



dorothea mackellar
poetry awards

Teachers' notes

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Frequently asked questions

Who is eligible to enter and how does the competition work?

The poetry awards are open to all school-aged students throughout Australia. The award sections and associated prizes are outlined on the entry form (visit www.dorothea.com.au) The entry fee is \$15.00 per school which includes GST. Payment must accompany entries which must all be submitted in a single envelope.

Entries must be posted on or before 2 June 2008. Judging will take place in July/August enabling announcements regarding the winning entries to be made during Literacy and Numeracy Week 1-7 September 2008.

What are the judging criteria?

Entries will be judged on originality, use of language and construction. (*Please see below for more hints on criteria.*) All entrants receive a Participation Certificate.

Why do you set a theme for the competition?

Many students are at a loss for a poetry topic or theme, so it was decided by the Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society to set an optional theme each year. In 2006 the theme was 'backyard', in 2007 it was 'colour' and this year it is "forests, feathers, fins an fur' . Students do not have to adhere to this theme; it is merely a suggestion.

Do the judges read every poem?

Each year there are two judges who read and assess every single poem. The judges are well known children's poets or authors, chosen to judge the competition for their experience. In 2008, the judges' are Sue Gough (www.suegough.com.au) and Prue Mason (www.penguin.com.au/authors)

Is there a word limit or a particular poetry form that should be followed?

There is a limit of 80 lines imposed on poets. Poems should say what they need to say without being verbose. This means that the poet needs to edit excessive wordage from drafts until every word used is necessary to deliver the poem's message. Another problem is that young poets often feel that it is imperative to use rhyme. Teachers need to stress that rhyming is only valuable where the meaning is not compromised.

How do you know that the poem was written by the student and not a teacher or parent?

When completing the entry form the student and teacher are both asked to sign a declaration that states '*I declare that this poem titled..... is my own work.*' This should preclude any submission which is written by anyone other than the school student.

How do you check that the poems are not plagiarised?

We rely on the honesty of the students and the adults who supervise the writing of the poems. Despite this, samples of directly plagiarised poems have been discovered in the past by our judges who are chosen because of their familiarity with poetry.

How and when are the results of the competition announced?

To enable appropriate arrangements for awards ceremonies, teachers of winning students will be advised in August if their student has been successful. Teachers will be able to announce it to the school after the official public announcements. This will be made during Literacy and Numeracy Week (1-7 September 2008). A media release will be issued to announce the winners, and names and poems will be published on the website.

Do we receive any acknowledgment of the entries submitted by our school?

If a school or individual student submits an entry online then they will receive an email confirmation of their entry. If hardcopy entries are submitted unfortunately, due to the volume of entries received it is not possible to acknowledge receipt of each schools' entries.

Each student who entered will receive a Participation Certificate and they will be sent to the school in September/October.

How much input can a teacher have to a student's poem?

It is expected that the teacher's input be limited but include help with motivating interest in entering the competition. Teachers could stimulate students' with topic ideas and words and imagery they might employ, and demonstrate poetic forms. Finally they could help students to edit their work, and to proof-read for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors.

How do I obtain additional entry forms?

Entry forms are sent to every school in Australia. However, if your school's entry form has been misplaced you can download one at www.dorothea.com.au or submit entries on-line. Alternatively we can send you one by calling 02 67 421 200 or email dorotheamackellar@bigpond.com.

More about the Judging criteria

Winning poems:

- stand out from the rest because the poet's approach to the subject matter is individual or "different"
- have a distinctive style
- are a personal response to a situation the poet cares deeply about
- show that the poet is attuned to his or her surroundings
- touch deep emotions
- contain powerfully understated last lines
- resound with metaphors and similes that captivate the reader
- contain lines which are a treasure of clear, detailed sensory images
- are skilfully constructed, with memorable lines and poetic devices such as alliteration, rhythm and internal rhyme
- are thought-provoking

Poems that don't make the grade:

- make general statements
- use banal language
- contain a lack of attention to details
- are often lists of mundane words, repetitive phrases and clichéd expressions
- use forced rhymes which don't make sense in the overall construction of the poem
- are carelessly constructed
- use poor punctuation
- show a lack of attention to lay-out
- are "over-written", with excessive and/or clichéd words

Feedback from the 2007 Judges of the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards

There must be something in the water in Tasmania! A disproportionate percentage of our winners come from there.

