

# Why Poetry for Reading Instruction? Because It Works!

*William Dee Nichols, Timothy V. Rasinski, William H. Rupley, Rachael A. Kellogg, David D. Paige*

You can joyfully use poetry and other forms of rhythmical language to instill in your students a lifelong love for literacy.

As Robert Louis Stevenson (1981) points out in the following excerpt from his endearing poem “The Swing,” swinging might be one of the most enjoyable acts of childhood. However, we believe that reading, writing, and performing poetry such as “The Swing” might be just as rewarding and is a right of childhood. Most students love and have prior knowledge related to swings, and we strongly believe that level of love and passion also translates to the reading of and performing of poetry.

How do you like to go up in a swing,  
Up in the air so blue?  
Oh, I do think it the pleasantest thing  
Ever a child can do! (p. 40)

## Why Poetry for Reading Instruction?

Recent research has demonstrated that poetry is a natural text for teaching phonic skills, developing fluency and motivating young learners to want to explore language (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2008a, 2008b). We have adopted a broad definition of poetry to include all forms of English rhythmic language that are intended to be read orally and silently, such as traditional poetry, nursery rhymes, song lyrics, jump rope chants, cheers, and even nonsense forms of language (e.g., Dr. Seuss). Each of these language forms fits into the features of poetry offered by Robert Frost (2007): “There are three things, after all, that a poem must reach: the eye, the ear, and what we may call the heart or the mind” (p. 301). Frost’s definition of poetry encompasses what learning to read and reading are all about. Teaching reading such that it reaches the “heart” of the reader nurtures both the acquisition of reading capabilities and the love of reading.

At one time in U.S. history, poetry was a cornerstone of reading instruction. However, today it has

been replaced by other educational materials such as basal readers, chapter books, trade books, informational texts, and digital texts (Elster & Hanauer, 2002). Indeed, the headline of an article in *The Washington Post* (Petri, 2013) asked, “Is Poetry Dead?” Perhaps poetry has been replaced by other materials because there is no manual for teaching it, as there is for many of the other forms. The lack of directions for guiding reading instruction may cause educators to shy away from adopting poetry as part of their reading curriculum. Perhaps school administrators view poetry as not having enough rigor for reading instruction; they may think poetry in the classroom is fluff that needs to be avoided and that takes away from the real job of teaching reading. Another, perhaps more credible, explanation is that teachers just did not have opportunities to experience the pleasure of poetry when they were in school.

Regardless of the reason, and acknowledging that a variety of reading genres may be more prevalent in today’s classrooms, poetry is making a resurgence

*William Dee Nichols* is a professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Maine, Orono, USA; email [william.nichols1@maine.edu](mailto:william.nichols1@maine.edu).

*Timothy V. Rasinski* is a professor in the School of Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Studies at Kent State University, OH, USA; email [trasinsk@kent.edu](mailto:trasinsk@kent.edu).

*William H. Rupley* is a professor and Distinguished Research Fellow in the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture at Texas A&M University, College Station, USA; email [w-rupley@tamu.edu](mailto:w-rupley@tamu.edu).

*Rachael A. Kellogg* is a doctoral student at the University of Maine, Orono, USA; email [rakellogg@gmail.com](mailto:rakellogg@gmail.com).

*David D. Paige* is a professor in the Annsley Frazier Thornton School of Education at Bellarmine University, Louisville, KY, USA; email [dpaige@bellarmine.edu](mailto:dpaige@bellarmine.edu).

in many early reading programs. The predictable, controlled, and challenging vocabulary associated with poems is a natural fit with many early childhood reading approaches (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Holdaway, 1979; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). With ample opportunities for students to work with word families (rimes) and to engage in repeated and prosodic reading, poetry provides a natural means to develop decoding skill and fluency (Rasinski et al., 2008b).

