

# Cold plums and the old men in the water: Let children read and write “great” poetry

*Teaching “great” poetry to students enhances their perceptions, improves their writing, challenges their minds, and enriches their lives.*

When I began my first year of teaching, an outside observer walking through the halls of the elementary school might have deduced that the poetry curriculum in my classroom consisted solely of reading Shel Silverstein books and composing haiku, cinquains, and the occasional couplet. I admit that Shel Silverstein was instrumental in focusing my own interest in poetry as a child, and I did use haiku, cinquains, and couplets as forms to teach to my students. When used repetitively or exclusively, however, these forms do not do justice to the whole field and process of poetry.

In *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* Koch (1990) contended that children should be exposed to works previously regarded as “out of reach”—works of Shakespeare, Whitman, and Dickinson to name a few. This validation gave me the courage to not only use “great” poetry with my students but also to teach the reading and writing of poetry together. I was hooked when I witnessed the work that came from my students when presented with the poem “This Is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams.

I have eaten  
The plums  
That were in  
The icebox

And which  
You were probably  
Saving  
For breakfast  
Forgive me  
They were delicious  
So sweet  
And so cold

(“This Is Just to Say” by William Carlos Williams, from *Collected Poems: 1909-1939, Volume I*, © 1983 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.)

One fifth grader, Janice Mitter, experimented for the first time with line break and form after inventing the idea to apologize to her horse.

I have mowed the grass  
That was rich in the yard  
I didn't know  
You were going to eat  
After our ride  
Forgive me  
Though I didn't like it  
Sweating  
And pushing

In the classroom now, I have expanded the use of poetry to include poems not only from the great poets but also from contemporary poets, quality adult poets in children’s anthologies, student poets from area elementary schools, and a wider variety of poetry to reflect different cultures and traditions. In this article, however, I share with teachers (a) validation for using great poetry with children and the justification for linking the reading and writing of poetry, (b) suggestions for selecting and presenting poems to students, and (c) using the reading of

poetry as an opportunity for writing poetry in the classroom—what Koch (1990) called “providing the link.”

## Can I really share great poetry with my students?

In Sharon Creech’s book *Love That Dog* (2001), a fifth-grade boy, Jack, experiences his own growth in poetry appreciation and writing after being exposed to the work of great poets. At first, Jack does not want to write poetry. He writes in his dialogue journal to his teacher, Miss Stretchberry, “Boys don’t write poetry. Girls do” (p. 1). As Miss Stretchberry introduces one poem at a time in his class, by poets like William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and William Blake, Jack—as reader response theory posits—finds content in the poems to connect to his own life, culminating in a poignant piece about his yellow dog, Sky, who died in the street when he was hit by a “blue car blue car/splattered with mud/speeding down the road” (p. 70). Jack takes on the cumulative styles of great poets to make something truly his own. Creech’s character, Jack, exemplifies the very strategy that this article suggests: By reflecting on, imitating, and “trying on” other poets’ styles, a child can find his or her own voice in poetry writing.

But even if we agree that children must read poetry in order to become better writers of poetry, why should we advocate children reading great poetry? In *When You’ve Made It Your Own*, a text that suggests quality poems for students, Denman (1988) asserted that for teachers to select poems merely “on the basis of their popularity or their ability to induce laughter and thereby assure ourselves that they will sit and listen is too weak an educational stance” (p. 83). In my public school teaching experience, I wanted students to experience the laughter in poetry as they did with Silverstein, but I wanted them to mature as readers and writers of poetry. One way to challenge children is to incorporate great poetry in the classroom. Because children’s poems also deserve to have clarity of thought, evidence of technique, and sincerity of tone, I began asking questions I deemed important when selecting poems for my students: Do the poems sensitize young students in their reactions and responses to literature? Do the poems

enhance their perceptions and enrich their lives? Do the poems appropriately challenge readers? I knew that when I drew on great poetry, I would often be satisfied with the answers to such questions.