This year the optional theme was “colour” and while an optional theme is a good starting point, it was inevitable that there would be a flood of poems about rainbows or poems that degenerated into lists along the lines of “red is for roses, blue is for sea”, etc. The sameness of approach meant that the judges read poem after poem that appeared to be more or less the same. As a result, these poems had nothing to make them stand out and cry for our attention. What the judges were looking for was some kind of extension: an original twist, or viewpoint, a depth of perception that took us below the surface, a poem that told us something that we did not know already, or expressed something fresh and exciting.

For instance, while only one of our top poets went with the theme, instead of merely writing about colour, she gave us a dazzling blow-by-blow account of the painter Jackson Pollock in action. She did not write *about* colour at all and yet we saw those paints thrown on the canvas in a way that was totally colourful.

Many poets chose dramatic scenarios relating to war, the environment or adolescent angst. While there was no doubting the passion behind the works, they seldom had anything new to say to add to the debate and all too often fell into declamatory melodrama or simply lament.

It is also interesting to note that the most successful poems did not rely on “poetic language” but crafted their work out of words we use every day. Adding extravagant adjectives detracts rather than adds to a good poem. Writing long rather than short is another trap for young writers. Although one of our winners wrote a poem only four lines long, every word counted and sizzled.

The very best poems that we read used startlingly imaginative metaphors, mixing unlikely combinations of carefully chosen words to new effect. Above all, the best poems showed evidence that the writer had not ploughed into the poem without giving the subject deep thought. The craft was then to distil something unique from those thoughts or emotions.

Sue Gough and Prue Mason

Feedback from the 2006 Judges

We were impressed by the quality of the poems submitted; in fact we feel that the overall standard has improved this year compared to last year. 'Backyard' as a topic provided for a refreshing and wide-ranging stretch of the poetic imagination.

We had a difficult task choosing the winners because of the quality of the short-listed entries. Winners came from all over Australia and it was a joy to have high standard of poems submitted by small schools for example Northern Territory's Katherine School of the Air.

Again this year, the largest volume of entries was in the upper primary section. The winners here were those who moved away from form poems and rhyme to develop depth and originality in their poems.

The poems in the secondary sections showed a sophistication and risk-taking in structure that was wonderful to see. In both lower and upper secondary sections a moving away from predictable rhyme and delving into the subject matter, whether it be the suggested topic or free choice, would lift many more of the poems to the shortlist pile. Winners from this category showed original imagery, economy of words and an ease with language that was breathtaking and joyous.

Suggestions for content:

- Fresh imagery is always going to lift your work above the other entries.
- Make what you write authentic to your voice, for example writing about yourself or others in old age sometime results in cliché work.
- Details, specific names make a simple subject much more worthy of the shortlist than an abstract expression of love or loss or friendship.
- Show us how you feel about a subject matter that might be sensitive or political or emotional, don't tell or preach to us, poetry is subtle and full of layers.
- Read your work aloud, if it doesn't sound vital, energetic or interesting or if you trip over a word then you might need to edit and re-write.
- Understand that your first draft is not the final piece. Put it aside. Re-visit, edit, take out words, re-write.
- Avoid cliché and overused words for example these supposed poetic words: azure, aquamarine, glee, pretty, verdant, gnarled, whilst, merry, sapphire, ponder, alas, dappled, yonder.
- Words in awkward order (inversions) just for their rhyming value do not bring zest to the poem
- Complex or unusual words can clog the poem. They stifle the free flow of ideas or expression.
- By blocking left in your poem's presentation you allow the white space of the page to help your poem's clarity and freshness. Readability is all.

- Poems need to make sense – some poets seemed to suggest by their poems that poetry is not concerned with communication.
- Humour is good too.