Poetry is one of the more personal genres of writing and has been used for centuries to provide us with beautiful and interesting language. Moreover, the brevity of many children's poems makes them accessible to both capable and struggling readers to promote mastery and a sense of accomplishment in learning to do a task well. The rhyme and rhythm of poetry give it a musical quality that is universally appealing. Rhyme, rhythm, and melody provide levels of support and scaffolding for the student, making it easier to learn and to actively engage in reading. Various childhood favorite poems, such as this excerpt from "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" by Jane Taylor (1949), beg to be sung, and the lyrical nature of the poem provides a rich rhythm appealing to young readers:

Twinkle, twinkle little star,  
How I wonder what you are!  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky. (p. 135)

Poetry is meant to be read aloud, even when the audience is solely the reader. Poet laureate Robert Pinsky (as cited by Wilbers, 2014) captured the essence of the physical nature of poetry:

The medium of poetry is not words, the medium of poetry is not lines—it is the motion of air inside the human body, coming out through the chest and the voice box and through the mouth to shape sounds that have meaning. It's bodily. (p. 140)

This bodily response to poetry is often manifested in students' body and head movements as they recite a favorite poem. Research has noted that learning mechanisms operate optimally under multisensory conditions (Ernst, 2007; Stein & Meredith,

1993). For many struggling learners, the more we can make learning a multisensory experience, the more likely they are to meet success. The physical nature of poetry taps directly into the multisensory approach to learning. When students are seeing words, saying words, writing words, hearing rhyme, moving to the rhythm in dance, and so forth, they

are using a multitude of input channels to reinforce learning and loving reading. These multisensory responses benefit all learners and actively engage struggling readers in successful participation.

An arguable perception of poems and nursery rhymes is that they are the beloved rights of childhood. Children live in a world of imagination and fantasy surrounded by fairies, elves, talking animals, and magical places.

The rhythmic language of poetry provides young children with a form of expression that helps fuel their imaginations and fantasies. Imagination and fantasy can be meaningful gifts, as noted by Albert Einstein: "When I examine myself and my methods of thought, I come to the conclusion that the gift of fantasy has meant more to me than my talent for absorbing positive knowledge" (Wikiquote, 2018).

Writers of poetry arrange words that paint a picture of sounds with language that helps the reader hear, see, and feel experiences in unique ways. For instance, Walter de la Mare's (1949) repetition of words and phrases ("sure-sure-sure," "Tap-tapping," and "at all, at all, at all") sets a tone of urgency and makes words tumble from a reader's mouth. "Some One" is an imaginative poem that a reader wants to read over and over:

#### Some One

Some one came knocking  
At my wee, small door:  
Someone came knocking,  
I'm sure-sure-sure;  
I listened, I opened,  
I looked to left and right,  
But nought there was a-stirring  
In the still dark night;  
Only the busy beetle  
Tap-tapping in the wall,  
Only from the forest  
The screech-owl's call,

### PAUSE AND PONDER

- Why should reading curricula include poetry?
- Why is poetry the perfect text type for teaching phonics?
- Why is poetry the perfect text type for teaching fluency?
- Beyond phonics and fluency, why else should teachers use poetry?

Only the cricket whistling  
While the dewdrops fall,  
So I know not who came knocking,  
At all, at all, at all. (p. 173)

Through thoughtful selection of words, poets present opportunities to teach how word choices and their arrangement can be used to create the emotional meaning that specific poems are intended to convey. Poetry can then become a highly motivational text type for developing a lifelong love for reading and language as well as fluency in oral reading (Duthie & Zimet, 1992; Perfect, 1999). When encountering the language of poetry, students can be encouraged and guided to have emotional and physical reactions to the words. Pinsky (2014) shared that poetry has the ability to comfort and add quality to our lives. Poets' careful selection of words creates word tapestries that allow readers to respond and interpret in their own ways. This makes poetry perfect for interpretive performance. As Emily Dickinson (1959) stated, "If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry" (p. 104).

A critical value of poetry in reading instruction is that it focuses the reader's attention on the language used. This drawing of attention to the language can be of great value to the enhancement of students' reading ability and pleasure. When reading poetry, students should be encouraged to explore sound patterns and offered a variety of opportunities to respond to the language of rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. Repeated reading of poetry selections stimulates readers to reflect on deeper levels of language features and their use in poems. In addition, students realize that a poem can be interpreted differently with each reading (Norton, 1999).