Lancia (1997) found that by providing quality models such as classic poetry, a form of mentorship can occur between children and the published writers, as it did in Creech’s *Love That Dog* (2001) between Jack and the masters Williams, Frost, and Blake. This idea seems logical, for as adults (as writers and human beings) we often imitate or take from others to develop our unique selves. Why not have this practice as a part of the experimentation that takes place in schools? Hansen (2001) added to the argument in her book *When Writers Read*, explaining that when children read high-quality literature, they not only appreciate it but also “mine” the print for ideas for their own writing. An added benefit of using great poetry is that students are exposed at an early age to the language of the past and to classic literature. Teachers just need to trust that the students’ own voices will eventually come out in their writing. Students will ultimately begin to develop a vocabulary for defining quality poetry. They will also discover, as adults do, which poets they like the best.

## The art of selection and presentation

Berthoff (1981) spoke of the power of language to create new meaning. She explained that Koch (1990) got his young students to write poetry because he gave them authentic poems to play with and to use while generating ideas for writing. It is clear that when students read a poem, they must search for their own meaning, and that is not necessarily synonymous with a single “message of the poem.” There can be multiple interpretations of a given poem because how children interpret something (e.g., a word, idea, statement) depends on their prior experience and current perspectives.

Denman (1988) illustrated the importance of finding the right level of challenge when selecting poems to develop children into mature poetry readers. The poetry that teachers use in the classroom greatly affects the long-term impression poetry will have on children. Poetry that is too complex or too abstract can turn students off at an early age. But

poetry that is too simple doesn't leave any real kind of impression, particularly as children mature.

## What kinds of poetry should we be sharing with our students?

A brief bibliography of classic poetry collections and anthologies appropriate for children is listed in Table 1 below. Koch's (1990) *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?* is a must, but adult poetry anthologies are also an essential resource. Once teachers are comfortable in testing various adult poems in their classrooms, they can be instrumental in selecting and presenting individual poems that allow students to create new meaning through their writings. I regularly practice, and highly recommend, scanning adult poetry anthologies for suitable poems for children. Some considerations I have found important in selecting individual poems to yield student meaning are summarized in Figure 1.

In *Poetry Everywhere*, Collom and Noethe (1994) offered suggestions for presenting poems to children. Presentation is important because it invites the students into a world in which they will eventually be moved to write from their own perspectives. Keeping the interest high at this first critical

reading stage is key. The series of steps in Figure 2 might help teachers in the classroom.

## Providing the link

I believe a poetry link can best be thought of as a writing suggestion, statement, or assignment that stems from an original text. It is different from a traditional writing prompt in that students and the teacher cocreate it. Instead of reading a poem to students and simply saying, "Now write one of your own," some time is spent in class helping students brainstorm ideas for writing by examining the particular poem. This is an authentic prewriting activity. I remember once hearing poet Georgia Heard remark that she must have books of poems armed around her to inspire her own writing. By examining models, children will make their own reading-writing connections and begin to see writing as an act of discovery for them to reconnoiter the texts of others. They can then use those texts as springboards for their own writings (Lancia, 1997). This process should be celebrated, for it is a time when students are formulating ways to play with the meaning, form, and elements of the original poem in order to create their own.

These poetry links are necessary for many writers to create their own texts. Collom and Noethe (1994) stated, "children do need guidance. Most kids, left to their own devices, will be at sea without some structure of idea to help them get going" (p. 224). At the same time, a teacher should be cautious when guiding students to create links. If the link is too narrow, it may simply feel like a traditional writing prompt that hinders rather than encourages creativity and broad thinking. Links should be rich with choices and as open-ended as possible. Koch (1990) explained that

many writing suggestions are unhelpful either because they don't give the child enough (Write a Poem of Your Own About a Tiger), or bad because they give him too much—often, for example, telling him what to feel—(Write a Poem about How Beautiful You Think Some Animal Is). "Write a Poem in Which You Imagine Talking to an Animal" is in the right direction, but not dramatic enough. A writing suggestion should help a child to feel excited and to think of things he wants to write. (p. 17)

