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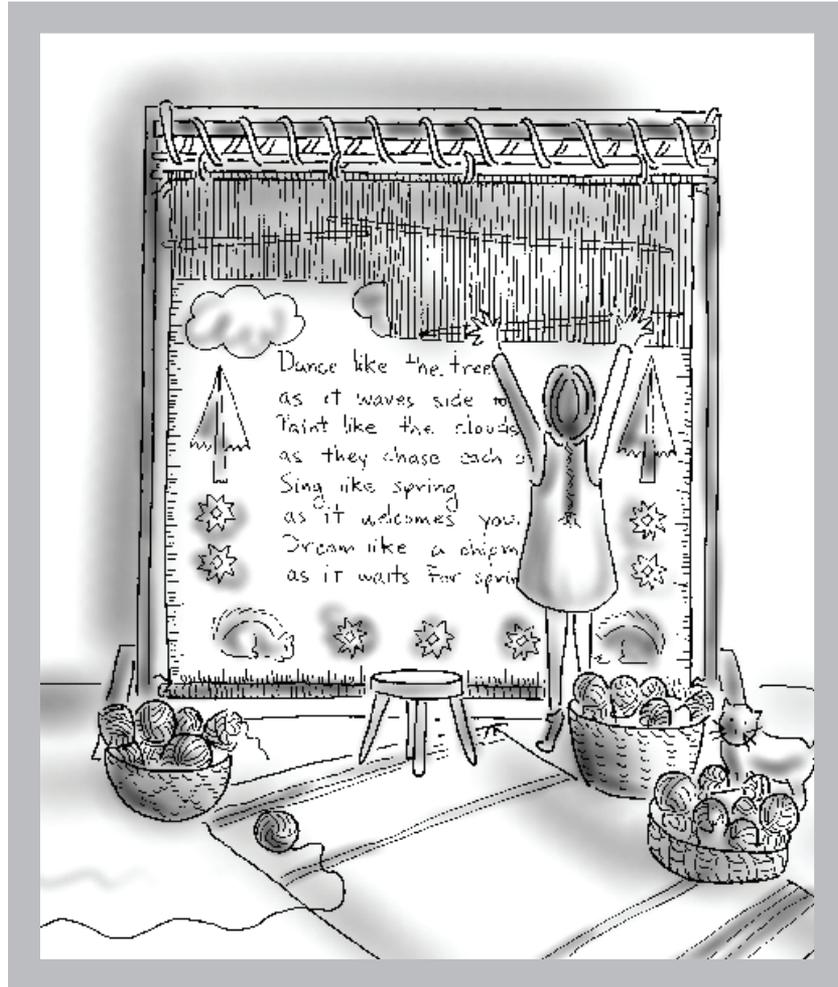
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# Word Weavings



## Writing Poetry with Young Children

*Shelley Tucker, Ph. D.*

Illustrated by Joan Cottle

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*In appreciation of William Stafford  
who showed that poetry writing is accessible to everyone.*

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# Introduction

**C**hildren are natural poets who delight in words. The language of poetry weaves easily in and out of their speech, and children can readily draw on it to compose their poems.

This book teaches poetry composition in free verse. Free verse is a type of poetry that does not use regular meter or end rhymes. It was introduced in the English language in 1855 with the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Similar to spoken language, free verse is now the most widely used form for writing poetry. It is so natural and familiar that all children can succeed when they compose it.

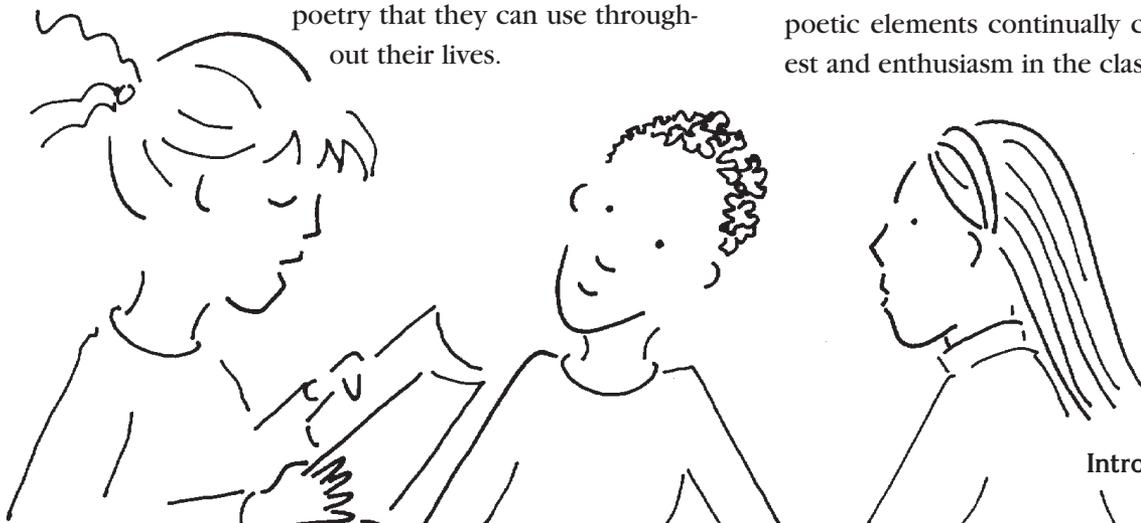
Free verse provides an alternative to poetry based on standard meter, end rhymes, or set patterns. These forms are not usually integrated into children's daily language patterns, but instead are external to the ways they think and speak. What children want to say does not often fit standard poetic forms, and such poetry writing can seem difficult or meaningless to them.