Many poems allow students to see and feel the world with fresh insights. Poetry encourages students to play with words and to appreciate how words can create images. Through poetry, students discover the power and beauty of words (Strickland & Strickland, 1997). When given the gift of poetry, students grow in their abilities to enjoy, appreciate, and interpret life (Godden, 1988). Teachers and parents who read all forms of poetry aloud to children are contributing to a foundation for lifetime reading and nurturing a taste for poetry.

Sharing poetry should be a joyous event that is pleasant for teacher and students alike. Poetry reading should be inspirational and nurture enthusiasm

to read more, and it inherently does this as the student begins to hear the rhythm of the poetry and the lilt of the voice of the person sharing the poem. Exposure to poetry cannot begin too early and should come about naturally, exposing students to the beauty, humor, and vitality of rhythmic-rhyming language. Words used in poetry and nursery rhymes make language fresh again. Reading and listening to poetry are mutual experiences of pure delight.

Listening is the requisite skill for developing phonological awareness as poetry is intended to be shared orally, and it should be read both beautifully and melodically to reveal its musical quality to students. The musical quality of poetry provides the setting to motivate the exploration of language, enjoying the feel, rhythm, and sound of the words as they are repeated over and over again. Rhyme, rhythm, and melody have universal appeal to students and make poems easy to learn. When using poetry to explore language and develop fluency with the printed word, young learners should begin with shared reading and recitation of familiar rhymes and jingles, such as Mother Goose, old nursery rhymes, and songs. With each shared reading, the vitality of the language is enhanced and enlivened (Strickland & Strickland, 1997). The rhythm and rhyme encourage the reader and the listeners to rock their bodies, clap their hands, and shout and sing it again and again.

## Rhyming Poetry for Phonics

The reason we advocate rhythmic-rhyming language for teaching phonics is that poetry is made up of word families, which are the rhyming words. This word study approach recognizes that many words share certain relatively common spelling patterns that have consistent last sounds the same. Repeating spelling patterns representing the same sounds within words results in more rapid learning of letter-sound relations (Adams, 2008; Heilman, Blair, & Rupley, 2002).

Readers who recognize these letter combinations and associate the pronunciation with them can then apply this decoding knowledge to other words within that word family. Practice with letter-sound patterns occurring within word families helps readers more quickly increase their word recognition ability and, as a result, increase their reading fluency and comprehension.

The idea, then, is to teach young readers these word families so they can use this knowledge quickly and effortlessly while reading to recognize words that have these spelling patterns. This approach to phonics instruction has been recognized and endorsed by leading scholars in reading (Adams, 1990; Cunningham, 2004; Ehri, 2005; Gaskins, Ehri, Cress, O'Hara, & Donnelly, 1996; Gunning, 1995; Snow et al., 1998). The spelling patterns can take a variety of forms, such as prefixes, suffixes, and Latin and Greek roots. However, we believe that the most important patterns to teach early readers are the vowel-consonant combinations called word families, phonograms, or rimes.

These letter combinations are the part of a syllable that begins with the vowel and contains any consonants following the vowel. For example, *-at* in *hat* and *cat* is a word family, as is *-ight* in *flight* and *sight*. There are hundreds of word families worth teaching, and students who recognize word families in single-syllable and multisyllabic words have the ability to process such words accurately and efficiently. Fry (1998) demonstrated the utility of word families in his article "The Most Common Phonograms." According to Fry, knowledge of these phonograms allows the reader to decode and spell more than 600 one-syllable words simply by adding an initial consonant, consonant blend, or consonant diagraph to the word family. Although word families are commonly taught through word lists and decodable texts, the best type of text to support word family instruction is rhyming poetry. Rhyming poetry draws attention to targeted word families in texts that are authentic and engaging for students.

