

Writing Poetry

by

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Synopsis

Poetry, metaphor and imagery exist in every language. This article will help you to tap into your students' imaginations and show them how to read and appreciate the language of poetry. It also gives practical activities to get them writing their own poems.

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Introduction to Poetry

'What is this?' asked our English teacher.

'It's your desk, sir,' we, the pupils, replied.

'Oh, no it isn't. This is, in fact, a dead tree,' said the teacher. 'And what is this?' he asked me, pointing at my desk.

'A dead tree, sir?' I offered.

'No. This is a diary of a thousand love affairs.'

My teacher was, I suppose, referring to the many hearts and arrows and scratched messages on my desk of the 'Darren loves Julie - true' variety. The above exchange was my first real introduction to metaphor. You can use a similar approach with your classes today. Metaphor is not a new concept for children or teenagers; they all play or live in a fantasy world. Under the dining room table is, in fact, a secret cave; that stone kicked between a parked car and a lamppost was really the winning goal in a Cup Final. What we need to make our pupils aware of is that **everyone** is able to hold two images in his/her head at the same time. Tell your pupils this. Tell them that some very rare people can hold more than two. For example, it is said that Leonardo da Vinci could write a different sentence with each hand while saying a third one aloud! Moreover,

Indian yogis spend a lifetime trying to hold only **one** image in their head, something that I find impossible for any length of time. However, we can all hold **two**, quite easily. So the mechanics of poetry, that is, metaphor, are open to all pupils, whatever their abilities in other areas of the language.

You can present the idea of metaphor with a few simple examples:

- 1 He talks louder than a parrot.
- 2 The train moved along the track like a snake.
- 3 The clouds covered the plane like a white blanket.
- 4 The boxer's punch was as hard as a hammer.
- 5 The flames flickered like tongues.

The images in the examples above are, in fact, similes, which are a type of metaphor using 'like', 'than' or 'as ... as'. Discuss each image with your students and ask them to think of alternative similes. If you have a high-level class, show the students a second list:

- 1 He parrots on all the time.
- 2 The train snaked along the track.
- 3 The plane was blanketed by cloud.
- 4 The boxer hammered his opponent.
- 5 Tongues of flame flickered up.

These sentences use the same images, but show more sophisticated metaphors. They exhibit a much more playful and creative use of language, such as the unusual verbs 'to parrot', 'to snake', and 'to be blanketed'.

Activity 1 – Matching images

To reinforce the duality of metaphors, give your students a simple matching activity - a list of situations to match with images:

<p>1 a firework display 2 an astronaut on a space walk 3 a child crying in its cot 4 an old man walking 5 a crowd entering a stadium</p>	<p>a a baby and its umbilical cord b ants going into their nest c a multi-coloured spider's web d a tortoise moving e a parrot squawking in its cage</p>
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You can, of course, make up your own matching exercise to suit the level of your students. Discuss the appropriateness of each metaphor with the class. You may need to do this in the students' own language, depending on their level.

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Activity 2 – Write an image

Before attempting to write a poem, students should be given a chance to write their own similes or metaphors. Give them a list of new situations and ask them to write their own images for each one.

a ship in a storm _____

a baby trying to walk _____

women in a carnival procession _____

trees in winter _____

people at a party _____

Students can read out their efforts to the class in a random order and the other students can then match them with the original situations. Again, discuss appropriateness. Point out that it is arguable whether there is such a thing as an 'incorrect' metaphor - it may just be more difficult to make a connection between the two parts of the image. Here are some possible images for the situations above.

a ship in a storm ... **a leaf in the wind**

This image focuses on movement; both ship and leaf get tossed about in a haphazard way.

a baby trying to walk ... **a drunk walking home**

This image again focuses on movement, in this case the uncertain, tentative movements of a baby or a drunk who is unsteady on his feet.

women in a carnival procession ... **peacocks**

This image compares the women in their large, colourful dresses to peacocks with their feathers spread out.

trees in winter ... **skeletons**

Here, trees with no leaves are likened to bones with no flesh.

people at a party ... **monkeys in a zoo**

This image focuses on both actions and noise; chattering, babbling, eating nuts, milling around.

2 Reading Poems

Now that students can recognise similes and metaphors, you can show them some complete poems. The poems you choose depend on the level of the class. They don't have to be classics. Scout around for simple poems in children's anthologies; many popular songs also contain thought-provoking metaphors. Pass the poems around and ask your students, perhaps in groups, to read them and underline the similes or metaphors or any other language that appeals to them. Discuss the language they have underlined with the whole class.

3 Writing a Poem

Finally, you can ask your students to write a poem. It is quite normal at this stage to get asked such questions as 'Does it have to rhyme?' The answer is 'No', of course. All you are asking for at this stage is a mental flow, a sequence of images about a particular topic. Another common question is 'How long does it have to be?' Your answer should be something like, 'As long as necessary to say what you've got to say!'

The best way to present this kind of writing activity is by demonstration. Below is an activity that has always produced interesting results.

Activity 2 – Colour words

Choose a colour and write it on the board; this is your 'key word'. Ask your students to tell you all the sights, sounds, tastes, smells and feelings that they associate with that colour. Accept all suggestions and write them around the key word on the left-hand side of the board. For example:

anger	heart	tomatoes	roses	blood
	☒	☒	☒	
eyes (crying)		RED		danger
	☒	☒	☒	
stop		accidents		fire
	lips		passion	

Then, on the right-hand side of the board, write some definitions using the students' word associations. This is your chance to have a say in the content of the poem – you can leave out words you think will not be very productive. Make sure you leave some space to write between the lines later.

For example:

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Red is blood

Red is fire

Red is lips

Red is a heart

Now guide the students to suggest possible **images** to go with each definition. Encourage them to experiment with similes and metaphors; get them to think of interesting verbs and adjectives. You may get something like this:

Red is blood
like a red flower on the road after an accident.
Red is fire
shooting out of an angry volcano.
Red is lips
leaving lipstick on a mirror.
Red is a heart
broken after a love affair.

Finally, erase the words 'Red is' from all of the definitions, so you are left with a list of images, like this:

Blood
like a red flower on the road after an accident.
Fire
shooting out of an angry volcano.
Lips
leaving lipstick on a mirror.
A heart
broken after a love affair.

Admire your class poem! Give it a title. Then, summarise the writing process you have just demonstrated and ask the students to choose their own 'key word'. This can be another colour, but it doesn't have to be. Abstract nouns are usually more productive, for example, **love, hate, jealousy, power, loneliness, boredom.**

Your students should now begin writing individually, in silence, making lists of images for their chosen subject. Stress the aim is **quantity**, not **quality**, with the first draft – editing comes later. Monitor this activity and encourage pupils to change words, add words, delete words, and change the sequence of their images.

When they have finished a first draft, they can, if they wish, exchange it with a partner to edit - this stage would include suggestions to improve the poem and comments on vocabulary and appropriateness of similes and metaphors. Students then work on a second draft on their own.

Some students will produce a reasonable effort in a surprisingly short period of time. Others need more guidance. Others will want to take their poems home to work on. Fix a time, though, of perhaps a week, and then collect all the poems. Read them to the class. Discuss them. Type them up and display them. Make a folder. Give them to another class to read.

Reflection

In my experience, writing poetry makes students think carefully about words and what they want to say - they have to be very precise and exact. It also encourages them to edit their writing. As a teacher, you can deal with an individual's language problems as they occur - problems with language that he or she **wants** to use. Above all, writing and reading poetry is a shared experience and something which can be done by **all** students at **all** levels.