

Teaching Poetry

for Pleasure
and Purpose

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In the spirit of reconciliation,
PETAA, the author and the editor
acknowledge the Traditional
Custodians of Country throughout
Australia and their connections to
land, sea and community.

We pay our respects to their Elders
past and present and extend that
respect to all Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander peoples today.

Foreword

The day we turned human

I had learned about heartbreak, awe, nobility, duty and majesty by the time I was four years old, because Dad read the poems he loved to me each night.

Stories give kids vocabulary, empathy, imagination and a million extra lifetimes lived through books. Poetry does all that, but with song, too.

Language is useful. Lyrical language is powerful. If a story is whole lives compressed into a handful of pages, a poem compresses what is most deeply felt into as few lines as possible. It is the richest form of language on our planet.

It is also the most playful. Poems can be pure fun. Poetry also teaches kids that we humans are the boss of language.

Yes, grammar matters – but in a poem you can break the rules of grammar. You can rhyme or not, or have a line of a single word or even just an exclamation mark. You can do *anything* in a poem – as long as it works. I've heard the music in words all my life, because they were given to me so early in poetry's song. By three years old I loved words, played with words, began to order words to do exactly what I wanted, even if too often they still don't obey.

What is a poem? It's emotion, compressed, whether love, laughter, awe or the million other emotions humans are capable of. A poem infects the reader with the wisdom of the poet.

As a five-year-old I wept as Tennyson's Lady of Shalott gazed into her mirror. Because of her I have a ways chosen real life, not a vicarious one. My concepts of love and duty were moulded by Alfred Noyes' 'The Highwayman', and Kipling's 'If -'. All through my youth I whispered the mantra:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master [...]
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run

I didn't understand it all back then. You don't need to understand all of a poem at once. When, to the shock of my first grade teacher, I recited 'Break, break, break, on thy cold grey stones oh sea' as my favourite poem, I'd never experienced Tennyson's lost romance.

Instead I was in love with the image of waves lashing back and forth on the rocks, just like the ones at the bay I'd never had the words to describe. I did know anguish, though. That poem helped me see that what I felt was an emotion shared by others, not isolated horror trapped in a small house in a Brisbane suburb. A poem can give kids the words to express emotions they can't talk about, and will give them the comfort that the poet understands.

My grandparents gave me poetry books. They contain the words that made me. When I was an adolescent, Judith Wright's 'Woman to man' taught me more about being a mother, parent and adult than any 'life education' lesson. 'All one race' wrote Oodgeroo Noonuccal, and suddenly I saw the racist Brisbane I had taken for granted as 'just the way it is'.

Sometimes, walking hand in hand with me at night, Dad would quietly recite David Campbell's 'Men in green' in the darkness, and I only now realise that he, too, perhaps, was using poetry to express what he could not say to anyone directly, all he too had lost in what was the relatively recent World War II.

I think, perhaps, the moment someone first spoke poetry was the day our species became human.

Poetry reaches kids as deeply as it does adults, or even more. It is so very easy to underestimate a child. A kid will remember a poem long after they've forgotten a cartoon – if it's the right poem, the one with the song they need. They also need to have been carefully introduced to poetry.

For most kids, poetry is even stranger than broccoli. Kids are suspicious of new foods, and suspicious of new word forms as well. There are some excellent kid-tempting broccoli recipes. This book gives kid-tempting ways to introduce poetry, that strange format that in a few words can change the way we see the world.

Poetry is perhaps our most ancient human heritage, and our most powerful language tool. Every young person has the right to the best possible introduction.

Jackie French AM
Australian author



Online resources

Go to www.petaa.edu.au/Poetry-Extras to find achievement standards, up-to-date links to the Australian Curriculum: English descriptors relevant to poetry and writing, and multimodal resources.

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Janeen Brian (2002) 'What's it like at show time?', *The school magazine: Countdown*.

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Steven Herrick (2009) 'the librarian', 'tantrum' and 'patience', *Untangling spaghetti*, UQP.

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Jackie Hosking for 'Hark' (2015) *The school magazine: Blast Off*; and 'The moon' (2006) *The school magazine: Countdown*.

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Jill McDougall & Sue O'Loughlin (illustrator) (2008) 'Recipe for a picnic' and 'The pea', *Put a cockroach in my muesli: poems about food*, Era Publications, Australia. Text and illustrations.