## Rhyming Poetry for Fluency

Poetry provides an excellent text structure for repeated oral reading. When teachers model fluent reading and then scaffold students' oral reading by reading with them, they are providing a key component of successful fluency instruction (Kuhn & Stahl, 2000; National Reading Panel, 2000; Nichols, Rupley & Rasinski, 2008; Rasinski, 2010). Studies have found that repeated readings lead to improved word recognition accuracy, reading rates, automaticity, expressive and meaningful reading, reading comprehension, and confidence in reading (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Samuels, 1979). These reading capabilities not only apply to the passages that students

have practiced but also transfer to new, never-before-seen texts (Mraz et al., 2013).

An important issue regarding repeated readings is implementation without diminishing students' desire and motivation to read. Many reading programs promoting fluency development employ rote and often mindless oral repetitions of texts for the primary purpose of increasing reading speed, often compromising prosody and motivation (Rasinski, Rupley, Paige, & Nichols, 2016). Elster and Hanauer (2002) noted that reading poetry is different from story reading and other text types, and teachers naturally encouraged multiple readings of poetry for expression or prosody. Poetry rehearsal emphasizes the eventual performance of poems and the more aesthetic experiences with reading (Elster & Hanauer, 2002).

The prosodic, performance, and aesthetic features of poetry reading are the primary reasons we have identified poetry as a natural text type for improving fluency. If oral performance is a natural outcome or goal of repeated reading, then poetry is an appropriate text or genre as it is meant to be performed for an audience. When teachers read poems, they promote learner involvement through expressive reading, immediate rereading, and encouraging students to read along or act out the poems (Elster & Hanauer, 2002).

## Poetry for Enjoyment

As previously discussed, poetry can be a useful vehicle for many various competencies in literacy and other curricular realms (Friday, 2015; Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Rasinski et al., 2008b; Simmons, 2014). If poetry is going to resurface for classroom use, it will require redefined purposes to maintain a place in the public school system (Friday, 2015; "Laureate Attacks Poetry Teaching," 2007; Sampson, 2007). When poetry plays a vital role in classroom instruction, the following occurs:

- Poetry is viewed as worthwhile and enjoyable and is seen as another avenue for motivating learners (Edwards, 2014; Rasinski et al., 2008b; Sampson, 2007).
- Personal connections to poetry are formed on important emotional planes, and students learn to express those emotions and improve their ability to interpret life (Godden, 1988; Simmons, 2014).

- Laughter finds its way into the classroom and stress becomes reduced (Rasinski, Rupley, & Nichols, 2012).

Poetry is a natural text choice for performance, practice, and engaging the whole class (Rasinski et al., 2012). Poetry lends itself to critical thinking, analysis, and the study of literary techniques and devices (Friday, 2015; Galda & Cullinan, 2006; Rasinski et al., 2008b; Tompkins, 2006). Yet, by its very nature, poetry also brings great pleasure to all who are able to experience it through reading, writing, listening, or any combination thereof (Edwards, 2014; Green & Ricketts, 2010; Vacca et al., 2006). As Kalli Dakos (1990) shares in this excerpt from her poem “Math Is Brewing and I’m in Trouble,” we cannot help but laugh and feel less stressed about learning new concepts:

Numbers single,  
Numbers double,  
Math is brewing  
And I’m in trouble.

If I could mix a magic brew,  
Numbers, I’d take care of you! (p. 4)

According to both educators and researchers, the first step in fostering a classroom environment rich in the love of poetry is to demonstrate that pleasure. Galda and Cullinan (2006) found that students respond more positively to a range of poetic forms in a supportive environment, highlighting the difference that teacher attitudes make. When young learners see teachers engaging in activities that are not necessarily required of the curriculum but that teachers teach because they love them, students wonder why this is and start developing their own interests in poetry (Kurkjian, Livingston, Young, & Fletcher, 2006).

Similarly, poet Roger McGough (2014) stated in the foreword to *Poetry Train*, “It is essential to foster an enthusiasm for poetry as children move through their primary education” (p. 1). In order for students to realize that poetry is exciting to experience, they have to be shown models of adults who feel this way. Modeling an appreciation of poetry is vital for a poetry-loving classroom culture. Given how much time students spend with their teachers each day, the power teachers have to influence student attitudes is astounding. Thus, a lifelong appreciation for poetry can begin and blossom right under a teacher’s nose.

