

# Using Poetry to Enrich Basic Literacy Instruction

**Project Read**  
**Continuing Education Class for Tutors**

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*San Francisco Public Library*

# Agenda

- Why use poetry to teach basic literacy skills?
- What makes something poetic?
- Forms of poetry.
- Developing basic skills through the use of poetry.
- Song lyrics as narrative poetry.
- Materials available to enhance instruction.



# Why use poetry to teach basic skills?

- Poetry often reflects the sound patterns of the language & can reinforce phonics & spelling.
- Poetry can enrich the reader by offering a new way to view everyday experiences.
- Poetry involves both visual and auditory learning styles.
- Poetry is easier to write for some learners.
- The poetry of song lyrics is everywhere in our lives.
- **Any other ideas?**

# What makes writing poetic?

- Form
- Imagery
- Rhythm
- Rhyme
- Other components of poetry?



# Forms of Poetry

## Alphabet Poems

A simple pattern to learn. Good for beginning level learners. This can be a fun way to express one's feelings about someone or something. Use the first letters of a name as a starting point.

**R**ader

**A**nimal lover

**N**ewlywed

**D**aily commuter

**Y**oung at heart

## List Poems

- Even easier to write than alphabet poems since a specific letter does not dictate the first word
- Start by naming the subject. Then brainstorm words that describe that subject (much like a mind map exercise.)

### Coyotes

Hounded, trapped, tortured, and killed

Desert-dwellers and scavengers

Surviving in a variety of locations

Singers in the night

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*Like a language experience story, tutors can use the text from the poem to teach basic reading skills. Remember the concept of "tutor words" and "learner words" from your tutor training?*

# The Cinquain

A five line poem that can be written about almost anything. It follows this very simple format...

Line 1: a one word title or name/subject (noun)

Line 2: two words describing the subject in line 1 (adjectives)

Line 3: three words describing the action of the subject (verbs)

Line 4: a sentence expressing a feeling you have about the subject

Line 5: repeats or renames the subject of line 1

Muni

necessary, problematic

lumbering, splashing, smelling

getting us there while we pay the price

Muni

Sandy

dedicated, loving

dancing, leaping, licking

growing old playfully

canine

- Cinquains can be a great reinforcement tool for teaching the parts of speech – verbs, adjectives, nouns, etc. But only introduce these concepts if your learner is ready.
- You can start with words already studied in your sessions—from flash cards, your learner’s word bank, vocabulary lists, or other sources. You might even divide the words into nouns, adjectives, and verbs before you begin.
- And like other types of form poetry, the detailed structure of the Cinquain can make it easier for some learners attempting to express feelings on paper for the first time.

# Haiku

- A two to four line poem that tries to capture an instant in time or a moment of insight.
- Probably best not to teach Haiku in the strict 5 – 7 – 5 syllable format which you might remember from school. This can be frustrating for adults who may be beginning level readers and writers and do not yet understand the concept of a syllable.
- Spending time reading Haiku by Japanese masters and others will make the form easier to understand and imitate.

*Untitled*  
*By Issa*

Grasshopper,  
Do not trample to pieces  
The pearls of bright dew

*Splinter*  
By Carl Sandburg

The voice of the last cricket  
Across the first frost  
Is one kind of good-bye  
It is so thin a splinter of singing

## Lyric Poetry

- This is what most people think of when they hear the word “poetry.” Typically, it is a very personal form of poetry expressing emotions and insights. It can be either rhymed or unrhymed and is usually fairly short (one or two pages.)
- These characteristics make lyric poetry very useful for adult literacy instruction. Learners can express any feeling or mood in an open “free verse” style--and length doesn't matter.
- The best way to make the learner comfortable writing poetry is to simply begin reading or listening to poetry together in your tutoring sessions. While doing this, look at the various ways poets use language and discuss what your learner notices.

# *Nothing Gold Can Stay*

By Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold.  
Her early leaf's a flower;  
But only so an hour.  
The leaf subsides to leaf.  
So Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day.  
Nothing gold can stay.

- What are the themes in Frost's poem?
- What sounds are repeated in the poem?
- What can we learn about the English language by examining Frost's rhyming patterns in this poem?
- How can you use the rhyming patterns found in poetry to teach basic skills in your tutoring sessions? This can create a great teaching opportunity.

# *The Tropics in New York*

By Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and gingerroot,  
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,  
And tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit,  
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs,

Set in the window, bringing memories  
Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills,  
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies  
In benediction over nunlike hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;  
A wave of longing through my body swept,  
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,  
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

- What rhyming patterns are evident in this poem?
- Based on these rhyming patterns, what teaching opportunities might this poem introduce?

## Writing Poetry

- Start by discussing a poem, read by your learner, which elicited strong emotions. For example, look at the poem *I, Too* by Langston Hughes.



## *I, Too*

By Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—  
I, too, am America.

- What is the theme of this poem?
- After a discussion of theme, you can encourage your learner to write his/her own feelings in a poem. For beginning level learners, you may want to start with a little mind mapping to generate a list of vocabulary words.

- Like other writing exercises, remember to allow the learner time to re-read the poem to him/herself in order to self-edit. Then the poem can be read aloud and discussed.
- Remember, spelling is the least important component of poetry writing at this beginning stage. The biggest writing challenge for most learners is simply feeling comfortable expressing their thoughts.

*Later, when you and your learner are ready, you can begin the process of rewriting & formal editing, looking for patterns of errors that can be addressed. And when it's finished, it can even be submitted for publication in the Project Read newsletter!*

# Song Lyrics as Narrative Poetry

- Song lyrics are by far the most often heard form of poetry in our society; we hear them everywhere we go.
- What elements of poetry are found in song lyrics?



## Song Lyrics as Poetry Exercise

Discuss with your learner what kinds of music he/she listens to, sings, or enjoys on a regular basis.

1. Ask your learner what they like most about their favorite music – the beat, the message in the lyrics, etc.
2. Play a recording of a familiar song.
3. Discuss the feelings which the songwriter is trying to communicate through the lyrics & music.
4. Again, talk about what makes the song “poetic.”
5. Ask your learner to write his/her own lyrics to the song, either on the same topic or any other.
6. Again, don’t worry about spelling, punctuation, etc. That can come later when you begin working on specific writing skills.

## Extending the Lesson

- Bring in books or magazine articles related to the artist or subject.
- Find related recordings.
- Do some research on the Internet to find even more information.
- Record your learner's musical creation.
- Other ideas?

# Multi-sensory Materials to Enhance Instruction

- Tapes/CDs of poetry (in P.R. office and general library collection)
- Magnetic Poetry (in P.R. office)
- Dry-Erase boards & colored markers (P.R. office)
- *Read to Me, Please* software (P.R. lab computers)
- S.I.B.L. (Songs Inspired By Literature) searchable database of lyrics from songs inspired by books & poems (part of the Artists for Literacy project)

[www.siblproject.org](http://www.siblproject.org)