Presentation:

- No fancy fonts- this inhibits readability and the impact of your poem.
- Block your poem left.
- No graphics- no pictures, no coloured paper, no photos, no cutesy stickers - please, please
- Check your spelling, check your grammar.
- Teacher's comments or corrections on poems do not enhance the poem's chances.
- Images of violence are not acceptable.
- Complete the entry forms fully.
- Please read the rules and ensure all information for the entrant is provided (title, name, age, grade, signatures of both teacher and student etc).

Lorraine Marwood and Claire Saxby

Comments from Judges from previous years

- Too often younger children's poems were lists of words, repetitive phrases and clichéd expressions.
- Poetry is memorable when the voice of the poet is distinctive, where the images are original, where deep thought is given to what the poet really wants to say or is feeling.
- Children's poems can be far more successful if they write about something they have witnessed first-hand – something which stimulates their imaginations and excites them.
- The simple is preferable to the complex, and that the aim of writing a poem is to communicate with the reader, not to baffle them.
- The poems which appealed most to us were those which expressed immediacy of personal experience and knowledge, encapsulating something specific, rather than attempting broad generalisations.
- We would advocate simplicity in presentation. Fancy typefaces and those in bold or varied colours – and artwork which fights against legibility – are taxing for the judges' eyes.

- Many poems included apt imagery, well observed and within the young writer's experience. A number of schools submitted formulaic poems obviously set as a class exercise; examples include acrostics, cinquain, definitions ('Time is . . .'). While useful as teaching devices, these formulas do not necessarily result in poems suitable for competition entries.
- Careless errors were common. Errors included:
 - mixing tenses (moving inadvertently from present to past)
 - verbs not agreeing with subjects (very common in reversed forms)
 - spelling - confusion of pairs such as past, passed; viscous, vicious; alter, altar; and (commonly) mixing there, their and they're.
- Many of the commonest errors are those which cannot be picked up by a computer spell check, but there were also many simple typos that should have been corrected by proof reading (eg voilent for violent).
- Young writers should be alerted to the over-use of generalised words and phrases eg beautiful, lovely, crystal (very popular this year!) and sparkling. Images... often tended to be clichéd, lacking vitality and freshness.
- The judges suggest that young writers should be encouraged to avoid generalisations and lists of values for individuals and for society. Some poems were homilies, addressing the reader with advice. Perhaps the influence of the greeting card industry and of popular songs is evident in this area.
- Plagiarism is most to be deplored and we suggest it is very important for teachers to be vigilant in discovering and discouraging it. At least six entries were direct copies of published poems. But, as in previous years, there were many entries that excited the judges because of their freshness and originality of ideas; their novel but apt imagery; and for their acute observation of nature and the environment, or of human nature with all its foibles as well as its rich diversity.

Overcoming potential problems

The do's and don'ts of getting students involved in poetry writing.

DO:

- encourage your students to frequently write poems
- expose your students to a whole range of poetry forms
- demonstrate to your students what makes a poem “work” by exploring with them the elements of a poem (voice and tone; sounds, such as alliteration, assonance, onomatopoeia; poetic devices such as similes and metaphors; rhyme and rhythm; poetic forms such as blank verse, couplets, quatrains, parodies, etc)
- encourage your students before writing to create banks of words (that is, nouns, adjectives and verbs) and phrases which sizzle with excitement and originality, and then encourage your students to dip into these word banks while writing their poems
- be enthusiastic when any of your students write phrases which are original
- encourage your students to experiment with their use of words and phrases, form, tone, voice, rhythm and rhyme
- show students how to edit their work ruthlessly, removing all words which are banal and/or unnecessary

DON'T

- let students write without first stimulating their interest in the subject at hand
- accept work which is sub-standard
- accept first drafts unless the student is in an infants' class
- allow work to be published which contains spelling, punctuation or grammar errors
- submit 30 poems to a competition which are virtual copies of one another

What is a poet's purpose?

- to describe the world around him or her
- to paint word pictures
- to arouse emotions
- to appeal to the reader's senses
- to change attitudes
- to make the reader think
- to explore the sound of words

Creating young poets

Winners of the Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards Schools' Award demonstrated a high overall standard, which indicated that teachers were working with students to develop poetic language and to encourage them to think about different ways of skilfully expressing their ideas in a range of different subjects.