When we teach poetry composition in free verse rather than with end rhymes or set meters, all children, regardless of academic ability, can readily draw on the daily rhythms of speech for use in their poems. At the same

time, they discover a method of writing poetry that they can use throughout their lives.

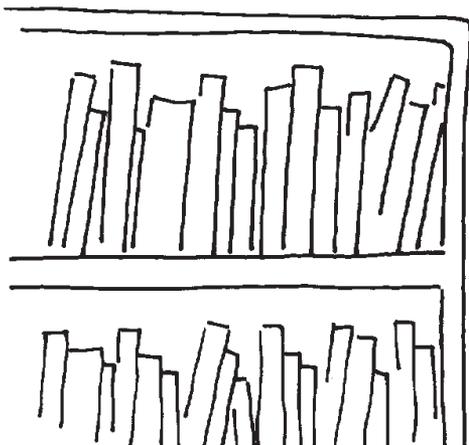
*Word Weavings* teaches seven poetic elements—simile, imagery, inquiry, metaphor, personification, alliteration, and onomatopoeia—for use in free verse poetry. These are relevant and easy for children because they are already present in their everyday thoughts and language. Children derive many benefits when they use these elements to compose poetry in free verse:

1. Writing can become as easy and important as talking.
2. Children discover connections between thinking, speaking, writing, and reading.
3. Interest in reading often increases. Children want to read their poems to themselves and others.
4. These poems are generally interesting, so adults listen to them again and again. Children experience a deep sense of the importance of their words while at the same time reinforcing their reading skills.
5. Children learn to listen attentively to poetry, which improves their listening and thinking skills.
6. Writing poems makes the classroom a creative center. Words become paints without the mess. Children draw pictures with language and turn the classroom into a word gallery. Poetry writing using these poetic elements continually creates interest and enthusiasm in the classroom.



- 7.** Poetry gives children more ways to use words in writing. Because poems draw on both figurative and literal language, children are able to express feelings, ask and answer questions, create images, and include sounds in ways often unavailable to them in other types of composition.
- 8.** Writing poetry is active, so it makes an excellent antidote to watching television and doing other passive activities.
- 9.** Children feel smart when they write poems with these poetic elements. Figurative language does not require the use of large words. Instead, what matters is the way the children combine everyday words to create interesting comparisons and images.
- 10.** As children prepare their poems for publication, they see the importance of standard spelling in final drafts.
- 11.** When children publish their poetry, their appreciation of reading and books, in general, increases.
- 12.** Through poetry writing, children make unusual connections and create unique images that elicit praise from listeners. Children love this spontaneous surprise, delight, and affirmation. At the same time, they're not dependent on it because they often respond similarly to their own poems.
- 13.** Creating art, making books, and reading poems extend naturally from poetry composition. These activities can be included in other subject areas too, such as science and social studies.
- 14.** Children who compose poetry become more confident in their use of language. They take pride in their word selections, juxtapositions of sounds and rhythms, and development of ideas and images.
- 15.** When children write poetry, they pay careful attention to their thoughts, feelings, and environment.

All children, regardless of academic accomplishment, can succeed when they compose free verse poetry based on these seven poetic elements.



# How to Use This Book

**T**his book is divided into seven chapters covering simile, imagery, inquiry, metaphor, personification, alliteration, and onomatopoeia. The early chapters, in general, present the simplest concepts. Each chapter begins with an introduction followed by several exercises that focus on the poetic element under discussion. Within each chapter, the exercises are arranged by level of difficulty, beginning with the easiest. One exercise, however, is not a prerequisite for another, so feel free to use them in any order. The exercises suggest ways of presenting the material, offer poetry writing activities and art projects, and close with examples of children's poetry. Children from typical school populations composed the poems that appear at the end of each exercise, and their ages are noted beside their names.

