

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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Why Poetry? 5–10 Minute Poetry Ideas

by Helen Frost

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What good is poetry? In these days of test-driven curricula, why and how should we find time for poetry in our children's and teenagers' classrooms? Is poetry an extravagance we can no longer afford?

I am certain that poetry is an essential part of any classroom, and that finding time for it every day helps students learn not only poetry, but also everything else.

Some students are in the classroom in body only, while their minds are elsewhere. In such cases, learning is minimal and impersonal, and doesn't "stick" long enough to be revealed on tests. Poetry can help students connect their whole being to their school lives. In using strong and musical language to explore the emotional center of children's real-life experiences, poetry draws children more fully into the classroom, making them feel they belong to the world they are learning about.

A child who has felt invisible (and there are many) and then comes across a poem that makes her feel seen is suddenly fully present in the situation in which the poem was discovered. If a librarian has introduced the child to the poem, the library will be felt as a friendly place, and the other books will be seen as potential friends. If a teacher has shared a poem that means something to a child, the child will be more open to all that the teacher has to offer.

It's not hard to find time for poetry in a classroom (for ideas, see reverse). One nice thing about poems is that they are usually short. They can be great "time fillers" for those moments when there isn't time to begin something new before gym class or lunch or the end of the hour or day. Start a collection of poems you like, and read one to the class in one of these moments. You don't have to teach it. Just share it, delight in it. Laugh or be silent with your students as the poem settles in. It will become part of your shared life.

Invite students to add poems to the collection you've started. Invite them to read aloud poems they have found that they think others might like. Have a corner of a bulletin board, or a page on a classroom Web site, where poems can be put up for others to enjoy.

When reading poetry leads, as it almost inevitably does, to writing it, your students' own poems can mix with the poems you have been sharing. Your life together will be enriched in countless ways.

5–10 Minute Poetry Ideas

Here are some ideas that fit into those five- or ten-minute spaces that sometimes appear in a teaching day. Welcoming poetry into your library or classroom enriches everything that happens there.

1. Read a poem out loud. (Early in the year, ask each student to go to the poetry section of the library, find a poem, copy it by hand, and put it in a class poetry collection. Include your own favorites, but don't tell them which are yours and which are theirs.)

2. Have each student write a sentence (or two or three). Have them count the words and then take out half.

3. Vote on which of these words your class likes best:

refrigerator	because
enemy	pillow
magenta	bird
mountain	spit

4. Circle the winning word and leave it on the blackboard. Let people (students, teachers, visitors to the classroom) surround that word with other words. Once a week or so, take a new vote, each time leaving the winning word on the blackboard and erasing all others.

5. Have everyone use the winning word in a sentence that is not true. Write the sentences on sticky notes. In groups of three to five, have students arrange their sticky notes in an order that makes some kind of sense or nonsense and read them out loud to the class.

6. Have each student fold a sheet of paper into nine squares. Instruct students to sit silently until they are filled with a word and to write it in one of the

squares, doing this until each square has one word in it. Save this paper.

7. Have each student fold another paper into nine squares and put it on the desk beside the first paper and write a new word in each square that looks or sounds something like the word in the corresponding square on the first paper. (The words might rhyme, they might begin or end with the same sound, they might have the same number of letters...) Ask students to write a sentence using three words from each paper.

8. Have students borrow someone else's paper and write sentences using three of the other person's words in each sentence. They can use the same words more than once, but not the same three words—at least one word has to be new in each sentence.

9. Ask students to write down two things that are not alike in any way (for example, "the moon" and "the school cafeteria") then trade papers with someone to see if they can find a way to compare the two things, writing the comparison on the paper and giving it back.

10. See if anyone can find two things for which no one in the class can find a comparison.

11. Ask students to write something they remember from a poem they heard or read more than a week ago.