



Start the year with a poem

Poems are words put together in interesting and entertaining ways to make meaning on various levels. That is the crux, the purpose, the essence of communicating - of reading, writing, responding, creating, speaking and listening. Sharing poems introduces new learners to words working together to make new meaning.

Reading poems to and with your students is a unique, enriching experience – words, meaning, ideas, emotional responses, and questions. Students can listen, read silently and aloud, choose poems for learning off by heart, and share the pleasure of reading together.

Poems can provide the stimulus for examination of all features of literary, persuasive and imaginative text.

A poem can provide an introduction to a history or geography topic, or those elements of writing you are going to teach. Poems provide stimulus for art forms.



The fires that have impacted on so many people will be part of every school at the start of this year. I have included links to works that could assist with exploring ideas. I'd start with Dorothea Mackellar's '[My Country](#)', which goes some way to describe the challenges of this country. Read the whole thing – it's worth it.

Reading poems needs no equipment.

The role of poetry

The *Australian Curriculum: English* is unambiguous. Poetry has a significant role to play in literature.

In Reading's sub-strand of *Literature* –

Features of literary texts:

Foundation - *Recognise some different types of literary texts and identify some characteristic features of literary texts, for example ... rhyme in poetry* (ACELT1785)

Language devices in literary texts:

Foundation - *Replicate the rhythms and sound patterns in ... **rhymes**, songs and **poems** from a range of cultures* (ACELT1579)

Year 1 - *Listen to, recite and perform **poems**, **chants**, **rhymes** and songs, ...* (ACELT1585)

Year 2 - *Identify, reproduce and experiment with rhythmic, sound and word patterns in **poems**, **chants**, **rhymes** and songs* (ACELT1592)

Year 3 - *Discuss the nature and effects of some language devices used to enhance meaning and shape the reader's reaction, including rhythm and onomatopoeia in **poetry** and prose* (ACELT1600)

Year 4 - *Understand, interpret and experiment with a range of devices and deliberate word play in **poetry** and other literary texts, for example nonsense words, spoonerisms, neologisms and puns (ACELT1606)*

Year 5 - *Understand, interpret and experiment with sound devices and imagery, including simile, metaphor and personification, in narratives, shape **poetry**, songs, anthems and odes (ACELT1611)*

Year 6 - *Identify the relationship between words, sounds, imagery and language patterns in narratives and **poetry such as ballads, limericks and free verse** (ACELT1617)*

ACARA (2014) English: Sequence of content F-6

Observable literacy behaviours

The ACARA *Literacy Progression* supports the *Australian Curriculum: English* by listing some of the observable behaviours in aspects of literacy that our students demonstrate. Not a lot of richness there.

Reading and Viewing: Phonological awareness –

Foundation - *joins in rhymes and chants and songs; repeats sounds, words, sayings, poems; completes familiar phrases in texts including chants, songs and poems (PhA1)*

Verse and nonsense

Poems provide elegant and precise imaginative descriptions of the world, of feelings, of people, plus stories. Nonsense poems are entertaining because of the way words sound, go together, and sometimes make meaning out of all the strangeness. Success depends on the skill of the poet, and on the willingness of the speaker and listener to explore possibilities.

We know that phonological awareness is an absolutely critical feature of pre-reading, for early reading. There it is, in PhA1 – asking us to provide opportunities for students to ‘join in’, to ‘repeat’ and to ‘complete’ familiar phrases. With poems, the sounds, the familiar phrases (or

phrases that become familiar) are essential elements of poems themselves. A great deal can be learned in the early years about language, communication and understanding through these encapsulations of meaning.

Listening to, learning and repeating poems assists with many of the other observable behaviors in Phonological Awareness through to the end of Year 1.

Familiarity with poems will also contribute substantially to phonic knowledge as a precursor and integral component of recognising words.