Here are some ways in which teachers can develop poetic creativity in their students:

1. Immerse students in and show them the power of words

Demonstrate how even a single word can have enormous power: a dog, for example, can be a mongrel or a thoroughbred. Both "mongrel" and "thoroughbred" create different emotional reactions in the listener/reader.

Consider these sets of words in terms of how you react to them differently, even though each set has similarities of meaning:

<i>anger</i>	<i>fury</i>	<i>irritation</i>
<i>Interest</i>	<i>obsession</i>	<i>curiosity</i>
<i>Animal</i>	<i>beast</i>	<i>dragon</i>
<i>plant</i>	<i>buttercup</i>	<i>poison ivy</i>
<i>Girl</i>	<i>bridesmaid</i>	<i>lassie</i>
<i>Hitting</i>	<i>bashing</i>	<i>prodding</i>
<i>Moving</i>	<i>propelling</i>	<i>shuffling</i>
<i>Jumping</i>	<i>hurdling</i>	<i>leaping</i>

You will notice these sets of words are nouns and verbs. Skilled writers know that appropriately-chosen nouns and verbs are the building blocks of good writing. Words carefully chosen to suit a specific purpose have more power than the first word that pops into the writer's head.

Challenge your young writers to carefully choose a word, not to simply write down the first word they think of. If a student uses a wishy-washy word, insist that he consults a thesaurus to select a word or phrase which will have greater emotional impact on the reader.

If the strongest verb is chosen, then usually there is no need to employ an adverb. (Lazy writers over-use adverbs because they haven't explored the wide range of more appropriate verbs.)

If your student uses an ordinary or clichéd adjective, challenge him to replace it with an adjective which has greater power. Here are some examples of poorly-chosen adjectives replaced by stronger, more effective adjectives:

An original idea *a new-born idea*

a huge lump *a cantaloupe-sized lump*

a suspicious woman *a frosty-eyed woman*

fat fingers *sausage-sized fingers*

brown eyes *teak-coloured eyes*

greedy face *wolfish face*

a high kick *a cloud-high kick*

grabbing fingers *fish-hook fingers*

2. Immerse students in poetry

a. Reading poetry

You, the teacher, can read poetry to children, not as a formal lesson, but informally, as the occasion demands, or whenever you have a moment to fill in during classroom lessons. The poems can be short and fun (a limerick or a couplet, for example), or longer and appropriate to a class subject you are exploring.

Ask your students to find poems for you to read to the class, or leave a pile of poetry books on your desk and flick through them from time to time to choose and read a poem to the class during the day.

Invite your students to read poems they enjoy to themselves and to the class. Ask your school librarian to give you a selection of poetry books and spend lessons where pairs of students read a poetry book and select a poem to be delivered to the class.

b. Reciting poetry

Poems which are relatively short and have a strong rhythm and/or rhyme are ideal for students to memorise and present. In time, your students should have a wide repertoire of poems for presentation. Audiences for the poetry recitation can be the class itself, parents, junior students, the general public or the whole school.

In presenting poems, don't just rely on the voice alone but make use of aids such as percussion instruments, pieces of music, finger clicking, hand clapping. Children can experiment with their voices while reciting – lowering their tones for slow and creepy sections, singing other sections, pitching their voices high where needed. Give lines to individuals or pairs of students to recite within the group recitation. Let your students have fun creating the sound of poems!

c. Listening to poetry

Invite others into your classroom to present poetry recitations. The “others” might be other teachers, students from other classes, the school principal, parents or visitors. Most people can recite at least one poem! You can also find CDs and cassettes with poems recorded on them to play for your students.

d. Copying poems

Have your students practice copying poems in their best hand writing or special calligraphy, and then create a fancy border and an illustration for it. Display the poems in a prominent place, such as the school administration entrance.

e. Writing poems

Creating a poem does not have to be an individual affair. Your students as a class can create a poem, or you can divide the class into groups and give each a topic (and a deadline); then invite the groups to give a reading (with sound effects) to the rest of the class. Students might like to work in twos or threes to write a poem and then present it for display on a poster.