In contrast to many traditional writing prompts, a poetry link connects the poem to the

**TABLE 1**  
Some suggested classic poetry collections for children

- Attenborough, L. (2001). *Poetry by heart: A child's book of poems to remember*. London: Chicken House.
- Finneran, R. (1997). *The collected works of W.B. Yeats, volume I: The poems, revised*. New York: Scribner.
- Holdridge, B. (1986). *Under the greenwood tree: Shakespeare for young people*. Owings Mills, MD: Stemmer House.
- Joyce-Oates, C. (1996). *The essential Dickinson*. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press.
- Kunitz, S. (1987). *The essential Blake*. Hopewell, NJ: The Ecco Press.
- McGough, R. (2002). *100 best poems for children*. London: Puffin.
- Tomlinson, C. (1985). *William Carlos Williams: Selected poems*. New York: New Directions Publishing.

**FIGURE 1**  
**Tips for selecting adult model poems**

- 1 Avoid constant “sweetness themes.” Many students have the perception that the content of poetry is limited to love or nature. Selecting a variety of themes will bring further awareness.
- 2 Do not be reluctant to shorten poems that are too long.
- 3 Select a variety of poems for cross-curricular application.
- 4 Do not be overly concerned about a few sophisticated vocabulary terms when making your selections; use them as an opportunity to explain the language of the past.
- 5 Make certain you, the teacher, are excited about the poem.
- 6 Choose poems that represent a variety of forms, languages, and moods.
- 7 Try to find more than one poem to demonstrate a particular theme or feeling.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Suggested steps for presenting poems to students**

- 1 Before reading the poem mention the author’s life briefly to humanize him or her, yet do not allow biography to override the author’s work.
- 2 Follow the rhythm of the poem, reading it in a natural voice. (The physical appearance of most poems offers clues to the rhythm and mood of the words.)
- 3 Do at least two readings of the poem so students may further understand the poem and grasp its physical attractiveness.
- 4 After the poem is read, the teacher should be still and quiet without feeling pressured into asking children if they liked it.
- 5 After modeling this process, students should have the opportunity to read the poem themselves.

student’s own world. It is the teacher’s responsibility to assure and to reassure children that their imagination and their experience of the world are major factors in understanding the poem. Sometimes this means thinking “small.” Fletcher (1993) reminded us that the best things to write about are often everyday observations and favorite stories—“your brother’s junk drawer, something weird your dog once did, your grandma’s loose wiggly neck, the moment you realized you were too old to take a bath with your brother” (p. 162).

Links balance creativity, clarity, and concept (Koch, 1990). Students should not be bogged down with trying to attempt to understand the link, which inhibits their creativity and initial writing attempts. To add interest, students can add something to the poem—a person, a color, a place, or the repetition of a word or sound. When creating links, teachers can also sneak in concepts such as rhyme, approx-

