

Introduction

R real experiences are essential to children's development and education and writing poetry is an excellent way to record those experiences. Encouraging children to look carefully and closely for specific details will not only help them to understand and appreciate their environment but, by the use of unambiguous and descriptive language, children can create an effective and lasting image to convey their ideas and emotions.

What is poetry?

Here are a few adult definitions of poetry:

'We often walk to places; we may even run but we don't dance. We often talk to people; we may even shout but we don't sing to them. Poetry is the dancing and singing.'
(Told to the author by the poet Lawrence Sail)

'A poem has to be the most powerful thing you can say in the shortest space possible.'
(Charles Causley)

It is very difficult to put a handle on a 'child-friendly' definition of poetry. Children often say when asked, "It's something that rhymes", or "It's a story in verse". To help children understand what poetry is, read them a paragraph or two from a storybook and ask if they think that what you've read is a poem. Even the youngest will know it isn't and they will soon reach the conclusion that the one thing poems appear to have in common is **rhythm**, or at least a **shape** that makes them sound different from prose.

Explain to the children that writing a poem is about making a 'word picture'. Just like any other kind of picture, it needs working on to be good, but there's a big advantage with word pictures: you can't spoil them. You can change words around, take words out, put words back, change them completely but, if all else fails, you can go back to your original. Encourage the children not to use a rubber, but just to cross words out and write new ones above or below the line. That way, they won't lose their prototype and, besides which, if they write a really good phrase that they don't immediately employ, it will sit quite happily in their notebook for use in the future.

Why teach poetry outside?

Where possible, teaching should contain an element of the 'real experience' for children. Nothing makes a subject live more than to be able to go on a visit: to spend time on a shore looking at the creatures that live there, to soak up the historic atmosphere in a manor house or castle, to visit a museum or gallery. The outdoor environment provides an ever-changing canvas – different weather, seasons, day and night – that can provide a wealth of inspiration for children to write poetry.

Being outside stimulates all of the senses, and children can really *look* at their surroundings. They can then consider what the very best words are that will express what they are experiencing and how they are feeling.

One of the main features of poems is that they usually consist of short lines, and this makes them easy to write outside of the classroom. The economical use of language in poetry means that children are encouraged to focus on using specific and effective vocabulary, which then helps the reader to imagine exactly what a place is like.

Other benefits of teaching poetry outside are:

- It encourages collaborative working – poems can be written in small groups, or each pupil can contribute a line to a class poem.
- Children learn to appreciate their environment (local and further afield) and they may also then be inspired to help improve the world in which they live.
- Many other curriculum areas can be covered at the same time, for example maths, science, history, geography, RE, citizenship and PE.

Where in the outdoor environment can poetry be taught?

The immediate outdoor environment includes the school grounds, and children should be given frequent opportunities to explore and work here. They can learn important fieldwork skills, which they will be able to apply in the wider environment, and there are a wealth of cross-curricular opportunities for hands-on work.

Next comes the local area where children live, play and go to school. It is important for them to investigate and work in their local area, as this leads to an appreciation of their world, which can help to develop stable communities. Their experience of the wider world can then continue to grow through field trips and residential visits.

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It is equally important for children to explore and investigate both the natural and built environment. Inspiration for poetry can be found in parks and woodlands, shopping streets and residential areas, religious buildings and other 'sacred spaces', museums and art galleries, rivers and coastal areas, rural areas and farmland... everywhere and anywhere!

Encourage the children to be opportunistic about their writing, and you must be opportunistic too! If a child notices something of interest – a cat watching birds in the corner of the playground, a plaque on the side of the house during a local walk, a pair of mallards skidding onto the water as they land on a lake – stop and seize the opportunity to describe it!

How can you teach poetry outdoors?

When writing poetry outdoors (or anywhere!), children should be encouraged to write about something they can see, something they are experiencing at first hand. It's much easier than imagined things, certainly at first. Tell the children that:

- they must **look** and really try to see, not just write what is in their heads. What colour is the sky? Have a look! (It's not always blue!) 'Seeing' can be a euphemism for using all your senses. It might mean touching something, listening, smelling... even tasting, perhaps?
- they must try for the **best word** to say what it is they want to say and avoid 'non-words' like 'move'. How much more interesting is it to say 'clouds tip-toe across the sky' rather than 'clouds move across the sky'?