Choosing a topic

Students will write best about topics which most interest them. Thus your first task is to find child-friendly topics (that is, those which are relevant to their age, their interests and their experience).

One idea is to make a list of the alphabet and then ask students to suggest topics which they might like to explore. For example:

Actors, action man, acrobats, aunties
Burgers, bedrooms, burping, beach, balloons, brothers
Cuddling, cute kittens, caves
Dogs, dancing, danger, dolls, dandruff
Exploring, ear ache, elephants
Food, fancy dress parties, flying, fear
Gross stuff, gardens, green vegetables, giraffes

Alternatively, your topics could be listed like this:

NATURE - plants, animals, countryside, ocean, fire, flood, air, earth

LOVE - friends, relatives, adult love, first love, animals, self love

LOSS - people, animals, objects, innocence

CHANGES - growth (physical, spiritual, emotional), house-moving, new friends, new parent

PEOPLE - loved, hated, feared, envied, admired, respected

CELEBRATIONS - birthdays, holidays, religious days, anniversaries

PLACES – positions (up, on, under, etc), countries, cities, towns, countryside, urban areas

OBJECTS- ornaments, clothing, toys, body parts, machinery

EMOTIONS - fear, anger, sadness, happiness, envy, frustration

MODERN LIFE - shopping malls, SMSing, videos, play stations, cities. computers, robots

THE ARTS - music, dance, books, sculpture, architecture, paintings

Creating poems: writing and editing activities

Creating an oral poem

Here are some suggested topics for this exercise: things parents say to kids when they are telling them off; the school assembly; being nagged to clean up your bedroom; begging for extra pocket-money; choosing a meal from a restaurant menu.

An oral poem can be created thus:

- a. Choose a topic
- b. Invite students to think of one line in response to the topic
- c. Listen to and select lines from students as they think of them
- d. As you accept “good” poetry lines, assemble the students physically in front of class and ask them to repeat their suggested line
- e. Keep adding students (with their lines) and then show the class the process of editing by re-arranging the order of lines, adding lines, deleting lines, repeating lines where appropriate
- f. When you think you have a good poem, ask the class for suggested titles and choose the most appropriate line
- g. Have the poem read aloud by each of the students in the line
- h. If you wish, write down the poem created by the class

Creating metaphors

This is an exercise which if practiced frequently will demonstrate to students how to create rich imagery in their poetry. Take a topic, and then show students how the topic can be likened to other objects or forms. For example:

Wind is
a mad man
a bully boy
a crazy woman
a maniac
a transformer
a destructive child
a loud-mouthed lout
a wrestler
a butchering beast
a runaway stallion
a noisy villain
an exhaled breath
a bunch of fidgeting fingers

If you wish to work with the 2006 theme, then here are some suggested topics: picking vegetables, trampolining, climbing a tree, learning how to swim. Other topics you might like to have your students experiment with are: the sun, the moon, Autumn, an abstract painting, a noisy boy, the city at night, a bushfire, a clown.

Creating richer language

In writing, the use of ordinary words results in ordinary prose or poetry. Students need to be shown that every single word in their writing is important in creating an overall memorable piece of work. They need to know how to increase the power of the words they use in their writing. If you undertake the exercise below frequently, your students will realise how much it improves their writing.

First, make sure every student has access to a thesaurus. Next, create a bank of clichéd words. For example:

Ran, walked, threw, said, called, jumped

Ask your students to replace each one of these action words with a more powerful verb. Suggest that they try to find a word which is unique. Compare and contrast the words chosen. Ask students why “shuffled” or “strode” or “tiptoed” are better words than “walked”. Explain to them that verbs are the most important words in a sentence, that they give a sentence its strength and energy, that most often adverbs are not needed if a verb is appropriately chosen.

Show how the adjective + noun combination can often be improved by using a specific noun. For example: an old woman is a crone; a girl dog is a bitch; a lot of books is a library; a big tree is an oak.

When students use clichéd adjectives, challenge them to be specific. For example, an old house might be a two hundred-year-old mansion; an angry man might be a mouth-frothing tyrant; a sweet desert might be a sugar-coated, crispy-skinned apple turnover; a red apple might be a ruddy-cheeked Sundowner.