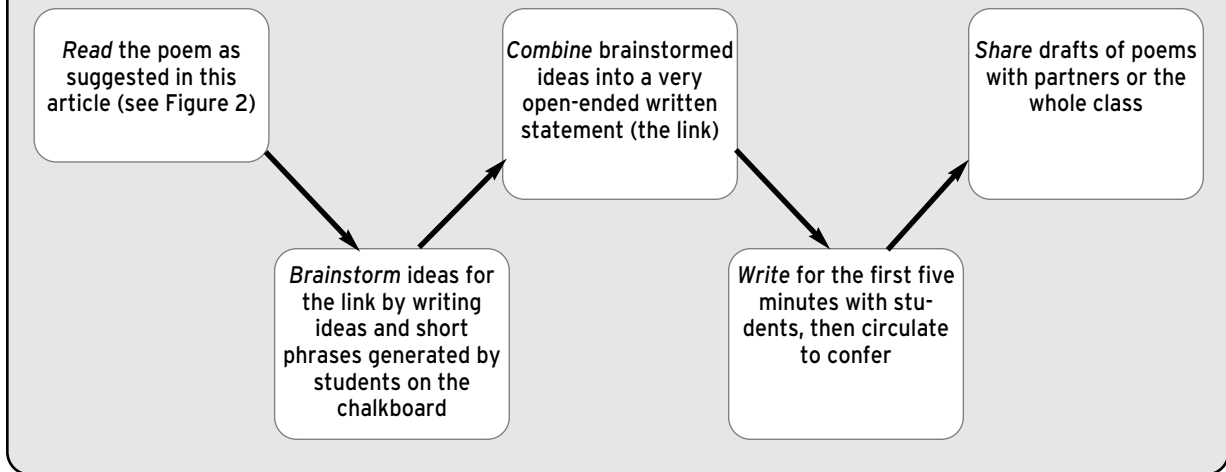
imate rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, or other skills appropriate for grade and ability level.

For a teacher and class of students who are testing classic poems as models in the classroom, it might be useful to remember the sequence represented in Figure 3.

My fifth graders were empowered with this sequence—this freedom to create their own writing “assignments”—after I read “The Old Men Admiring Themselves in the Water” by William Butler Yeats.

I heard the old, old men say,  
“Everything alters,  
And one by one we drop away.”  
They had hands like claws, and their knees  
Were twisted like the old thorn trees  
By the waters  
I heard the old, old men say,  
“All that’s beautiful drifts away

**FIGURE 3**  
Suggested sequence for linking the reading and writing of great poetry



like the waters.”

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As we brainstormed ideas for a link to this poem, one student thought of the idea to write about a conversation that the speaker once overheard, so I wrote the idea on the chalkboard. Immediately, other students inquired if it had to be a *real* conversation, so we had a brief discussion and concluded that it could also be fictional. I asked the class how they knew a person was talking in the poem. Students agreed that the dialogue clearly made the conversation “stand out” more, so I wrote on the chalkboard the suggestion to include quotation marks in our own poems. Another student loved the way the poem sounded haunting with the *ay* sounds at the ends of several lines, and we discussed how repetition of rich vowel sounds in poems can often have that effect. Some of the students were concerned about rhyme in the poem, yet others were eager to experiment with it. We agreed that meaning would precede form; that is, some of us could rhyme because it added to the effect of the poem, and others may not choose to rhyme because it hindered the meaning of the poem. In the end, my fifth-grade class had com-

bined our brainstormed ideas to create the following link as a general starting point:

Write a poem about an interesting conversation you have overheard. It can be a real conversation or an imaginary one. Maybe the conversation is between two people unlike yourself—like two old people in the poem [by Yeats] or two young children. Think about what kinds of things they would say to each other. Use quotations in your poem when the people are talking. If you like, you can talk about where the two people are when you overhear them. Try to describe the people talking. What do they look like?

Writing about conversations students have overheard can be an interesting writing assignment, and it also gives students the chance to use quotation marks in the poem when the characters are talking. They can also experiment with rhyme scheme and play with the literal images and the hidden meaning in their poems. It is essential to remember that once the link is created, it should not be a template assignment or a writing prompt to be followed, but a list of possibilities to help writers get started.

## Children deserve quality poetry

Berthoff (1981) reminded teachers that “it is [their] job to design sequences of assignments that let students discover what language can do, what

they can do with language” (p. 70). These assignments are most organic when constructed in the context of quality poetry and unfolded in the process of students’ own exploration of the world through writing. I have come to believe that if a poem is not good enough for an adult, it is not a quality poem for a child. Children, too, deserve a diet of poetry that blends laughter with elements of insight, human experience, and wonder so that they can make meaning of the world and their unique perspective.

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