

Poetry & The Natural World

Why write poems about the natural world?

British poetry has a long tradition of connection with landscape and nature. We cannot separate ourselves from the natural world, and young people are increasingly concerned about it. What we can do is bring into sharper focus for both children and ourselves the joyful, healing, subtle, delicate or terrifying aesthetics of nature. When writing a nature poem, we're aiming to share a particular experience of nature, and we have to resist the temptation to write generally about it. It's about choosing a diamond moment. We are lucky enough to have many experiences with nature, in urban jungles, streets, allotments, gardens, weather, woods, parks, beaches, rivers, seas, peaks, hills and playgrounds. Many of these experiences will be enjoyable; some may not.

This poetry resource gives children the opportunity to write an impression, to capture a moment, to use poetry as a symbol and to make something familiar seem unfamiliar. Perhaps those taking part could even produce a literary magazine showcasing the power and fragility of nature.

Things to bear in mind

- It's important that you approach poetry topics with an understanding that you and your class are discovering poetry together, and that you will join them in exploring the theme of the natural world. Poetry is a great way to pick up the habit of being a writer- teacher. It doesn't take much to draft a verse of a poem and you can show children how you are developing your poem over time. So much of poetry is fine-tuning, rereading and making gradual changes. You will need to model this, as children often have the misconception that once a poem is drafted it is finished.
- You will need to focus on children's use of general verbs. When conferencing, look out for these and ask children whether they can swap them for something different. Verbs that children typically overuse include: *has, was, saw, got, went* and *made*.
- While it's not impossible to plan a poem, you will not be giving children planning grids for poetry. Instead, you will provide them with strategies used by real poets at the 'dabbling' stage. This is where poets play around with lists, words, phrases and lines before slowly building up a first draft.
- Some children may know they have something to say but don't know where to begin. In these cases, simply help them by giving them an opening line. They can always revise it later once they've got going.
- You will notice that children will usually want to focus on any 'action' taking place in a poem. Make it clear to your class that you know this is what they'll do and that your mini-lessons will show them how to take these 'actions' and make them poetic.
- Children will often find revising their poem easy. However, they may be reluctant to let go of old lines and delete what is no longer required. This is something you will have to encourage and model.

Idea Generation Techniques

Write lists

- Write an *If I were ...* poem.
- Write an *I'm the person who ...* poem.
- Write a list of words that remind you of nature.
- Write a list of natural things you can see, feel and hear right now, and turn one of them into a poem.
- Write about something in nature that is important to you.
- Turn a nature detail or setting from a story that you know (e.g. the forest in *Little Red Riding Hood*) into a poem.
- Turn a nature detail or setting from one of your own stories into a poem.
- Write a poem from the point of view of something in nature, e.g. a pebble, the wind, an animal.

Poetry from the book you are reading

- Choose a sentence or two from the book you're reading and turn it into a poem.

Special object

- Bring in a special natural object from home. Describe what you see – using all the senses. Describe how it makes you feel. Turn it into a poem.

Seeing things differently

- Compare an everyday natural thing to something abstract. For example, a storm and fury.

Important people

- Make a list of the most important people in your life. Then make a list of memories you have with that person that involve something to do with nature.

Memories with strong feelings

- Write a list of strong feelings (happy, worried, scared, sad). Then write down a moment when you have felt like that.

Favourite places

- Describe the smells/sights/sounds of your favourite natural place. Jot down what it's like there. Use all the senses, thinking about the emotions it brings up for you and what might be important about the place. Turn that into a poem.

Go outside

- Play with your friends!
- Find something very small that you have never looked at properly before.
- Find something that is growing. How is it doing it?
- Find something that shouldn't really be there or is broken. Why?
- Sit and listen to the sounds around you.
- Feel what the weather is like. First with your eyes open and then with them closed. What does this kind of weather make you wonder about?

Take five ideas

Choose a natural object (e.g. a tree). List five ordinary words to do with the object. Then make each word into a poetic line:

- **Trunk** – serious and silent, sturdy and strong
- **Bark** – crusty and dusty, hugging history to itself
- **Leaves** – whispering secrets to the breeze
- **Branches** – curious fingers exploring the sky
- **Rings** – the life of the tree in layered lines – the story goes full circle.

Try personification

Write down five things you see when walking outside. Choose one and list five ways it could seem human or animal-like:

- **Plant pot** – like a cupped hand, taking good care of the flowers.
- **Tree root** – keep a close eye on it – I'm sure I saw it slide through the earth towards us.
- **Leaves** – looking up, I see thousands of little umbrellas doing their best to keep us dry.
- **Sea Spray** – Rising up – out of stones – like horses.
- **Seaweed** – It lies across the rocks like forgotten mermaids' hair.

Use drawings and photographs

- With your friends, collect natural things from outside, draw them and write a poem underneath.
- Bring in photographs from home and write a poem about each one.

Use your own memories

- Write down lots of endings to this sentence until a writing idea appears: *Outside, when I was younger ...*

Suggested Books

Poetry Please: The Seasons by Various authors

Vacation time poems for children by Nikki Giovanni

I Am The Seed That Grew The Tree by Fiona Waters

All the Wild Wonders: Poems of our Earth by Wendy Cooling

A Year Of Nature Poems by Joseph Coelho

Overheard In A Tower Block by Joseph Coelho

Orionmagazine.org: An american based nature poetry journal and website.