Find memorable lines of poetry and display them for students to read and to discuss. Here are some examples:

... lamps like burning tulips bloom
... the hammer-blows of heat/The intolerable dazzle
... the white saucer like some full moon descends
... in the deep, strange-scented shade of the great carob tree
... amber pools like tea/From some old fossiker's billy
... the river was brawling and tempestuous
... her face ripened to cherry redness
... the woman bathed them in her drowsy, amiable smile

Dealing with the 2008 theme 'Forests, Feathers, Fins and Fur' **by Lorraine Marwood**

A way into an exciting poem

Often I need to research my poem before I write it- now that could simply mean making a bank of words related to my topic- in this case 'Forests, Feathers, Fins and Fur'.

Here are some suggested ways to gather information first:

- **Brainstorm** - making a mind map or a simple list of all the words and ideas you know about the topic.

Here are some ideas I came up with when I wrote *feathers, forest, fur, fins* in a circle in the centre of my page

- fauna/ flora- this topic includes plants, trees in a forest
- food chain, food webs
- positive and negatives of feathers, fur, fins
- the variety and purpose of feathers, fur fins
- uniqueness
- how each depends on the other
- into the future, into the past
- knowledge, understanding, empathy
- what's my role in all this?



- Forest- the variety of bushes, trees, mosses, water, rock, shade
 - Forest as earth's lungs
 - high and low and thick forest, smell of wet earth
 - how can I help our native animals?
- **Research-** now go to the school library, public library or the internet, and start finding out information- make a note of the most surprising fact about the forest or animal or plant or mini beast you are interested in.

Here's a simple format for research:

- Chose an animal or part of the forest
- Write down where it lives/ its habitat
- Find all the words you can to show us a word picture of that animal
- The secret ingredient- surprise us with an amazing unique fact about that animal and keep this for the last line

Here's my research on the platypus:

Platypus and environment	looks	behaviour	endangered
In rivers or streams	Duck billed	Dives repeatedly for food- up to 75 dives per hour	Only one of two monotremes in world
Earth bank to dig burrow	Beaver tailed	Forages for food 12 hours every day	Pollution of waterways
Likes overhanging vegetation for shade	Lays eggs	solitary	
	Semi aquatic	Venomous spur- male only	
	2 layers of fur	Rely on touch and a sixth sense of elcetro reception	
	All the power in the front legs		

Picking out ideas from this grid and adding - what surprises me out of all this information

- 75 dives per hour
- tunnels in bank

Remember you don't have to use all the information.



Here's the first draft of a platypus poem

*Platypus, beavering tail as rudder
feet and beak as duck,
but that dive
time and time again-
seventy five times you were clocked
such precision, searching for the right
stream food. Then the moist tunnel
in stream bank
a cocoon between earth, water and snout.*

*Front legs so digging strong
so predator alert, a spur
of poison, like a hidden dart
on hind leg. Be warned, be watchful
small worms, water beetles, larvae
and us.
Platypus is the thread of double layered fur
skimming the stream, the river, nibbling at
bushes, at roots booted in mud.
Burrowing between the forest, water
and the world's spotlight on such
a creature, monotreme,
that lays the mammal egg
our nursery rhyme to keep safe
from our giant hands.*

A format

1. start with physical description
2. weave in environmental points
3. bring in something of surprise, unusual, unique
4. don't forget to add emotion, your reactions, your feelings- these two points make a powerful ending to your poem

Other approaches

- a new animal using characteristics of extinct animals
- an environmental adaptable animal maybe a hybrid
- an overview of characteristics of fins or feathers or fur
- from a wildlife rescue team
- from a zoo
- a wildlife park
- a ranger
- a researcher



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- a historian
- someone seeing the animal for the first time
- a poacher
- connections to all layers of life

Format or ideas for the way a poem can be presented

- a postcard
- a mask poem
- a conversation poem
- a report
- an invitation
- a time capsule report

Remember

- use the senses of taste, touch, sight sound and smell to move away from cliché
- put your emotions and unique ideas into the poem- this will make it stand out from the others
- keep brainstorming the topic until you find an idea that no one else will think of
- use original imagery
- enjoy finding out about our unique and wonderful world of feathers, forest, fur, fins

Some final hints

- the most information will come from researching an animal or plant in detail
- try and use similes/ metaphors- like/as
- what images have I used in my poem?