Children often think that poems must rhyme. However, rhyme should not be encouraged (unless it is used naturally) until children are seasoned poets. Concentrating on rhyme generally means that children will focus on the last word only, not the sense of the rest of the line. Tell them that rhyme is one of the tools of poetry but, like all tools, you don't always need to use it. However, praise accidental rhymes and half-rhymes elsewhere in lines when they occur. Playing word games and practising with words is very important, especially in the early stages of learning to write poetry. This, of course, includes lots of reading of nursery rhymes, poems and stories.

Explain to the children that, when you write a poem, you're usually trying to put over what is in your mind into the mind of a reader. In order to do this, it is important to be precise about detail. Read the following line to the children: 'Flowers grow in the hedgerow'. Then ask them what the word 'flower' makes them think of. They will probably come up with several things, from completely blank looks to suggestions like 'petals', 'perfume' or various colours. They

may suggest various flower species. The point is that the word 'flower' triggers all sorts of different responses. However, if you say: 'Yellow daffodils grow wildly in the hedgerow', it is only possible to think of one image and the whole scene becomes so much clearer. Tell the children that if you want to describe hearing a bird singing loudly from a tree it's often better to make the bird's name up rather than to be vague: 'a robin sings loudly from a holly bush' is so much more easily imagined than 'a bird sings loudly from a tree'.

Encourage children to keep jottings in a notebook of things they notice when they are outside; the notes will be a real inspiration to them later on if they can't actually be in the place when they're writing the final poem. If they try really hard to see pictures of the place in their heads (the 'mind's eye'), then they can write about the pictures, and then use words and phrases they noted which will help to create similar pictures in the mind of the reader.

Try and take the opportunity, where possible, to write with your pupils; this is the best way to realise exactly what you are asking of them. Also, if there is a spare adult available, ask them to be a scribe while you discuss things with the children. The scribe can scribble down any exciting comments or lines that children say, so that they are not lost and can perhaps be used later.

If there is time, a good way to get children to understand which parts of a poem might benefit from re-drafting is to put it away for a while. They may think that they've just written the best piece of poetry the world has seen for a long time. However, if they can put it in a drawer and not look at it for a few days, they may find that they can make it even better with the benefit of hindsight!

Overcoming the barriers to outdoor learning

Some teachers can be reluctant to carry out outdoor work with children, due to issues such as health and safety, pupils' behaviour and the 'great British weather'! However, these barriers can all be overcome with careful planning, in order to anticipate and then minimise potential risks or problems (see the section 'Keeping Safe' signposted from the map). For example:

- carry out a quick 'safety sweep' for activities in the school grounds prior to an outdoor activity;
- involve the children in determining potential risks or hazards and then discuss with them how to reduce these risks (e.g. identifying which areas are 'out-of-bounds' and knowing how to cross roads safely);

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- communicate to the children your expectations for how they should behave outside, or ask them to help you devise a list of rules for outdoor activities. Outdoor learning can often have a positive impact on children with 'behaviour problems', as they are able to escape the confines of the classroom;
- ensure that the children have suitable outdoor clothing, such as waterproofs, wellies or sun hats (depending on the time of year). These could be provided by parents, or purchased by the school, and should be left at school throughout the term – that way, your class will always be prepared for both planned and spontaneous outdoor adventures!

Weblinks

Throughout the teacher's notes, website addresses are given which children can access in order to obtain additional information.

It is not unknown for unscrupulous individuals or organisations to place highly unsuitable material on websites to which children might have access. It is essential that teachers check the contents of websites before allowing the children access to them. Although we have tried to suggest reliable sources, websites can sometimes be removed or have their addresses changed. LCP cannot be held responsible for websites which are removed, or change their addresses, nor for the content of websites.

Let's build a poem

It is important not to bewilder young or reluctant writers by giving them too broad a subject about which to write. The important thing is to give children the idea that they should look for details piece by piece rather than trying to write about everything in view all at once. Take the pressure off a bit by dividing the children into small groups occasionally and asking individual children to work on, say, two lines about a specific topic. Later, the children can sort their lines to make a group poem.

The following ideas are all ways of focusing the children's attention on narrow areas and smaller details, and gradually 'building a poem'.

A little at a time

Sometimes when you are outdoors, inspiration for poetry writing is obvious and flows naturally, but on the occasions when this does not happen, teach the children to focus on a small area of their surroundings. Then build up a group poem by asking questions about the area. Use a scribe to help or write their answers yourself. For example:

You: Look at this tree. What's it doing?

Pupil: Nothing. Trees don't do anything. (*Don't be discouraged!*)

You: Yes, but look more closely. What's the trunk made of?