## Poetry, Come on in to My Instruction

To use poetry as an integral part of the reading curriculum, teachers provide scaffolded instruction that supports students’ learning and reading of their poems fluently as they develop mastery over individual words and word parts within each poem. For sharing poetry daily, the activity should focus on the following:

- Enjoyment of poetry and songs for the sake of the poems and songs themselves
- The meaning of the poems and songs
- Making meaning through oral performance and student participation through positive encouragement
- The words within poems and songs, both word family words and interesting literary words that authors make good use of in writing
- Teacher modeling of fluent reading
- Rehearsal or repeated reading by students of poetry
- Assisted reading through reading with others
- Community building through group reading of poetry and performing for others

Many primary-grade teachers have a daily poem with which they open each day. Teacher and students may read a thematic, funny, or inspirational poem chorally once, twice, or three times as the day begins. The poem is then put on visual display for students to read on their own or again in unison when lining up for lunch, coming in from recess, or just before leaving for the day. This is a wonderful way not only to start each day but also to continue throughout the day with much repetition in less formal instruction. The following is an example schedule for reading a daily poem (Rasinski et al., 2012):

1. Choose a poem or song for each day of the school year. For example, on the day after your class has been invaded by a bee, fly, or other annoying insect, have your students learn to read and enjoy “There Was an Old Man in a Tree” by Edward Lear (1947). Put the poem or song on a chart or other form of visual display so it can be read over and over and compared and contrasted with new poems or songs when they are introduced.

### “There Was an Old Man in a Tree” by Edward Lear

There was an Old Man in a tree,  
Who was horribly bored by a Bee;

When they said, "Does it buzz?"  
He replied, "Yes, it does!  
It's a regular brute of a Bee." (p. 58)

2. Chorally read the poem with your class two or three times at the beginning of the day. Point out words that rhyme, uses of alliteration, and other interesting words and put them on display on a separate chart (word wall). List these words vertically so students can note the similarities in spelling for rhyming words.
3. Read the poem and word list twice more before morning recess (e.g., boys read once, then girls read once).
4. Read the poem and word list again when returning from recess (e.g., alternate lines between boys and girls, or use some other form of grouping).
5. Read the poem and word list together before lunch in a cheerful voice.
6. Read the poem as a group after lunch, but this time with softer voices to get ready for the afternoon.
7. Invite individuals and groups of two and three students to read the poem at the end of the day in an impromptu poetry slam. Encourage students to develop hand and body movements to go along with their performances.
8. Retire the poem to the back of the room, perhaps a poetry corner, where students can continue to read the poem on subsequent days.
9. Every Friday or so, bring back the retired poems so students can read and perform their favorites again and again.

Notice that we have simply expanded the notion of the daily poem by giving students the opportunity to read it repeatedly throughout the school day in different ways and with different voices. By focusing on words within the daily poem, we have engaged students in exploring the words for patterns and interest. The repeated readings of the poems promote fluency for students, and the harvesting and reading of words from the poem will develop their word recognition skills.

This format is flexible, and teachers will probably see many other opportunities to add additional readings; do other word activities, such as sorting the words by certain sounds, letters, or letter patterns; engage in other instructional activities

around the poem; and send the poem and word list home for further reading and enjoyment. The key idea is that we need to give students the opportunity to engage in the enjoyment of language and to master certain short texts. The sense of accomplishment that comes from being able to read a text well cannot be underestimated, especially for students who struggle to become proficient readers. These routines can form a basis for reading instruction that is effective for developing proficient readers and nurturing lifelong readers and language lovers.

### **Putting Poetry in Its Place— At the Forefront in Beginning Reading Instruction**

Unfortunately, as previously noted, poetry is a genre of text that we feel has to some extent found its way out of the reading curriculum in the name of more scientific approaches. Most reading curricula are dominated by informational and narrative texts, and as a result, poetry has been given a tertiary position. We feel that with the absence of poetry, students are missing out on a genre that allows them to appreciate the beauty of language from a number of vantage points: meaning, sound, rhythm, and expression. Thus, we feel that poetry is natural for promoting reading fluency, and rhythmic-rhyming language has the potential for nurturing both phonics and fluency. Also, of paramount understanding is that the use of poetry in no way impedes the use of science in the teaching of reading.