Leave your first draft of your poem for a day or two, then look at it again

- Read it aloud
- Does it sound poetic?
- Do you need to cut out unnecessary words?
- Do you need to add a startling image?
- Do you need to re arrange your lines for a more rhythmical poem?
- Do you need to make another stanza to provide emphasis?
- Look at the two versions of the poem – what have I altered?

Second draft of poem

*Platypus, beavering tail as rudder
feet and beak as duck,
but that dive
time and time again-
till seventy five was the tally
such precision, searching for the right
stream food. Then the moist tunnel
in stream bank
a cocoon between earth, water and snout.*

*Front legs so digging strong
so predator alert, a spur
of poison, like a hidden dart
on hind leg. Be warned, be watchful
small worms, water beetles, larvae
and us.*

*Platypus is the thread of double layered fur
skimming the stream, the river, nibbling at
bushes, at roots booted in mud.
Burrowing between the forest, water
and the world's spotlight on such
a creature, monotreme-
that lays the mammal egg
our nursery rhyme to keep safe
from our Giant hands.*

Some websites to help research the theme:

<http://www.namoi.cma.nsw.gov.au>

<http://www.australianfauna.com/>

<http://www.teachers.ash.org.au/jmresources/ausanimallinks/index.html>

<http://www.zoomwhales.com/coloring/Australia.shtml>

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~slacey/minibeasts.htm>

Opening lines

There are a myriad of lines with which to begin a poem. Pre-writing, encourage students to think about the voice and tone of their poem. Have them imagine who is narrating the poem. What is the purpose of their poem – to shock, inform, amuse? Will they use a particular poetry form such as a septet, rhyming couplets, quatrains or a sonnet?

Here are some opening lines of published poems which deal with the topic of backyards:

*it's afternoon and here I lie
"Wash the dog," Mum says
I like our gate
Last Sunday at our barbecue
Plumtrees in orchards day and night
Within the flower there lies a seed
Cut grass lies frail
The sounds in the evening
Wake up stars!
When we buried
Seeing all my family
The hen is a ferocious fowl
How beautiful is the rain!*

Writing and editing a free form poem

Students often finish a poem and do not want to re-draft it. The purpose of the following exercise is to demonstrate to students not only how to create a poem, but also how to edit it. You would be advised to demonstrate the exercise on the whiteboard before having students work on their own poems.

Ask students to think of a place and a time* and to keep this in mind as they write:

- line one something says to you
- line two something you can see going on
- line three something you say
- line four something you hear
- line five something you are thinking

Next, have the students create variations of these lines. They can

- change the line order
- add new lines
- remove any line or element
- expand any line or element
- use forms of repetition or reframing
- change tense and/or
- add rhyme (but only if it makes sense!)
- finally, create a title for the poem.

Suggested topics: * in the kitchen at breakfast time, Thursday night in the supermarket, noon in the library, school holidays at an amusement or water park, a term day on a school excursion, late evening on a railway platform.

Crafting free verse

Free verse is irregular verse free of metre, patterned end rhyme and anything else (such as syllable or accent count). One of its features is the breaking of the line to highlight a key image or idea. The poem should be rhythmic, not dull and flat.

A poet can make free verse lines “sing” by

- deleting excess words
- paying attention to vowels and consonants
- attending to the ebb & flow of rhythm
- breaking lines (enjambment) to highlight the “music”

Enjambment occurs where the sense of one line runs over into the next. It makes the poet more conscious of words, phrases, lines and rhythms. Places where your students can break lines are

- where natural pauses occur such as between phrases or after punctuation
- in the middle of a natural phrase (to create tension)
- at a point of suspense, leaving the matter hanging until the next line picks it up and satisfies the reader’s curiosity