Pupil: Wood... It's a tree! (*Hang on in there!*)

Eventually, questions about texture, about bare branches, about its size, about its apparent relationship with the sky and so on, will encourage answers such as:

Pupil: The branches look like bony fingers.

You: And what do bony fingers do?

Pupil: They scratch, tickle and poke.

You: And what are they scratching in this case?

Pupil: The sky, wind, clouds.

Praise even their simplest efforts or children will become quickly discouraged. You can either praise and write down what you consider to be their best and most original lines there and then, which has the advantage of immediacy but the disadvantage of ruling out any debate, or you can write down everything they say for further discussion back in school.

Let's build a poem

The following group poem was written this way, whilst looking at nesting jackdaws in a local churchyard.

Jackdaws

Jackdaws swoop,
Wings outstretched like fingers,
Black like bats,
Blowing like leaves in autumn.

Their voices like sore throats,
They cackle like witches.

Up in the treetops,
They weave twigs into untidy baskets
And go shopping for eggs.

Written by Year 4 pupils from
Stithians Primary School, Cornwall.

Snapshots

This activity was originally developed for writing about paintings in a gallery, but is equally effective when used with an outdoors view. This works well as a paired exercise with the children having a chance to discuss their ideas as they write.

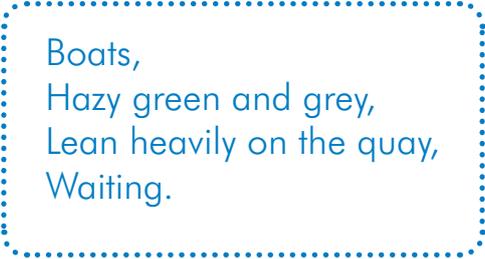
Before they start writing, ask each pair to choose a view to write about, in the location where they are (e.g. a harbour, a field, in front of a stately home). They can 'frame' the view using a cardboard frame or use their index fingers and thumbs as a 'viewfinder' and move it around until they have framed something they would be happy to write about.

Next, ask the children to choose the main subject that they can see within the view, and to use this as the first line of their poem. This line should be kept short; it could even just be a single word.

Let's build a poem

Then ask them to write about the colours and textures that give the strongest impression. Encourage the use of words such as 'spotted', 'streaked', 'misty', etc. Now ask them to write something about the subject, for example using verbs and adverbs to say what it is doing. Finally, they need to add one or two words to say a little more about the subject and round off the poem. Again, this works best as a short line or single word.

It is important that the four lines should make sense. For example:



Boats,
Hazy green and grey,
Lean heavily on the quay,
Waiting.

Explain to the children that this will form the first stanza of the poem (you may need to explain to the children that 'stanza' is the name we give to the 'verses' in a poem). Each pair should then write a further two stanzas, which each focus on a different (minor) aspect of the view.

Photocopy the sheet 'Snapshots' (see page 10) for each pair. Allow the pairs time before writing their poem to draw their 'snapshot'. One partner could hold up the 'frame', while the other partner draws what they can see.

When the children have written their two or three stanzas, they can retain them as individual poems, or stanzas can be selected from various children's work to make a class poem.

On pages 4 and 5 there are some examples of poems based on the 'snapshot' idea which were written by Year 4 pupils during a visit to a cemetery. The activity took place during an afternoon and linked to a book stimulus in which a young boy makes regular visits to a cemetery. The class were joined by some parents who led small groups in the activity.

Their teacher said: "The children and adults alike were amazed by how powerful the writing was and how it was created in such a short amount of time – a short, sharp successful session!" (Lee Moscato, King Charles Primary School, Falmouth)

Let's build a poem

Gravestones
Slate grey and silver
Leaning wearily
Remembering
Benedict

Gravestones
Rain cloud grey, silver, green
Standing in line like soldiers
Watching, waiting

Gravestones
Lichen green, moss silver
Tired and leaning heavily
Remembering days gone by.
Lois

Lichen
Lizard green, lime, yellow
Clinging, smothering
Hiding the words from the past

Lichen
Green, grey, silver
Holding, spreading like a disease
Slowly, slowly
Callum

Tombs
Gun metal grey, silver
Towering powerfully over
Reminding
Joshua



Photograph taken by pupils from King Charles Primary School, Falmouth, during a visit to a local cemetery.

