

Poetry Y4 T1 Poems on a theme

The National Literacy Strategy

Objectives

Y4T1T14 to write poems based on personal or imagined experience, linked to poems read. List brief phrases and words, experiment by trimming or extending sentences; experiment with powerful and expressive verbs.

Principles and explanation

The writing of poems based on a theme is best suited to a unit of work that links reading poems based on a theme with writing. There are possible links with using powerful verbs and adverbs (Y4T1S3,S4).

This unit could be built around reading from themed anthologies. It might be built up to over time by reading around a theme over the weeks prior to the specific unit.

In reading, select several poems to compare and contrast, discussing likes, dislikes, puzzles and patterns. Look at the similarities and differences, with reference to form, language and impact on the reader. Make sure that reading aloud plays an important role, so that poems are heard. Children can sift through collections and find favourites on the same theme to compare. Pairs, or small groups, might present contrasting readings accompanied by an exploration of the poems. They should explain their personal responses and preferences, referring to the texts to support their ideas (Y4T1T7).

Linked to this, a focus on a pair of poets could usefully establish an ear and eye for different/similar styles, approaches and themes - as well as the way different poets tackle the same subjects. Again the reading of poems might take up odd spare moments or be part of quiet or private reading, prior to the specific unit of work. Possible poets might include Grace Nichols, Val Bloom, Judith Nichols, Wes Magee, Peter Dixon, Matt Simpson.

Prior to writing, highlight distinctive features of selected poems that might act as models or contain features that the children might use in their own writing, for example:

- well chosen words - especially powerful verbs, adjectives and adverbs;
- surprising combinations of words;
- simile and personification;
- alliteration and onomatopoeia;
- the pattern of the poem.

Capturing

There are three basic approaches that might be adopted.

- Writing a poem that uses a repeating phrase, e.g. *When I am angry I...*, *When I am happy I...*, *When I am sad I...* Using a repeating phrase may be the best solution to writing about imagined experiences, e.g.

*It was so quiet that
I heard a cloud slither through the air.*

*It was so quiet that
I heard a stone groan.*

- Writing a poem that uses one of the forms that the children have already met in a previous year. For instance, they may have written riddles in Year 3 Term 3.
- Writing a poem that has its own pattern.

To help children explore ideas about the chosen theme it is important that the whole class writes to the same focus. Children write best about both what they know and what matters to them. The teacher will need to light upon a theme that interests the class. This might be based on a common experience (e.g. *darkness*, *school life*, etc.) or by providing an experience (e.g. *observing butterflies hatching*, *looking at a collection of skulls*, *studying feathers with magnifying glasses*, etc.). It is hard to write about general themes such as 'pets'. Poetry is more likely to spring out of a direct and focused experience such as looking at a tarantula or watching a python swimming towards the glass in a zoo!

Planning for writing

The objective focuses upon the need to develop the preparatory skills of 'listing brief phrases and words, experiment by trimming or extending sentences; experiment with powerful and expressive verbs'.

Brainstorming needs to be taught through whole-class brainstorms. Once children have developed this skill, it can be carried out in groups, pairs or individually. Use questioning to draw children's attention back to the detail of the focus, learning to use their powers of close observation.

If preparing to write about a butterfly hatching:

squeeze, flex, wings, stretch, crumpled, see through, invisible, uncurl, like a leaf, slim legs, slender, frail...

If preparing to write a riddle about the moon:

slice of lemon, a smile, comes out when we sleep, made of cream cheese!, man visits in a rocket...

If about to write a poem based on a model (e.g. *I stood in a room full of...*), list possible ideas for inclusion. To help children generate ideas ask them to look round the room picking out interesting detail from the display. Take their minds for a walk to think about things at home, in their bedroom, in the town, in the countryside, in other countries, in outer space, in books they have read, e.g. *wind, computer, thistle, dust, ant, blood in veins...*

Demonstration

Shared writing

Silence listens...

It was so quiet that
I heard the wind sneezing.

It was so quiet that
I heard the computer's mind buzzing.

It was so quiet that
I heard a thistle burst through
The pavement.

It was so quiet that
I heard a speck of dust thud
On the window sill.

It was so quiet that
I heard an ant crunch a leaf.

It was so quiet that
I heard the blood
Rush through my veins.

Points to make:

Keep referring back to the original list/brainstorm of ideas. As you write, experiment with trimming or extending ideas. Take care to select powerful verbs.

Moon riddle

Like a slice
Of lemon
Never to be tasted,

Or a lopsided grin
That will never
Speak.

It visits us
When we dream.

Some say, it's made
Of cream cheese -

It is a rocket's blast away.

Points to make:

As this is a riddle think of a number of things about the subject - what it looks like, what it does, what we know about it. Use some of these ideas to write brief poetic phrases. As you write, try out the poem by extending ideas or cutting them back. Choose verbs with care. Keep referring back to the original list of ideas, discarding some and using others.

Butterfly hatching

The brown case cracks -
Something squeezes out,
Shuddering.
The butterfly flexes its wings,
Stretching crumpled tissue paper.
It uncurls, like a see-through leaf,
And stands on slim legs.
The slender body sways
As it tests the air.

Points to make:

Keep referring back to the original list/brainstorm of ideas. As you write, experiment with trimming or extending ideas. Take care to select powerful verbs.

Shared composition

Take the same theme and involve the class in suggesting ideas. Get them to work with ideas from their initial list or brainstorm - but also any new ideas that occur. Do not accept any old idea - push them to rehearse ideas, use whiteboards or notebooks to try out ideas - getting rid of extraneous words, extending sentences, listening to the effect of their suggestions. Ensure that the verbs selected carry a punch!

Independent writing

Just prior to writing, read aloud several good quality examples that are just above the level of the majority, so that they start writing with the flow of language ringing in their ears.