

Growing Poems

Overview: Students will cultivate creativity and communication skills through garden-inspired poetry.

Grade Level/Range: Grades 2 to 8

Objectives: To encourage students to develop more diverse ways of describing everyday objects, processes, and events and to recognize that they each have a unique way of expressing themselves.

Time: 1 hour

Materials:

- Sample poems
- Word Harvest worksheets
- Clipboards or notebooks
- Dictionaries and thesauruses

Background Information: Through their participation in plant-based lessons and school garden programs, students often connect deeply with plants and nature. This connection can serve as a rich source of material for budding poets. By reflecting on their gardening experiences through poetry, students can explore phonics, personal expression, parts of speech, figurative language, and many other language arts standards.

Poetry is meant to be a liberating medium for expression, yet it also encourages precise use of words as kids home in on what they wish to communicate. The buried treasure kids discover is the skill to harness language to enrich their work in all disciplines. And since poetry is meant to be read aloud, it also can bolster presentation skills. Ideally, it will help them grow into effective, compelling wordsmiths and communicators.

Advanced Preparation: Make a Word Harvest worksheet. Divide a piece of paper in half and on one side write “Observations – External (Use Senses)” and on the other side write “Feelings and Reactions – Internal.” Make enough copies for each student.

Laying the Groundwork:

1. To prepare your class for writing their own poems, read a few aloud. Teach the students about the cadence of the poems - defined by Webster’s as “rhythmic sequence or flow of sounds in language.” Sometimes cadence does not follow the line breaks. Reading aloud demonstrates that cadence, like punctuation in sentences, clarifies the meaning of the phrases.

If you don’t already have a collection of favorite poems to share with your class, here are a few suggestions:

- A Child’s Calendar by John Updike
- Twilight Comes Twice by Ralph Fletcher
- Over in the Garden by Jennifer Ward
- Laughing Tomatoes and Other Spring Poems by Francisco X. Alarcon
- Old Elm Speaks by Kristine O’Connell George
- Color Me a Rhyme and Fine Feathered Friends by Jane Yolen

2. After each poem, explore some of these questions together.

What do you think this poem is about?

Does the poem create an image for you?

How does it make you feel?

How do you think the poet was feeling, or what was he or she trying to tell us?

Does the poem help you see the subject in a way you didn't before?

From whose point of view is it written?

Does it have a rhythm? Does it rhyme?

Are there some words whose meanings you don't know?

How is poetry different from a news story? From a short story or novel?

3. Discuss the difference between observations and feelings. Ask your students, *What does it mean to observe something?* (It means to study something with all of your senses). *How are observations different from feelings and reactions?* (Observations are made from external stimuli, while reactions and feelings come from inside of us.)

4. Reread one of the poems. Ask, *What do you think the poet is observing in the poem? What are the poet's reactions/feelings?*

Exploration:

1. Tell students that today you are going to harvest words from your garden.

2. Distribute the Word Harvest worksheets, which have two columns, one for Observations and one for Feelings/Reactions.

3. Travel out to your garden and allow student 5 to 10 minutes to quietly observe one thing that captures their attention - a developing tomato fruit, for instance. Have them record what they sense about it (e.g., green, smooth, round, hard, probably crunchy, silent) in the Observations column, and their feelings and reactions to it (can't wait to pick it when it's ripe to make salsa, could be used for a game of toss, I wonder if the birds will get to it before we do) in the right column. If it's not possible for them to use all their senses (you don't want to pick the unripe tomato yet), suggest that they imagine what it tastes like.

If going outside isn't an option, ask students to take a stroll through the garden in their memories and pick one thing they remember strongly: perhaps tasting freshly picked strawberries or pulling weeds. Have them take a few minutes to imagine using all their senses, even the unlikely (What does a strawberry sound like?), to observe the object or activity, recording these and the resulting feelings that arise.

4. With the "raw materials" - their recorded phrases and ideas - kids can fashion first drafts of poems. Here are some tips you can share to get them started:

- Choose an idea, feeling, or image from your trip to the garden that you want to communicate, and write it down. Use the words on the sheet to illustrate it.
- Start with a single word or phrase from the sheet that you like the best, and use that as your topic. You don't have to use any other words from your worksheet unless you want to.
- String entire phrases from worksheets together in a way that makes sense to you.
- Connect words that sound pleasing together.