Let's build a poem

Gravestones
Grey, silver, black
Writing from the past
Remembering, reminding

Churchyard
Greens, greys, bright, dark
Visiting yesterday
Peaceful, patient
Alice

Trees
Lime green, bottle green, browns
Flecks of sky
Sheltering, shading

Trees
Emerald green, muddy brown
Hands waving, arms swaying
Standing
Mabel



Pupils from King Charles Primary School, Falmouth, carrying out the 'snapshots' activity.

Directions

This activity links well with directions work in maths, geography or orienteering. It would be equally effective in either a familiar outside environment (e.g. encouraging the children to look closely at their school grounds), or as a way to help children get to know a new area (e.g. during a residential visit).

Begin by giving the children compasses (in groups or pairs) so that they can identify the directions correctly themselves. As an alternative, you could encourage your children to look for natural indicators of the directions; for example, moss usually grows on the shaded north side of trees or walls; the sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

Ask the children to decide which direction they would like to face for the start of the poem. They may choose north, as this seems logical, but it could depend on the area, for example they may want to begin by facing in the direction of a significant building or an ancient tree. Ask the children to look in this direction and write a line about something interesting that they can see. For example:

To the north, the sky is hidden by trees.

They should then face a new direction and write another line:

To the east, a village snuggles in the valley.

And again:

To the south rolls the misty sea.

And once more:

To the west there stands an old stone cross.

Let's build a poem

The children now need to look at the same directions again, one at a time. They should focus carefully and add another line to the one they have for each direction. For example:

To the north, the sky is hidden by trees
Their bony fingers stretching upwards

To the east, a village snuggles in the valley
Cosy and warm in the afternoon sun

To the west there stands an old stone cross
Cool in a coat of green lichen

To the south rolls the misty sea
Restless and uncomfortable

The children can then repeat this process until they have written four lines about each direction. *Please note that it is more effective to do it this way than to face one direction and write all four lines straight off.*

To the north, the sky is hidden by trees
Their bony fingers stretching upwards
Saluting the wild winds
And waving at the wandering clouds.

The sheet 'Directions' (see page 11) can be photocopied for each group to record their ideas.

The activity can be adapted to suit the age or abilities of the children. For example, younger or less able children could write a collaborative poem with each group just writing about one direction.

Reflections

This idea evolved from the same method of producing lines as 'Directions', though the inspiration for it was Tennyson's poem 'The Lady of Shallott' and various paintings of the lady (such as those by John William Waterhouse). However, there is no reason why the method cannot be used without reference to a poem or painting at all. It can just as effectively be based on a view outdoors.

For this activity the children can sit on the ground and use a mirror to look upwards (e.g. in the woods), look through a window (e.g. at the gardens from inside a stately home) or use a 'viewfinder' (see the activity 'Snapshots' on pages 2 and 3). Organise the children into groups of five, and ask each of them to write a fairly short line about something interesting they can see. For example:

1. Bare trees stand with empty branches.
2. Grey clouds float through the sky.
3. Cows chew the grass in the field.
4. A jackdaw glides past.
5. Daffodils are yellow in the flowerbeds.

Then ask the children to elaborate on each line by looking carefully at each chosen subject and adding, say, two more lines:

1. Bare trees stand with empty branches,
Their vacant fingers clutching at the sky,
Waiting for spring leaves.
2. Grey clouds float through the sky,
Hurrying on their journey round the world,
Searching for sunshine.

The original lines can also be redrafted if you wish.

3. Cows **gently** chew the grass in the **meadow**,
Wandering carefully among the buttercups,
Uncaring of the weather.

Let's build a poem

The children can then put the whole thing together as one – the first stanza 'sets the scene' and the subsequent stanzas elaborate on the information given in the first stanza, which helps the reader to focus in on the individual elements that make up the picture or view.

Bare trees stand with empty branches.
Grey clouds float through the sky.
Cows chew the grass in the field.
A jackdaw glides past.
Daffodils are yellow in the flowerbeds.

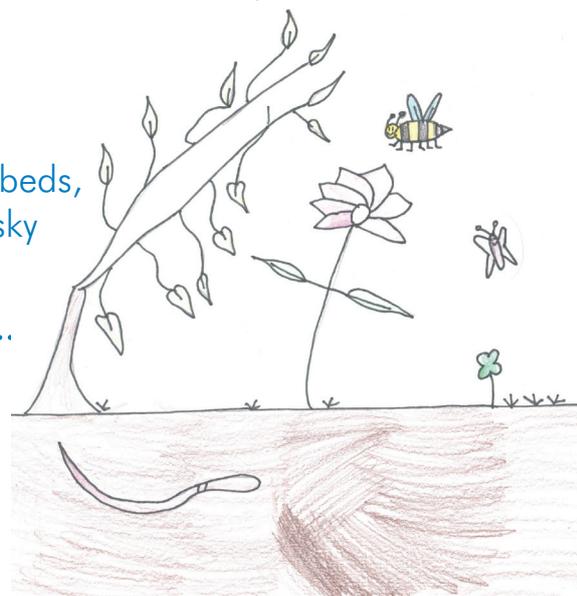
Bare trees stand with empty branches,
Their vacant fingers clutching at the sky,
Waiting for spring leaves.