Sally Morgan for 'Numbat' © 2012, Sally Morgan, *The last dance*, Little Hare Books (now Hardie Grant Children's Publishing). Text and cover.

Rebecca M Newman (2015) 'Rat lullaby' and 'Handover', <https://poetrytag.wordpress.com/>.

Claire Saxby for 'Shoes' (2007) *Little ears magazine*; and 'Leaf life' (previously unpublished).

Pat Simmons (2018) 'Spider', Australian children's poetry website, www.australianchildrenspoeetry.com.au.

Stephen Whiteside (2014) 'The platypus', *The billy that died with his boots on*, Walker Books.

Gordon Winch (2004) 'Too early', *The roo jumped over the moon*, Scholastic.

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'Blowing bubbles', 'Clouds' and 'Rainbow' (2008) *Assembly: Poems to perform*, Ready-Ed Publications.

'Destination' (2015), *The school magazine: Blast off*.

'Dog' (2020) www.sallymurphy.com.au.

'Caught' (2017) *The school magazine: Countdown*.

'Gecko' (2015) Australian children's poetry website, www.australianchildrenspoeetry.com.au.

'Noodles' (2009) *Alphabet soup magazine*.

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'Postal dilemma' (2017) <https://poetrytag.wordpress.com/>.

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'What a mess!' (2017) *The school magazine: Countdown*.

Additionally, many of the poems included in this book, as well as portions of chapter 1, formed part of Sally Murphy's doctoral thesis, completed with Edith Cowan University in 2017. Other poems appear here for the first time.

To the best of our knowledge, the following poems are in the public domain. Contact from rights holders would be welcomed.

Anonymous, 'There was an old lady'; 'The bear at the zoo'; 'The lady from Spain'; Lewis Carroll, 'Jabberwocky'; Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'An ode to the rain'; CJ Dennis, 'The unsociable wallaby'; 'The ant explorer'; 'A song of rain'; Emily Dickinson, 'A bird came down the walk (328)'; Mary Hannay-Foott, 'Where the pelican builds her nest'; Edward Lear, 'There was an old man with a beard'; Vachel Lindsay, 'The little turtle'; Hughes Mearns, 'Antigonish'; Marianne Moore, 'A jelly-fish'; AB 'Banjo' Paterson, 'Old man platypus', 'Mulga Bill's bicycle'; Laura Elizabeth Richards, 'Eletelephony'; Christina Rossetti, 'Who has seen the wind'; Alfred, Lord Tennyson, 'The eagle'; Mabel Watts, 'A little seed'.

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Chapter 1

Why poetry?

A note from Sally

I am a poet and have always loved poetry, inspired initially by the prevalence of rhyme and poetry in my early life. Memories of reciting nursery rhymes with my mother and siblings and of being thrilled by illustrated poetry collections feature prominently in my early recollections. At school, I loved it when teachers read poetry, and even more so when we learnt poems to recite. Far later when I began my professional writing endeavours, much of my creative output was poetry. Unsurprisingly, poetry remains a big part of my adult life. My first publication credit was a poem and, while I am published in a range of forms and genres, it is my verse novels (poetic narratives) for younger readers that have enjoyed most critical and commercial success.

The poems I loved as a child and the sensations they evoked have stayed with me and, at times, have found echo in my own work. But although my early experiences with poetry were very positive ones, as I moved through school and university, I learnt that studying poetry was not all about pleasure. I learnt about poetic techniques, different poetic structures and layers of meaning. I learnt that sometimes the meaning of a poem was buried with an obscurity I found overwhelming; and I felt a pressure to be able to understand poems and to get the answers 'right'. I was unaware of the probability that my peers were having similar experiences.

And then ...

As a beginning teacher, I taught poetry because it was in the curriculum, but I struggled to engage my students: in part because of what I perceived as their reluctance to read poetry and in part because of my own inability to find ways to present poetry in a way that overcame that reluctance. I also found that many poetry units focused on teaching students to attempt specific forms such as the cinquain, haiku and acrostic, in exercises that focused more on fastidiously adhering to form than on appreciating the power or beauty of poetry.

