

# Unlocking the Poet in Every Child

# About the author

David Orme has written many books for children, and a wide range of materials for teachers. He has been involved for many years in running writing workshops for students and in-service training sessions for teachers.

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# Unlocking the Poet in Every Child

Strategies, activities and resources for teaching poetry

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David Orme



## **Unlocking the Poet in Every Child**

by David Orme

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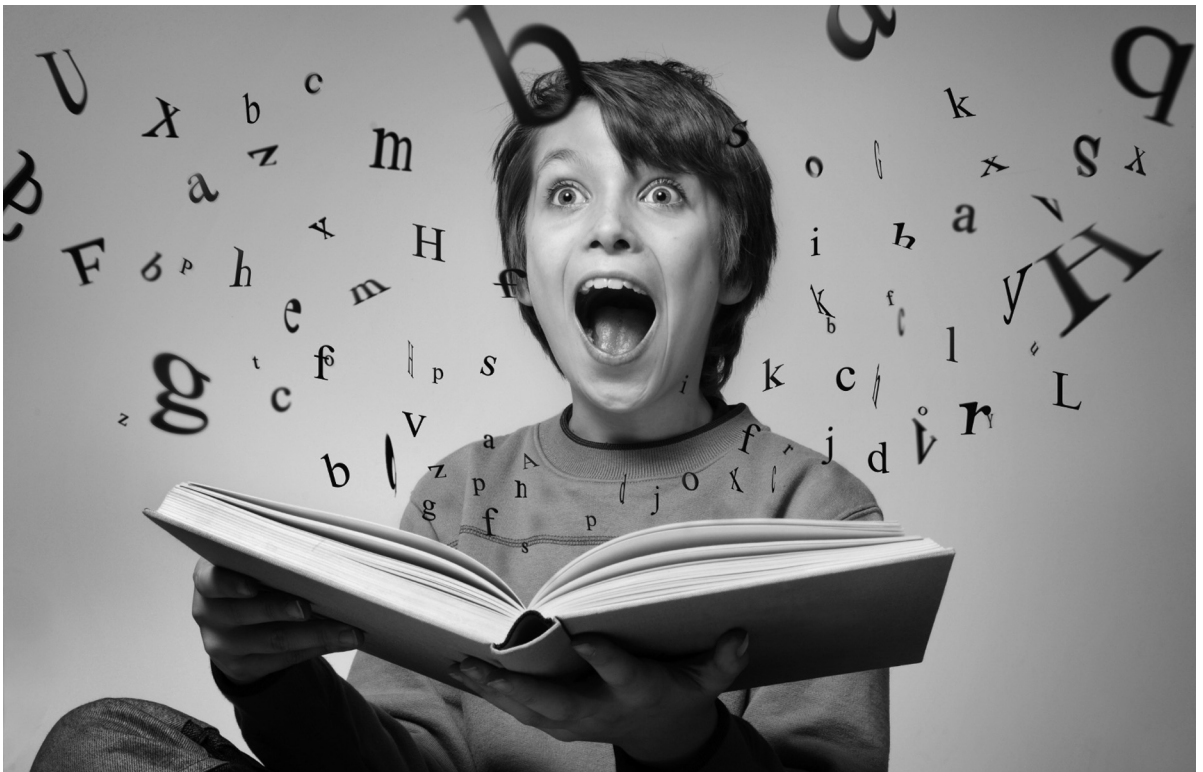
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# 1

# Part One Poetry Teaching Strategies

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# 1 Primary Poetry:

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## Strategies for Teaching Poetry in the Primary School



### So what is poetry anyway?

Poetry is patterned language, a putting together of words and images to create an effect that is emotional, intellectual and musical. The best poems balance these three elements.



### A special way of looking

This extract from William Blake's poem *Auguries of Innocence* is a perfect account of the way a poet works:

*To see a world in a grain of sand*

*And Heaven in a wild flower,*

*Hold infinity in the palm of your hand*

*And eternity in an hour.*

We all observe the world, but the poet sees more. The poet sees the implications of ordinary things. It could be a burglar rattling at the door, the ghost of a lost soul seeking revenge, or a fire-breathing dragon knocking over dustbins with its tail and ripping leaves from trees with its breath.



A windy day is just ‘weather’, but for the poet the wind can be wildly and violently alive.

The ability to look in this special way is inherent in children’s imagination, and needs only to be encouraged.

Children rely on imagination as a survival mechanism in a complex and unpredictable world, and are rather better at finding these sorts of images than worldly-wise adults.

For children, this ‘special way of looking’ encourages depth of thought, sideways thinking and an ability to make links between apparently disparate ideas.



## Why teach poetry?

Poetry provides a huge variety of models for writing. It also provides opportunities to consider grammar and punctuation in action, and to widen vocabulary. It supports many other aspects of literacy by making links with other curriculum areas, exploring points of view and justifying opinions. For students still insecure with reading, it offers repetition and memorability.

Structured work in poetry can solve some of the problems associated with a broad curriculum and limited time.

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**P**oetry is, in my view, the finest way of all of developing a ‘feel’ for how language works. Whatever the writing task, a background in poetry will make the writing more cogent and more persuasive.