Try these poems:

- *maggie and milly and molly and and may* has been put to music by [Natalie Merchant](#) on an album she made for her daughter. It's a thoughtful interpretation of the words. There are numerous others; the least worst is probably [this one](#)
- The poet E. E. Cummings preferred not to use conventional written punctuation, syntax or formatting. He repeats phonic elements in ways that are god fun to share with students, and to have them learn. Try *Chansons Innocentes: I*
- *Bibbidi-Bobbidi-boo* is the magic song from Disney's 'Cinderella'. This is the original. 2015 version [here](#). This is a great way to prepare for the bell at recess or lunch
- C.J. Dennis' work includes material suitable for all Primary Stages.
 - '*Triantiwontigongolope*' and '*The Ant Explorer*' for early years; use to create a whole class picture, or exploring outside with the class set of magnifying glasses (cheap at news agencies). These are part of Dennis' 'Roundabout poems. '*The Traveller*' can be used with excerpts from his '*A Song of Rain*'. Australian place names and the joy of rain. Judith Wright's '*Black Cockatoos*' fits well here. It's in Paul Kelly's '*Thirteen ways to look at birds*'.
- Kenneth Slessor's '*Country Towns*' will be familiar, and W. E. Harney's '*West of Alice*' links well with Paterson.

Classic Australian yarns in poems include:

- Banjo Paterson's '*The Man from Ironbark*' (language warning – Year 6 love it). Paterson's '*In Defence of the Bush*', addressed directly to Henry Lawson, is part of an important literary debate. '*Mulga Bill's Bicycle*' is good fun, exploring the idea of embracing change (or not). '*Clancy of the Overflow*' is another good one to consider comparisons of city and country life.
- John O'Brien's '*Said Hanrahan*' is great to work with – we all know a pessimist.

These yarns represent an important time in Australia's literary history, but there's been over 100 years of excellent writing since then. The Australian Poetry Library has everything.



Do

- ‘Road test’ every poem you intend to read to students. Read silently, all the way through. It should resonate with you. Then read it aloud a couple of times. If it still works, read it to your students. Don’t read something you don’t like. It’s OK to not quite understand.
- Read some hard poems. If meaning is too obvious, there is nothing more to explore. Students can identify the sections or phrases they find difficult – and explore possible meanings. Use for homework, and find out what parents think. Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘*Pied Beauty*’, Shelley’s ‘*Ozymandias*’, Irene McLeod’s ‘*Lone Dog*’ will work in Stages 2 and 3.
- Read again and again, to learn the patterns of each poem, particularly with younger students at the start of the Foundation/Kindergarten year. Observe participation and understanding. Check the sounds they make, particularly phonic elements that can be confused - ‘hard’ /g /and /k/; /p/ and /b/ for example. (NOTE: Arabic has no /p/ sound – this will have to be learned from scratch for these children).
- Emphasise – teach – how you put your mouth, and use poems that include lots of any tricky sounds. Explore the sounds. Play substitution games and make your own poems – eg ‘This morning I saw a brown bat, I saw a holey hat, I saw a marvellous mat, I saw a ... ‘ etc

Resources

Fred Sedgwick has been working with students on poetry for many years. On his [website](#), the ‘Teaching Space’ has good ideas to get started.

Poems online:

- The Australian Poetry Library – everything you could ask for at <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/home> including results of a search for ‘bushfires’. ‘Dust’ by Jamie Grant is one that could be used with care
- <https://australianchildrenspoetry.com.au/>



- <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/children> Try Maya Angelou's 'Caged Bird' for Year 2 and older
- <https://hellopoetry.com/poets/e-e-cummings/> Read 'If' with Year 5/6 students. Use it as a model.
- <https://allpoetry.com/> Australian poems
- <https://poets.org/> U.S.
- <https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/home> Australian
- [Poems for children by famous poets](#) Various, classics

References

ACARA Introduction to the ACARA *National Literacy and Numeracy Progressions*

ACARA [Linking Progression indicators to Stages](#) accessed 21/01/2020

ACARA (2014) English: Sequence of content F-6 Strand: Language at <https://australiancurriculum.edu.au/f-10-curriculum/english/>

Kelly, Paul (2019) Thirteen ways to look at birds at <https://www.paulkelly.com.au/thirteen-ways-to-look-at-birds> accessed 22/1/2020