As my two careers – educator and author/poet – grew, I became increasingly aware of the disparities between the two in relation to my own use of, and attitudes towards, poetry. I also began to observe my teaching peers' attitudes towards poetry and saw reflected some of my own doubts around how best to teach it. I also observed that poetry for children is underrepresented in Australian publishing, classrooms and libraries compared with prose fiction and nonfiction. This lack of representation is surprising given the value placed on poetry in curriculum documents and by literacy experts, as well as the keenness of creators – including myself – to produce poetry for children.

And so, I set about trying to resolve this, at least for myself. I embarked on doctoral studies, aimed at developing my own writing but also at figuring out where children's poetry belonged, in schools, publishing and bookstores, and in the hands and hearts of children. I ran workshops for writers and for teachers, and I looked for ways, as a teacher educator, to encourage teaching both the writing and enjoyment of poetry in the classroom.

This book is part of that quest: it offers ways to teach and share reading and writing poetry across the primary school years, and showcases a variety of poetry that can be loved and used in the classroom.

How will this book help you?

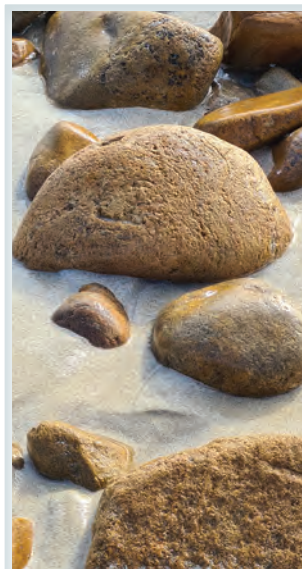
The chapters that follow offer a blend of explanations, practical exercises and, importantly, poetry. By demystifying the language of poetry – poetic techniques, language devices and forms of poetry – this book aims at enabling you as teachers and, through you, your students, to understand how poetry works, how to unlock its meaning and how to write it. Above all, the message is that poetry can be a pleasure to teach, to read and to write – for teachers and students alike.

What is poetry?

In order to teach poetry, we need to have some understanding of what poetry actually is. However, the very term can cause debate. The many different forms, and the seemingly limitless range of themes, as well as the vast variations in length, and the optional use of rhyme and structured rhythm mean that there is no simple definition of what is or isn't a poem.

Poets, academics and readers have long debated the term. Literacy consultant and academic, Nikki Gamble, suggests that rather than seeking an elusive single definition, focus should instead be on the qualities of poetry, which are 'compression, allusiveness and patterning' (2013:229). The compression of language allows for different levels of meaning and varied interpretation, while structure and devices, including rhythm, rhyme, line breaks and poetic techniques, 'amplify the reader's experience' (Gamble 2013:229–230). Perry Nodleman agrees with this sentiment, claiming that readers of many poems are delighted not by the poem's meaning, but by the way that meaning is expressed. The words of the poem, he says, 'resonate beyond themselves' (Nodleman and Reimer 2003: 254), a quality that encourages readers to consider a range of meanings. A poem's words stay with the reader in a way that the specific words of an informational text may not. This belief is echoed by other academics and editors (Patten 1991; Sloan 2001), while yet others argue that what makes a poem poetry is the intent of the poet – that is, the creator intends something to be poetry – the use of repetitive devices (rhyme, repetition, alliteration and so on) or simply the use of line breaks (Ribiero 2007; Bourbon 2007).

If none of these definitions seems suitable for classroom use, perhaps the simplest way to define poetry is with a poem:



A poem

by Sally Murphy

A poem
 is a whole lot of words
 a plethora of words
 a smattering, a scattering
 a shattering of words
 thrown on a page
 in carefully created
 chaos
 to make you wonder.

In this poem, you see poetic techniques – repetition, rhyme, alliteration – and the poem intends to leave the reader not with a definitive answer, but with something to ponder. That may be a depth of feeling, a sense of joy or even just a giggle.

Why does poetry matter?

Much of the discussion regarding the importance of children's poetry comes from educators and is echoed in educational policy across the country. The Australian Curriculum mandates poetry at all year levels within the English Scope and Sequence, recognising both the importance of poetry and the appeal of different forms to different age groups. Foundation students, for example, are expected to 'replicate the rhythms and sound patterns in stories, rhymes, songs and poems'; while in their first year of high school (Year 7), students are expected to learn how language is used to 'create layers of meaning in poetry, for example haiku, tankas, couplets, free verse and verse novels'. So, we teach poetry because it is in the Curriculum, but that on its own does not explain why it *should* be taught.

