy of the poem. As homework, the student reads the poem completely through three times, then, in a journal entry:
  a) makes five observations about the poem;
  b) poses five questions about the poem, some of them based on their observations;
  c) offers five interpretations about the poem, responding to the questions raised.

You may find it useful to model three or four “OBQUIN” activities in class so that your students understand what is expected of them.

• A poem that you ask students to interpret might also be one of the poems that you assigned to students to memorize earlier in the year.

• Poetry speaks to different individuals in different ways. Use poems that resonate with you. Leaf through poetry anthologies and select verses that capture your interest, for whatever reasons.

Over the years, my eighth graders interpreted the following poems, some of which were used for their memorization assignments:

- “My Papa’s Waltz” by Theodore Roethke
- “Not in the Guidebooks” by Elizabeth Jennings
- “anyone lived in a pretty how town” by e.e. cummings
- “Signatures” by Candace Thurber Stevenson
- “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “The Great Figure” by William Carlos Williams
- “I Hear America Singing” by Walt Whitman
- “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll
- “Ozymandius” by Percy Bysshe Shelly
- “Because I could not stop for Death” and “Much Madness is divinest sense” by Emily Dickinson
- “Recollection” by Frances Cornford
- “Richard Corey” by Edward Arlington Robinson
- “Requiem” by Robert Louis Stevenson
- “Grass” by Carl Sandburg
- “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus
- “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes
Writing Poems - Suggested Guidelines

A Caution
Middle school students enjoy writing poetry. Even so, when I began our poetry writing unit, I did NOT say, “You are going to write 20 poems in the next eight days.” That would have been counterproductive. Rather, I began incrementally, sharing and discussing a different short poem each day for eight days, asking students to use the poems as models and create two or three poems “inspired” by each model as homework (and, of course, to save all drafts).

The Background
By this point in the year (January or later), students had already composed free verse; they had done several poetry recitations; I had shared a number of “occasional” poems with them. Thus, students were seeped in poetic forms, models and language by the time we began writing poems in earnest. This unit took ten class periods.

“The Red Wheelbarrow”
We began with this classic by William Carlos Williams. Students copied it from the chalkboard into their journals, we discussed it using an in-class OBQUIN approach, and the many student observations that arose in the discussion enabled them to compose poems that evening using “The Red Wheelbarrow” as a model. Because the poem captures a moment in time, we called it a “still photo” poem.

Other Models
The following day we used another Williams poem (“As the cat/climbed over . . .”), one we termed “slow-motion.” A third Williams poem, “The Great Figure,” was a model of a “fast action” poem. I presented list poems, haiku, rhymed couplets (Frost’s “The Circle Sits”), metaphor (Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”), and what I called “shattered shape” poems by Arnold Adoff from his book, *Eats*. After presenting eight different poetic models, I invited students to compose two more poems using any model previously presented, including free verse.

A Typical Class
Students shared the poems they had composed based on yesterday’s model (I shared my poems as well, ever the teacher as poet, often going first to break the ice). Then they turned in their homework. I presented another poetic model to them, we discussed the characteristics of that poem, and students had the remainder of the class to begin their homework for the following day – creating two or three poems based on the new model.

The Poetry Booklet
On Day Ten of the poetry writing unit, I returned all poems and assigned a poetry booklet. Each student had to select his or her ten best poems and compile them in a booklet (and include a foreword, illustrations and an “About the Author”). In addition, students submitted five of their best for the class anthology and three of their best for the school literary magazine.
After completing yesterday's homework assignment, you will have written two or more of each of the following kinds of poems during the past two weeks, for a total of at least eighteen (18) poems:

- "still photo" descriptive poems ("The Red Wheelbarrow")
- "slow-motion" poems ("As the cat / climbed over / the top . . . ")
- "fast action" poems ("I saw the figure five in gold")
- "list" poems ("I dreamed I was eating mackerel")
- shattered shapes ("all that counted was the dough")
- haiku (5-7-5)
- rhymed couplets ("The Secret sits in the middle and knows")
- free verse poems (as composed earlier in the year)

Your Three-Part Poetry Assignment:

Part A. Due Monday, March 18 - Create an individual booklet of your ten (10) best poems using at least five (5) of the forms listed above.

- write/word process each poem (with title) on a separate sheet of paper
- spelling and neatness count
- you can create brand new poems or revise old ones if you wish
- illustrations are optional and encouraged
- create an attractive cover with your name, date and booklet title
- include a one page introduction which explains:
  - what you learned by studying poems in class
  - your experience of writing twenty+ poems in eight days
  - your thoughts about writing poetry
  - an explanation of at least three (3) poems in your booklet
  (where your ideas came from, what worked, why you selected these poems, what inspired them, etc.)
  - anything else appropriate to an introduction in a poetry booklet

Part B. Due Tuesday, March 19 - Type up five (5) of your best poems. USE NO MORE THAN THREE SHEETS OF PAPER. Put your name on the first page. Spell check your work. These poems will be published in our team poetry anthology. You will have class time in the computer lab on Monday to type your five poems.

Part C. Due Tuesday, March 19 - Select your three (3) best poems for submission to our school literary magazine for possible inclusion. Each poem should be typed on a separate sheet of paper, titled, and have your name on it.
**Fibonacci Poetry** – A new form of poetry appeared recently in the New York *Times* – poems based on the Fibonacci sequence (as described in an article by Motoko Rich, 4/14/06). The creator of these poems, Gregory K. Pincus of Los Angeles, designed the form based on the familiar mathematical progression 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13 . . . (the next number in the sequence is the sum of the two previous numbers). Fibonacci poems, or “Fibs,” as Pincus calls them, can be about anything. The Fibonacci sequence determines the number of syllables in each line. Here’s an example:

Fibs:
poem
forms that
constrain, yet
liberate the muse
hiding inside any poet
(and, after all, aren’t we but fibbers in hiding?)

Students composing “fibs” need to pay attention to the strict numerical Fibonacci sequence. Pincus suggests using a six-line poem as the model (with a 1-1-2-3-5-8 syllable count per line).

What
kind
of poems
could your kids
create if they used
the Fibonacci sequence?

An ambitious student may want to attempt a 7- or 8-line poem, but warn them that the last lines may become problematic.

I
tried
to write
an eight-line
Fibonacci poem
but the very last line became
much longer than I wanted and I had trouble end-

**Remember:** When you create your own poetic models and share them with students, they become more engaged in the exercise.
List of Related Citations

“Poetry in the Classroom: Developing Reading Writing, Speaking and Thinking Skills”


Let us remember . . . that in the end we go to poetry for one reason, so that we might more fully inhabit our lives and the world in which we live them, and that if we more fully inhabit these things, we might be less apt to destroy both.

- Christian Wiman, Editor, Poetry