It is critically important for teachers and students to learn the motivational influence poetry has on writing and reading. Learners who do not engage with the joys of poetry miss out on the opportunity to discover how rewarding and enjoyable poetry can be in all aspects of literacy. Teachers can enhance their students' love of poetry by manifesting and modeling their own appreciation of poetry (Graves, 1992; Parr & Campbell, 2006; Wilson, 1994). The true motivation for learning and using poetry is the realization that it has an abundance of positive benefits. Poetry can allow for immediate success and confidence in literacy activities. Poetry encourages language and wordplay, connects reading and writing, and demonstrates the importance and creativity of word choice and word order (Parr & Campbell, 2006; Routman, 2001).

## TAKE ACTION!

1. Make poetry instruction part of your daily routine. Choose a poem for each day of the school year. Read the poem to model its prosodic features and pronunciation of the words.
2. Read the poem frequently over the course of the day (before students line up for specials, lunch, recess, etc.). This can be part of any transition activity.
3. Use repeated readings and recitations of poems, and combine these with movement.
4. Use poems as model texts so students can write their own poems for expression and motivation.
5. Create original poems.
6. Write parodies of classic poems, songs, and nursery rhymes.

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### MORE TO EXPLORE

#### Classic Poems

- Story It: <http://www.storyit.com/Classics/JustPoems/index.htm> (This webpage provides a collection of classic poems, including poems by Emily Dickinson, Edward Lear, and Albert Midlane.)
- World-English: <http://www.world-english.org/poetry.htm> (This webpage is another source for classic poems.)

#### Help With Writing Poems and Poems Written by Kids

- Poetry for Kids: <http://www.kathimitchell.com/poemtypes.html> (Easy to navigate, this webpage will be helpful to teachers who want to explore different types of poetry with their students. It features examples of how to do acrostic, alphabet, autobiographical, cinquain, and many other types of poems.)
- Poetry4kids and Giggle Poetry: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetry4kids-and-giggle-poetry> (On this site, you will find lessons on how to write poetry, including “poems about me,” family poems, animal poems, tall tales, school poems, silly rhymes, holiday themes, and silly songs. This is a wonderful site, and many of the other sites have links to it. It is a great resource for teachers.)

#### Songs

- Kids Environment, Kids Health: <https://kids.niehs.nih.gov/games/songs/index.htm> (This National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences webpage has some wonderful songs and sing-along activities arranged alphabetically and by theme. Many of the songs included here reinforce the word family–fluency connection.)
- BusSongs.com: <https://bussongs.com> (This site has the largest collection of children's music on the Internet and contains lyrics, videos, and music for kids' songs and nursery rhymes.)
- The Teacher's Guide: <http://www.theteachersguide.com/ChildrensSongs.htm> (On this webpage, songs are arranged in alphabetical order and set up for easy browsing. If you are unsure about the title of a song, a feature is provided to help you search the lyrics and identify the song.)

(continued)

**MORE TO EXPLORE (continued)**

## Poems for Kids

- Kenn Nesbitt's Poetry4kids.com: <http://www.poetry4kids.com/poems-by-topic/> (Poems are arranged by category: animal antics, food follies, friends and family fun, holiday happenings, and so on. You can also rate the poems. Many of them include rhyming patterns that can be used in the classroom.)
- Patrick Winstanley's Poetry for Kids: <http://www.funny-poems.co.uk> (This site includes funny poetry arranged by themes and features poetry writing contests. Note: Spend some time examining this site before sending kids to it. Some of the poems are rude and crude, which is actually a theme! Most are harmless, but some may be inappropriate for young students.)
- Jeff's Poems for Kids: <http://jeffspoemsforkids.org> (Jeff Mondak's site includes information about the poet as well as songs and lyrics written by him. Many of the poems rhyme and can be used to create good word family activities.)