Poetry and poetic language form an integral part of early speech and play experiences, developing naturally in the formative years. Young children are typically attracted to poetry and it can support them in acquiring linguistic mastery. Poetry is shared through nursery rhymes and rhyming books. We even see the instinctive use of rhythm and repetition when speaking to young children at home, at early learning centres, in public offerings such as library rhyme times, and through early years' television and video offerings. This use of playful, poetic language exposes children to unfamiliar vocabulary and to experiences they may not otherwise have (Winch 1991; Coats 2010). It also, according to academic Karen Coats, helps young children to regulate embodied experience, developing in them characteristics including 'mental flexibility, a high tolerance for ambiguity, [and] a capacity for moral decision making' (2010:126), as well as an understanding of how humour works.

What poetry does

Sir Andrew Motion, former poet laureate in the UK, believes that the aural nature of poetry creates deep connections with and for children, meaning that the sounds of poetry can move them even if they don't completely understand the words (cited in Morrison 2014). Scientific research supports this claim, demonstrating that reading poetry produces brain activity similar to listening to music, and that poetry activates pleasurable responses even before the meaning of the words is grasped (Zeman et al. 2013; Vaughan-Evans et al. 2016). The intensity of poetic language and form provides a way in for children, while the aesthetic pleasure of poetry helps children build their sense of identity as individuals and as members of society (Styles 2011; Coats 2010; Gioia 2007).

Across the schooling years, poetry aids language acquisition and builds reading, writing and speaking skills (Elster 2010). Because poems are often short, they can be easily used within the classroom and can be attractive to reluctant readers. Poetry is available on almost any topic and can also allow connections to be made between seemingly unrelated topics (Perfect 1999). While poetry for adults can sometimes seem hard to understand, most poetry intended for children tends to use more accessible language and to explore topics to which they can relate. Children’s poets agree:

- Children’s poet Rosemary Milne (2010) claims that her objective is ‘to use rhymes and rhythms that will delight’ young readers, but that reading the poems will help children to master sounds and words, and hence develop reading and language skills.
- Ted Hughes observes that children can respond to complicated language in poetry: ‘If they can recognise and be excited by some vital piece of experience within a poem, very young children can swallow the most sophisticated verbal technique’ (cited in Lockwood 2009:297).
- Much-loved UK poet Michael Rosen (2008) says: ‘Poetry is a special way of talking and writing. Poems are often musical, playing with the sounds of language while they tell stories, reveal feelings, make pictures and give us ideas. We all find this pleasurable, but children especially so.’

Who this book is for

Any teacher of literacy

This book is primarily intended for preschool and primary teachers (including pre-service teachers) of the Australian Curriculum: English, to support planning to teach poetry specifically, and literature, literacy and writing more broadly.

Whole school

This book will also support schools that want to teach and promote poetry in a whole-school approach, with chapters for individual year levels complementing each other.

Literacy specialists and support staff

This book supports educators responsible for implementing and developing literacy programs in their schools, as well as those who help students requiring intensive support or extension.

How this book is structured

This book addresses curriculum that specifically targets poetry and poetic technique, while also providing resources, activities and, importantly, poems for each year group.

Chapters 2 to 8 are all year-level focused, from Foundation to Year 6. Each chapter is structured in the following order:

Achievement standards and up-to-date links for the Australian Curriculum: English descriptors relevant to poetry and writing for each year can be found on the PETAA website at www.petaa.edu.au/Poetry-Extras.

- A brief introduction including recommended focuses for text and writing
- Unpacking any key terminology

- Activities that can be implemented in the classroom at this year level
- Poems that can be used as classroom texts
- Further suggestions of resources for the year group.

Chapter 9 is an annotated bibliography of poetry texts, verse novels and other resources that can be used across the school years. This recognises that, while it is useful to have specific resources recommended for a year level, often a book or poem can be used across multiple age groups, depending on purpose and interest.

Note that the majority of poems and resources recommended in this book are published in Australia. This is to recognise the enormous depth of talent among Australian authors, and to increase the likelihood of resources being readily available. However, where relevant, resources from overseas creators are included, and educators are encouraged to explore resources from overseas, particularly to ensure a diversity of voices and topics.

