

Quick Tips: Using Poetry in your Classical Classroom

Are you implementing additional poetry into your lesson plans? Do you have some lingering concerns or question the value of this endeavor?

In a recent podcast, “Nurturing Competent Communicators,” IEW founder Andrew Pudewa offered an valuable suggestion: Let’s offer our students frequent opportunities to experience and practice reliably correct and sophisticated language patterns. Ongoing exposure to these language patterns will help them become competent communicators of oral language and the written word. Many rely primarily on TV, streaming video, their peers, and busy, distracted adults, they tend to adopt imprecise usage and unsophisticated vocabulary. Even motivated, independent readers tend to skip sophisticated language patterns when they read. No wonder “Johnny can’t write!”

Pudewa offers a two-fold solution: Promote **reading aloud** from complete, unabridged narratives (no skipping sentences or paragraphs!) Offer students frequent opportunities to stop and ask questions along the way. Plan for regularly scheduled **memorization of poetry and prose**, and help your students build a more comprehensive language toolbox.

Reading aloud and memorizing poetry allows students to listen to and practice academic language, and build their vocabulary and syntax skills. When we plan carefully and diligently, these tools can help even our most reluctant readers to delve more deeply and build their imaginations.

Where to begin? Start with the predictable patterns of rhyming poetry.

1. Build your Poetry List

Begin with a selected list of poetry for your grade level. Although you should introduce several during the school year, start with 6-8 poems for all students to memorize. Vary selections by various poetic elements, length and/or thematic complexity. Select those poems that cite one of the seasons of the year or the Liturgical Calendar. Boys often respond well to poems involving dramatic battles or humor. Of course -- worthy poems appeal to all students. Choose poems that you know well and share your enthusiasm! Remember that poetry memorization is likely to be much easier for your students than it will be for you. As your students experience the ongoing repetition (spiral), you, too, will benefit!

2. Grading Categories and Grades

Select your poems for the entire year and “spread them out” among each semester. Discuss with your principal whether or not you will assign Pass/Fail grades, add the letter

grade into an existing Language Arts subject category, or create a new grading category for “Oral Presentations” or “Recitations.” An “Oral Presentation” category might include Saints Day Speeches, history and science presentations. Create your own or share your teaching peers’ general rubrics or use one similar to the one in Appendix A.

3. Daily Practice

Schedule daily, 5-10 minute poetry sessions. The first 10 minutes after recess or lunch works well. These daily, short memorization sessions tend to be more effective than one or two longer weekly sessions.

4. How to Start

With deliberate inflection and careful phrasing, first read aloud the entire poem to your students. Next, pass out a written copy of the poem. Read it aloud a second time. Go over unfamiliar words and answer any student questions. Have a general discussion of the poem. Don’t be overly analytical. Allow students to enjoy the poem.

Start by memorizing the first line or stanza. The teacher reads; the students repeat. Do this several times. Assign ongoing practice for daily homework.

The next day the teacher reads two lines or stanzas and the students repeat. Always repeat the previous memorized portion before going on to a new section.

Create your own, or download audio recording of your students’ favorite poems and play them during your poetry session as a warm-up.

5. Lather, Rinse, Repeat -- Continual Review

Once you and your students have mastered one poem, go on to the next one. *N.B.* -- insist that students master of all the poems. Plan to review all poems every day. Later in the semester, you might modify your schedule and review only every other day. Remember, the year-end goal is for your students to “own” 6-8 poems, not just the most recent.

6. Integrate across the Curriculum.

Use poems for copy work and dictation in support of your school-wide writing program. Select poems that align well with history units, and/or celebrate great discoveries in science.

7. Personalized Student Poetry Anthology Books

Once students have mastered a poem, have them carefully copy the poem into a hard cover composition-style notebook. Allow them to add their own illustrations. At the end of the year, they can take home a precious keepsake! Throughout the year, these souvenir books can be displayed at Parent-Teacher Nights and Open Houses.

8. Recitations during Public Performances

Some poems are well suited to public performance. Seek out several opportunities throughout the school year. Classroom visitors, neighboring classrooms and parent-led service groups are often willing audiences who will offer your students encouragement. Consider Christmas and Spring/Easter programs programming that includes choral or individual recitations.

Most of all -- have fun and enjoy poetry in your classroom! Good luck!

Resources

All Grades:

Pudewa, Andrew *Linguistic Development Through Poetry Memorization*, Locust Grove, OK: Institute for Excellence in Writing 2012

Berquist, Laura M., *The Harp and Laurel Wreath*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press 1999

Berquist, Laura M., *Designing Your Own Classical Curriculum*, San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press 1994

Sister Anna Louise, SCN, *Poetry for Junior Students*, Boston, MA: Ginn and Company 1929

Smith, Phillip, ed, *Favorite Poems of Childhood*, New York: Dover Publications 1992

Pre-Kindergarten to Grade 1:

Frank, Josette, ed., *Poems to Read to the Very Young*, New York: Random House 1977

Yolen, Jane, ed., *Here's a Little Poem*, Somerville, MA : Candlewick Press 2007
Kindergarten to Grade 2:

Prelutsky, Jack, ed., *Read Aloud Rhymes to the Very Young*, New York: Random House 1986

Stevenson, Robert Louis, *A Child's Garden of Verse Coloring Book*, New York: Dover Publications 1977

Kindergarten to Grade 8:

de la Mare, Walter, ed., *Come Hither*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1957

Dickinson, Emily, *Poetry for Young People*, New York: Sterling Publishing 1994

Kennedy, Caroline, ed., *A Family of Poems*, New York: Hyperion 2005

Kennedy, Caroline, ed., *Poems to Learn by Heart*, New York: Hyperion 2013

Paschen, Elise, ed., *Poetry Speaks to Children*, Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks 2005
(includes a CD with poems read by the poets themselves)

Prelutsky, Jack, ed., *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children*, New York: Random House 1983

Pedagogical Resources for Teachers and Parents:

Bateman, Laura, *Poetry for the Grammar Stage*, Louisville, KY: Memoria Press 2012
(Suggested for Grades 4-6)

Whitling, Matt, *Grammar of Poetry*, Moscow, ID: Canon Press 2012
(Suggested for Grades 7-8)