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## Avoiding agendas

Poetry doesn't have to be limited to literacy lessons – it can have an impact across the entire curriculum. There is a danger, however, that it can be hijacked to address other agendas. Teachers concerned with PSHE (personal, social and health education) issues, for instance, may use a poem to introduce a topic – the environment, or issues of gender, for example – and then close the poetry anthology and move smartly on to discuss the issue.

This approach ignores the important point that the poet will have views and insights into the topic that deserve to be heard and explored, and if the poem is simply used as a 'warm-up' exercise these will be lost.

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**P**oetry can inform work in history, or geography – in fact just about anything. But choose the poem carefully, give it due attention, and get full value out of it.

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## Delight in language

Children love the 'wit' of language: jokes, riddles, silly rhymes, playground chants and games. Much of this is unsophisticated to adults, but playing with language in these informal ways builds confidence.



'Failing' children because of inaccuracies, or trying to formalise their writing at too early an age, can destroy children's confidence.

Word games, both written and oral, where 'anything goes', are an essential first step in moving towards being able to use language in a formal, controlled way. Poetry provides the fun and the framework for these games.

## Building vocabulary and language skills

Children often have a wide knowledge of words, but in general they only use a limited vocabulary in their speaking and writing. If asked for a word to describe an elephant, they will, inevitably, come up with 'big'. A ladybird will be 'tiny', a leaf 'green', and so on.

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**B**ecause of its insistence on freshness, quirkiness and a 'special way of looking', poetry writing is the best way not just of building vocabulary, but also of utilising the vocabulary children already have.

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In the same way, reading a wide range of poetry encourages breadth of vocabulary, as poets very rarely state the obvious.



### Immediacy

Compared with fiction, poems are short, often repetitive and have highly patterned language. These ingredients make them ideal reading for younger children still struggling with language.

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**T**he impact of a poem is immediate, and the language, because of its patterning, is memorable.

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This memorability reinforces the process of learning to read; children will 'know' the poem, even if struggling with reading individual words.

For weaker readers, struggling to understand a sentence often means that what happened in a previous sentence is forgotten, but poetry, with its patterned language, 'sticks'.



### Coping with feelings

Poems start with the concrete and move to the abstract. They explore the emotional implications of objects, observations and events. The emotions are generally positive ones, such as delight and humour, but sadness is not excluded.



Reading poetry can expand the ability to cope with events and give a sense of perspective. Writing poetry provides the means to express difficult feelings.



## Problems in teaching poetry



### Is poetry difficult?

Teachers sometimes feel that poetry is ‘difficult’ and full of obscure techniques such as onomatopoeia and metaphor. They may also be conscious of the rather precious image poetry has had in the past, and wonder how well it will go down with a modern-day class.

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**P**oetry is difficult only if presented in an insufficiently structured and guided way.

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The hardest task for a child (or adult) is to be asked to sit down and write a poem on a given theme, with no help on how to go about such a task.

Some teachers may feel that the introduction of ‘formal’ poetry such as a haiku or cinquain is unduly restrictive. The opposite is the truth. The structure or ‘pattern’ of the poem frees the poet from the necessity of finding a pattern of his or her own, and provides a scaffold for children struggling with abstract ideas.

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**F**or any reader, reading a poem ‘cold’ can be difficult. Poems are more than just words on a page. They need to be heard, so that the music of the poem can have its effect.

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Sometimes children are good at letting a poem just ‘happen’ without worrying about finding a key to unlock its meaning.

Sometimes the ideas of a poem are straightforward, but the language is difficult because the poem is pre-twentieth century.



Do not be too preoccupied with the meaning a poem has; the important focus should be on the emotional resonance of the words and sounds.

Very often, a good performance followed by a discussion of the main thrust of the poem will overcome difficulties. Remind children that they do not need to understand every word in a poem to enjoy it. Often the very difficulty of poetry – the challenge of the ‘puzzle’ element in riddles, for example – is what children find most enjoyable.



## Poetry and special needs

Poetry is language at its most sophisticated and intense, and so it seems counter-intuitive to argue that it is particularly appropriate for students with special needs, or for those who struggle with language or who are disaffected with the learning process. However, poetry has unique advantages when we are working with these groups:

### 1 Brevity

Reading or writing a story can be a major challenge for children with a short attention span or those with problems with short-term memory. More often than not, poems are short – which reduces the problem.

### 2 Appropriate content

Children’s poems are often funny and/or subversive.

### 3 Structure

Struggling young writers find it difficult to get started and to structure their writing. The activities suggested in Part Two of this book provide the scaffolding to get over these problems, without restricting the more able children.

I have sometimes described poetry-writing as ‘age non-specific’. For example, a haiku can be written by an eight year-old or by a sophisticated adult. The content will be different, of course, but the task is the same.

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**P**oetry-writing is an ideal activity for a mixed-ability class.

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### Does poetry have a poor image?

Poetry's sentimental image is long gone and these days it does not occur to children that there is anything 'soppy' about it.

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**P**oetry and rhymes feature in everyday life,  
whether it be in nursery rhymes or TV jingles.

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There has been an explosion in children's poetry in recent years, and much of it is funny, subversive and distinctly unsentimental. It is important, though, that children are presented with more than just 'funny' verse, as this will sell both them, and poetry, short.