Resources lists

The collections and anthologies listed in the resources sections of chapters 2 to 8 have been published in Australia in recent years, so should still be widely available. In addition, many collections are published annually by international publishers. Many of these are thematic, so can be linked directly to your classroom theme.

Thousands of rhyming picture books are available for educators to choose from for class use as well as for classroom libraries. The resources lists do not attempt to encompass them all. Rather, these examples offer some contemporary suggestions – either published or readily available in Australia – that make pleasing use of rhyme and rhythm, and offer engaging narratives or subject matter.

Look also at shared reading packages from quality educational publishers, which often include stories in rhyme and can be used to explore poetic form and devices, or as mentor texts.

There are, of course, wonderful rhyming books that are published overseas as well. Look for rhyme and rhythm that doesn't trip you up when you read it, and where the narrative is more important than any underlying message.

There are many multimedia resources and websites either for classroom use, or as resources for educators to learn new rhymes and poems.

Key message: pleasure is vital

Throughout this book, you will find mention of pleasure. While fun, humour and happiness are all valuable terms, the word 'pleasure' is used here to stress that pleasure can be more than laughter. Readers of all ages can find pleasure in being transported through the full gambit of emotions, but the key is in allowing children to do this for both personal satisfaction and for the benefit it has for learning outcomes and achievements.

Earlier in this chapter, I wrote about my own early pleasure with poetry, and how it diminished later in my school life and in my early teaching experiences. This experience is common among teens, university students and in teachers too. It seems this is often because of the challenge and boredom around tasks that focus on analysis and hidden meanings in poems (Harrison and Gordon 1983; Ray 1998; Coats 2013; Xerri 2018; Sigvardsson 2020). The benefits of poetry are lost when pleasure is absent.

Why pleasure matters

Longitudinal studies of children show that reading for pleasure is more significant in determining their educational success than a host of other factors (including parental levels

of education or socioeconomic status), with reading for pleasure leading to progress in literacy as well as in other subjects, including mathematics and science (Sullivan 2015). Studies of brain activity using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology have found that reading poetry stimulates activity in the areas of the brain linked to memory and self-reflection, a similar response to that evoked by listening to music (Zeman et al. 2013). This response occurs ahead of any understanding of the words, instinctively speaking to the mind (Vaughan-Evans et al. 2016:6). It seems however, that between the extremes of the very early years of childhood and adulthood, the emphasis on pleasure and enjoyment is forgotten, particularly in the school setting. This is unfortunate, because playful learning aids vocabulary acquisition in a way that passive instruction does not (Harris et al. 2010:58–59).

Many children will only encounter the explicit use of poetry inside the classroom. It is critical therefore that the poetry selected and presented provides opportunities for pleasure, brain activation and the multitude of educational benefits, such as language acquisition. If poetry experiences evoke pleasure, then children will not only engage in the classroom, but will seek out and enjoy poetry for personal reading, thereby multiplying the benefits. This book aims to help teachers make poetry pleasurable for their students and, importantly, for themselves.

Simple ways to make poetry accessible in any school

- 1 Read poems aloud to your students. Poetry is meant to be spoken and listened to. Hearing a poem read well emphasises its musicality and makes its rhythm and language more accessible.
- 2 Include poetry (including poem anthologies, rhyming picture books and verse novels) in your classroom library – all the time. Allow students to discover them on their own during free reading time.
- 3 Display poetry on walls and pin-up boards. Rotate it regularly, to be discovered by students and adults too.
- 4 Create a poet-tree – either one dimensional (on a wall: a picture of a tree that teachers pin poems to as leaves) or three dimensional (a large branch or even a potted plant). Pin short poems or favourite lines of poetry onto the branches as leaves.
- 5 Include poetry in school newsletters and announcements – for example as a poem of the week or day.
- 6 Keep a book of poems on the teacher's desk or near the classroom door. Ask every adult who visits the classroom to choose one poem and read it to the class.
- 7 Allow students to use magnetic words to create poetry in their free time. You can buy magnetic words or make them using strips of magnetic whiteboard or laminated card.
- 8 Encourage students to enter poetry competitions, such as the annual Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Competition.

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