If students need more structure, direct them to compose a poem in a specific format such as a simple haiku, a traditional Japanese poetry form based on or inspired by nature. The least rigid of the modern haiku formats requires that the poet use words totaling 17 syllables within two or three lines.

5. Next help the students review their work. Explain that rewriting is a way poets refine their words so they come closer to conveying the subject, image, or feelings in an accurate way. Ask them to read their poem silently several times and then consider:
 - Can you remove words without losing the feeling or meaning you want to share?
 - Can you replace some words with others? Depending on the age of your students, discuss the concept of synonyms. Ask them to try and think of their own synonyms first, and then explore further with a thesaurus.
6. After rewriting, ask them to read their poem aloud to themselves and then to a friend. How does it sound? Does it need any adjustment?
7. Finally, share poems aloud to the whole class. Before students read their poems to the class, suggest that they imagine themselves in the garden, sensing the thing that inspired them. Encourage good communication and public speaking skills by advising them to:
 - Read the poem slowly. Every word is important.
 - Pause for a few seconds between the title and the first line.
 - Read in a normal voice, but loud and clearly enough that everyone can hear.

Making Connections: Use the questions from the Laying the Groundwork section to bring the exercise full circle. Let your young poets know that their works are as valid as those of the poets you introduced them to at the beginning of the lesson!

If students are eager to share their works with others, they can host a reading in the garden (if weather permits) and invite other classrooms, parents, and community members. Or they can publish an illustrated booklet for display in the library.

Branching Out:

Explore Figurative Speech: Analogies, Similes, and Metaphors

Analogies, metaphors and similes are staple ingredients of poetry. The plants, gardens, and the outdoors are rife with inspiration for these expressions that invigorate the imagination, encourage creative use of words, and help kids see things anew.

An analogy notes similarities between or among objects, and may back them up with explanations: “A morning glory blossom reminds me of a horn because it is shaped like the bell on a trumpet. It reminds me of a long skirt, flowing from a narrow waistline to a wide hem. It reminds me of the summer sky, blue and clear.”

A metaphor is an expression that substitutes one object or event with another that shares a resemblance. Here are a couple of examples, using the sunflower seed analogies mentioned in the paragraph below:

“The sunflower holds a circling zebra herd.”

“Inside its cocoon, a baby plant sleeps until spring.”

A simile is an expression that likens one object to another, usually linking them with the words like or as. Examples include:

“The bee is like a cargo plane, flying supplies back to the base.”

“She’s as single-minded as a bee on a blossom!”

Challenge students to choose something in the garden and identify at least five analogies - things it reminds them of. For example, “A sunflower seed reminds me of a zebra ... a shield ... a butterfly cocoon.” Next ask them to consider, Why does it remind me of that? If it reminds me of something, it might function in a similar way? For instance, if a seed coat resembles a shield, might it in any way act like a shield for the seed inside? If it resembles a cocoon, how might it help the seed if it also acts like a cocoon? As a follow up, invite them to create related metaphors and similes to work into their poems.

Write Process Poems to Maintain Memories

The water cycle, the nitrogen cycle, and photosynthesis are complex physical and chemical processes that are brought to life in the garden, but students' memories of the specifics may drift away before the next growing season. To help children extract and retain the importance of these things, students draw diagrams of simplified versions of these processes, and even find ways to relate them to their own lives or those of their community (e.g., our garden soaks up more water when we use mulch between rows; excess lawn fertilizer pollutes our streams; we all depend on the oxygen produced by plants). Writing poems can help kids develop more connection to these sometimes dry topics, especially if poetry is included - and read aloud as it is composed - from the beginning of the unit or lesson.

They can even use their poems as mnemonic tools, especially if they incorporate original and accurate imagery, sounds, movements, and personifications. For instance, to spark more interest in photosynthesis, give all the players (carbon dioxide, chlorophyll, and sunlight) distinct personalities, voices, and costumes and have them bake a birthday cake (made of carbohydrates, of course) for a newly emerged seedling. Who is left when the party's over? Oxygen!

Create Patchwork Poems

Draw columns on a sheet of paper and label them "nouns," "verbs," and "adjectives." Write down all the words you can think of associated with a gardening topic, such as butterfly gardening, in five minutes, putting them in the correct column. Cut the words out, mix them up, and use them to create phrases and questions, inserting articles (a, the) and other words as needed to make coherent phrases (even if they are silly phrases!)