Suggested free verse exercises

1. To help students understand enjambment, find a published free verse poem and present it as a piece of punctuated prose. Ask the students to “re-work” it as a poem, deciding where (and why) they think end words occur. When the class has decided on the shape of the poem, compare their effort with the original poem. If students undertake this exercise a number of times, they will write free verse poems with greater confidence.
2. Have students examine particular poems of their own choosing for the lineation and its effects on meaning. You might want to point out that in speaking poetry the convention is to “read to the end of the line” so that the word at the end is stressed.
3. Have students experiment with reading aloud a free verse poem that they have selected as their favourite. Allow time for sharing of these readings and discussion of the effects.
4. Have students write a sequence of free verse poems. Encourage them to consider the voice they will use in each verse and how they will shape the poetry to communicate feelings and ideas.

Activities for pairs or groups

1. Students are presented with a poem with particular words omitted and asked to speculate what might best fit. If carefully chosen words are left out, rather than in standard cloze procedure, attention can be focused on specific aspects of the poem – imagery, rhyme, or rhythm.
2. Students are presented with a poem cut into segments. They must then place them in what they judge to be the “right” order. The difficulty of the exercise can easily be adjusted to the level of the pupils both by the choice of poem and the length of each segment.
3. Some “wrong” words – perhaps a declared specific number – are included in a version of the poem. Students decide which they are and propose alternatives.

After each of these activities, students should compare their versions with the original poems and discuss their relative merits.

Australian and international children's poetry books and collections

- Do Wrong Ron, Steven Herrick (UQP, 2003)
- My Life, My Love, My Lasagna (UQP 1997)
- By the River, Steven Herrick (Allen and Unwin, 2004)
- If Bees Rode Bicycles, Michelle A. Taylor (UQP, 2003)
- Muster Me a Song, Anne Bell (Triple D Books)
- Redback Mansion, Lorraine Marwood (Five Islands Press, 2002)
- that downhill yelling, Lorraine Marwood (Five Islands Press, 2005)
- Doodledum Dancing, Meredith Costain (Penguin, 2006)
- Farm Kid, Sherryl Clark (Penguin, 2004)
- There's something nasty on the bottom of my shoe, Colin Thompson (Hodder, 2003)
- And the Roo Jumped Over the Moon, compiled by Robin Morrow (Scholastic Australia, 2004)
- Poems By Young Australians 2007: The best entries from the Taronga Foundation Poetry Prize (Random House, 2007)
- 100 Australian Poems for Children, edited by Clare Scott-Mitchell & Kathlyn Griffith (Random House, 2002)
- Floating on Clouds: The Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards 1998-2001, edited by Zita Denholm (The Dorothea Mackellar Memorial Society, 2002)
- Because a Fire Was In My Head, edited by Michael Morpurgo (Faber & Faber, 2001)
- The King's Pyjamas, compiled by Pie Corbett (Belitha Press, 2001)
- Poems Then and Now, compiled by Fiona Waters (Evan Brothers Limited, 2001)
- The Moonlight Stream & Other Poems, compiled by John Foster (OUP, 2000)
- The Way Through the Woods & Other Poems, compiled by John Foster (OUP, 2000)

For older poets:

- The Best Australian Poems 2004, edited by Les Murray (Black Inc. 2004)
- The Best Australian Poems 2003, edited by Peter Craven (Black Inc. 2003)

Bibliography / Poetry reference books

- Did I Hear You Write? Michael Rosen (Andre Deutsch, 1989)
- Word Games: Activities for Creative Thinking and Writing, Dianne Bates (Longman, 1993)
- The Inward Ear: Poetry in the Language Classroom, Alan Maley & Alan Duff (Cambridge University Press, 1989)
- Teaching Literature: Nine to Fourteen, Michael Benton & Geoff Fox (Oxford University Press, 1985)

About the compilers

Dianne (Di) Bates was co-judge with her children's poet husband Bill Condon of the 2004 Dorothea Mackellar Poetry Awards. Di has authored over 80 books, mainly for young people. Her most recent titles are *How to Self-Edit* (Emerald Press) and *Money-Smart Kids* (Ibis Publishing). You can contact her at www.enterprisingwords.com.

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