## A Note About Poetic Elements

You do not need to use the terms *simile*, *imagery*, *inquiry*, *metaphor*, *personification*, *alliteration*, and *onomatopoeia* with young children. Instead, place the emphasis on their understanding and use of the poetic concepts. Talk with young children about the process of composition in some of the following ways:

**Simile:** Notice how we can say anything is like something else just by using the words *like* or *as*.

**Imagery with action verbs:** When we use interesting action words, we create pictures in poems.

**Imagery with detailed description:** One way to write a poem is to describe something carefully.

**Inquiry:** We can answer interesting questions in poetry.

**Metaphor:** A way to write poetry is to compare two things that seem different.

**Personification:** We compose poetry by saying that things, colors, feelings, and animals are like people. To do this, we can give objects human actions, body parts, emotions, and names, such as *she* and *he*.

**Alliteration:** Sometimes we write poems with words that start with the same sounds.

**Onomatopoeia:** We can use the sounds of people and things in our poems to make them more interesting.



## Group Presentation

During the group presentation, adults ask children a variety of questions. This helps the children expand their understanding and application of the poetic concepts and shows them how to lengthen their sentences and enlarge their ideas. One measure of writing maturity is sentence length. As writing matures, sentences become longer. Consider the sentence, "I saw flowers." To lengthen it, older children and adults naturally add "Who? What? Where? When? Why?" or "How?" They might write "I saw flowers growing toward the sun or I saw flowers in a garden at the park." You can teach younger children how to extend their sentences by asking them questions about their ideas.

Another measure of academic skill is the ability to generate a variety of responses. When you ask children specific questions about their poetry, you also teach them general thinking skills. As they internalize this process, the children learn to ask the questions themselves.

## Writing Poetry

### Children Recording Their Poems

After the group presentation, many young children can write their poems by themselves. To support their flow of ideas, have them initially use inventive, made-up, or guess-and-go spellings when they are unsure of standard spellings. This supports their creativity and production in first drafts. Work with them later on standard spellings for final drafts.

### Adults Taking Dictation

Young children frequently need other people to record their poems. When young children watch adults and older children take dictation, they observe that writing can be as easy as thinking and speaking. They see how to use standard sentence punctuation and capitalization. Children also learn about editing when their poems are reread to them.

Follow these steps to record children's poetry:

1. Ask the children general questions first. In the exercise "Glide Like a Bicycle," for example, begin by asking, "How do you want to start your poem?"
2. Record their responses. If the children do not know how they want to begin their poems, read them the line starts listed in the exercise.



Dance like...

#### Example:

Do you want to start your poem with "Leap like," "Soar like," "Fly like," or "Glide like"?

(Some children need fewer choices. Then offer two line starts and have them choose one.)

3. After children begin their lines, ask another general question, such as, "What do you want to say next?"
4. Record their answers. If they have none, choose three categories suggested in the exercise, and ask them to make their selection.

**Example:**

Do you want to name a color, an animal, or some kind of weather?

(If children need fewer options, choose a familiar category, such as animals or colors, and tell them to name one.)

5. Ask a final question to show children that they can easily continue to extend their sentences just by answering questions.

**Example:**

Child	Leap like the wind.
Adult:	Where?
Child:	In the sky.

6. Record their answers.

**Example**

Leap like the wind in the sky.

7. Read aloud each sentence that they compose. At the end of the dictation, read the entire poem aloud too.

**Titles**

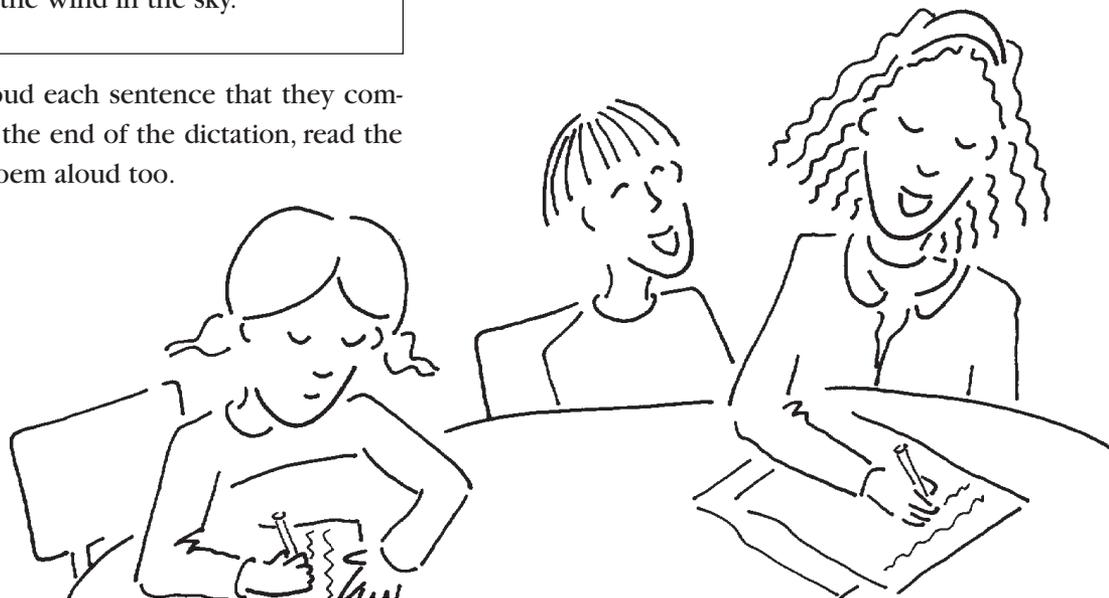
Most poems written by young children do not require titles. Their poetry is usually short, so their topics do not need a summary or an explanation. If you want children to compose titles, however, suggest that they:

- select one or more words from their poems for the title; or
- describe what their poems are about in their titles.

**Evaluation**

Do not use letter or number evaluations on children's poems. When graded, children often come to believe in "good" or "bad" poets and think only some people are able to write well. To support children's natural abilities to compose poetry, encourage them with feedback. Comment on:

- specific words and topics you like and why;
- how you feel when you hear or read their poems;
- what you think about as you listen to their poetry; and
- how much you appreciate their writing in general.



## Making Art

Art and poetry are natural companions. Both rely on elements of color, texture, dimension, comparison, attention, and surprise. Each exercise is presented so that the children compose poetry first and then create art. This way, they gather ideas for their art as they write. To follow this sequence, show children samples of the art during group presentations, and give them specific instructions for making the art after they write. The children, however, could also do art before writing.

All of the art projects in this book require inexpensive or free supplies. Most of the materials are readily available in classrooms and supply rooms. You can easily collect the others. Parents make excellent resources, and some local stores give free supplies, such as grocery bags and old keys, to educators. Some useful arts and crafts materials are grouped by category in the box at the right.



### Containers

- milk containers
- egg cartons
- margarine tubs
- plastic milk, juice, and water bottles in all sizes
- shoe boxes
- aluminum foil
- paper bags in a variety of sizes

### Craft Store Supplies

- craft sticks
- confetti
- colored tissue paper

### Food

- uncooked pasta
- beans

### Hardware

- keys
- miscellaneous hardware, such as doorknobs

### Paper

- canceled stamps
- paper plates
- magazines
- calendars
- greeting cards
- brochures
- wrapping paper
- Contact® paper
- tagboard
- writing paper
- construction paper
- cardboard
- old maps
- catalogs

### Sewing Materials

- buttons
- zippers

### Things Found Outside

- shells
- sand
- rocks
- stones
- leaves
- branches
- twigs
- pine cones

## Collecting and Showing Poetry and Art

### *Making Books*

Children know that everything with a binding is a book. You can easily make books with them, and the benefits extend throughout the language arts curriculum. Making books clearly shows children the value of thinking, speaking, writing, publishing, and reading. It integrates process with product, letting children see the relationship between the abstract and the concrete. Children feel proud when they make books and look for opportunities to read them to others.

Here are four ways to make books with children to include their poetry and artwork. Between book covers:

1. Staple sheets of paper together on the left sides or at the tops.
2. Stack sheets of paper, fold them in half, and staple them in the center.
3. Take a stack of paper, fold in it half, and punch holes on the left side through the folds. Use yarn, ribbon, or string to make the bindings.
4. Use comb binding machines available in most schools.

There are also wonderful, decorative books that can include the poetry of one or many children. Please see the reference section at the back of this book for suggestions on book-making resources.

### *Reading Aloud*

Reading aloud is another important part of the poetry process. It shows children that their words matter. It strengthens their reading skills while at the same time increasing their comfort with oral presentations. Reading aloud allows children to hear ways to edit their poems. It also transforms the classroom into a community where children pay close attention to each other's words, interests, feelings, and ideas. Give many opportunities for children to read their poetry aloud to classmates and adults.

Young children can read or present their poems in several ways. They can:

- read their poetry without assistance,
- have another person read their poems aloud,
- have someone say their words aloud to them and then repeat them, and
- read what they can and have someone else read the rest of their poetry with them.

### *Displaying Art and Poems*

Children are thrilled when their art is shown. Here are some ways to display their poetry and art:

- Attach poems to the back of art.
- Suspend poems from the bottom of art.
- Mount poetry and related art in adjacent spaces on bulletin boards.