Grey clouds float silently through the sky,
Hurrying on their journey round the world,
Searching for sunshine.

Cows gently chew the grass in the meadow,
Wandering carefully among the buttercups,
Uncaring of the weather.

A black jackdaw glides by,
Floats down to the field
And calls quietly.

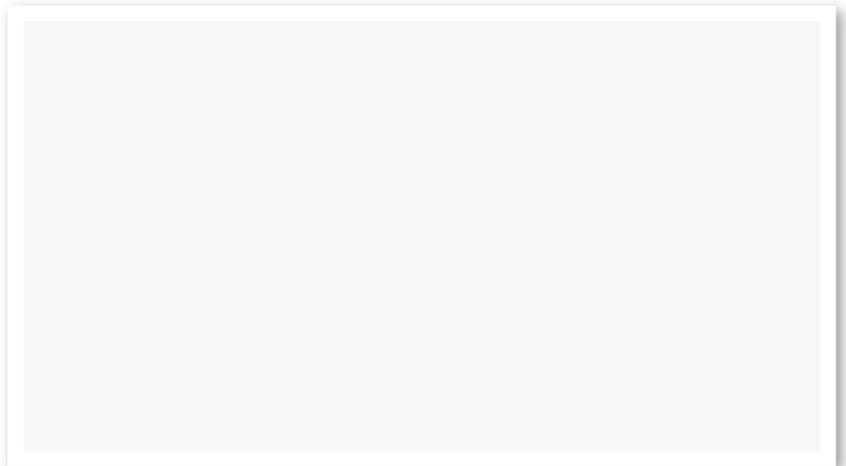
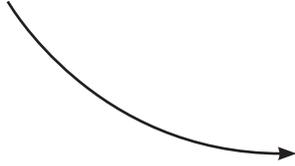
Daffodils are golden in the flowerbeds,
They turn their faces towards the sky
And smile at the sun.



Manveer (Year 1, Billesley Primary School)

Snapshots

Draw your 'snapshot' here:



Stanza 1

Main subject of the view:

Colours/textures:

Say something about the subject:

Add **one** or **two** words:

Four horizontal dotted lines for writing the first stanza.

Stanza 2

Something else in the view:

Colours/textures:

Say something else about it:

Add **one** or **two** words:

Four horizontal dotted lines for writing the second stanza.

Stanza 3

Another aspect of the view:

Colours/textures:

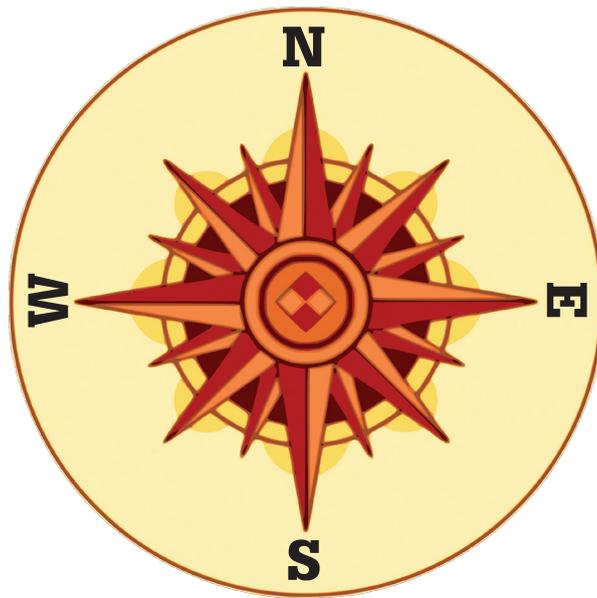
Say something else about it:

Add **one** or **two** words:

Four horizontal dotted lines for writing the third stanza.

Four horizontal dotted lines for writing a name or title.

Directions



Four vertical dotted lines for writing.

Four vertical dotted lines for writing.

Four horizontal dotted lines for writing.