



Grow your own class of poets

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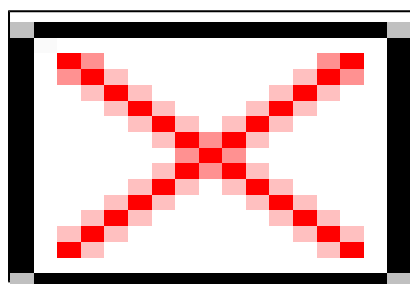
[Simon Mole](#) [1]

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Byline:

Simon Mole makes it easy

A to-do list longer than **The Iliad** and no poetry lessons planned for next week? There is still time to change the world! Poet and poetry-instigator **Simon Mole** tells you how with this step-by-step guide.



When asked how best to encourage children to write poetry, a common and creditable answer is to start first with them reading and listening to poetry. Options range from simply reading your class one poem a day, to wallpapering the whole room in poems that the children have chosen.

I absolutely support this approach, but I do find it relies on a teacher having confidence and experience with poetry to begin with, or the time and inclination to develop those things.

Tight budgets and COVID19 restrictions also mean the option of having a visiting poet into school is increasingly unlikely. So as **National Poetry Day** encourages everyone to 'see it like a poet?', how can we get children inspired by poetry quickly, in a way that stays with them?

For me the most important part of the National Poetry Day theme of VISION, is for children to see that they themselves are poets. With this in mind I want to suggest we try flipping the conventional approach on its head; perhaps one way to help children enjoy reading poetry is actually to have them write a poem *first*. Before they even realise that they've written one. If this sounds tricky, it doesn't have to be!

There is one particular approach that almost every visiting poet uses, and that I very rarely see teachers try independently.

Step one: the warm up

We'll get into the specifics of it shortly, but first 'get the kids (and yourself) warmed up with a couple of games. Sounds obvious, but the main aim here is to have fun. At the same time as doing this you can easily seed the content and build the core 'skills' children will need to write their poem. When I say skills, to some degree I mean attitude 'and specifically, letting go of the feeling that they must always get it right. In writing terms this means 'training' kids to abandon their internal editors in the early stages of the writing process.

There are loads of options for games and activities that encourage this, have a look at this, which is one of my favourites: ['Yes and'](#) [3]

Step two: magic writing prompts

Once you have taken the time to build an atmosphere that supports creative risks (and silliness!), most classes will write astonishing amounts of high-quality poetry in very short spaces of time. So, onto the magic trick! Like many poet-educators, the key tool that I favour to get great writing quickly is a carefully crafted series of writing prompts.

Here is a popular example of the approach, where [young poets can turn their favourite word into a 'character poem'](#) [4] in about 10 minutes.

As in the above video, the first prompt will usually be something super simple that they can fill in by noting down a version of an idea or sentence they said in the warm up. Getting those first words on the page is such a crucial step.

Using a sequence of prompts in a tightly timed way like this (often billed as a game or challenge where children can only write for a maximum of 1 or 2 minutes on each question) sparks children to quickly generate sensory descriptive language or 'poetic content' of another kind. The 'trick' being that by the time kids are actually asked to 'write a poem' they basically already have. Your sequence of questions functions as a scaffold that once removed will leave behind a poem - or at least the heart or the start of one.

As you'll see in [this step by step guide to writing an ode](#) [5], example answers to each prompt are crucial too.

If you're going to create your own prompt sequence, definitely try it as a writer before you ask anyone else to.

Step three: write it down

Once students have got some interesting notes down most will be happy to invest time 'arranging' or 'sorting' those notes into an order which they think will sound good. Which is of course also known as *stage whisper* *writing a poem*.

I believe the approach works because it differentiates naturally - there is a structure/template that will lead to something that is recognisably a poem with even minimal input, but there is also space for more confident writers to leave that template completely if they want to. [This example](#) [6] even encourages that at points, as well as leaving a clearly mapped route for those writers who prefer to follow the guidelines more closely.

Investing this time up front in 'having fun' without any particular curriculum focus, will pay off in so many ways. Firstly, it will be much easier to return to the piece they have written and support them to use specific devices or techniques, or target particular curriculum areas - especially if you can illustrate how doing so will improve further a piece of writing they are already proud of.

Crucially, and returning to my opening point, this energy and connection can be carried forwards into reading and analysing poems by other writers. They are poets now, poetry is one of their 'things?', time to read some!

During lockdown, I started offering free weekly online poetry workshops using exactly these techniques I suggest above, and I was blown away by the response. We had kids joining from Beckenham to Barbados and the weeks went past, I realised the little creative community we were growing was having a big impact on the children and families involved.

As well as becoming increasingly confident writers and performers, I saw them become poets in a deeper meaningful sense that will stay with them. Looking closely and creatively at the world, sharing thoughts and feelings, listening to others. These 'poetry skills' are part of a mindset that they can carry with them beyond those brief moments of actually putting pen to paper.

More young poets can only be a good thing for the rest of us too - surely the more people who think carefully and creatively about the world and their place in it, their impact on it, the better that world will be.

So, wishing you a fun and creative **National Poetry Day**- let's change the world, one poem at a time!

Simon's online poetry workshops for children and families now take place twice a month, more information [here](#) [7].

Teachers can find video resources [here](#) [8].

And download a free lesson plan [here](#) [9].

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