Preparing for a field trip to the Poetry Center

Best Practices for Teaching Poetry

- We encourage teachers and students to encounter poems in a variety of contexts, for a variety of purposes.
- Avoid using poetry for only teaching close reading/analysis, grammar, and mechanics. Poetry can also be read to encourage a love of reading, emphasize the oral tradition of literature, and investigate content across the curriculum.
- The primary goal the Poetry Center’s education programs is to make poetry accessible to general audiences and to cultivate “poetic literacy” in our community. Research shows that by engaging people with poetry and literature, we encourage a lifelong habit of reading and writing as well as a general involvement in the arts.
- Poetry’s unique gift is that it fosters an ability to see the world with fresh eyes and to reinforce our sense of humanity—traits which help to build a highly engaged, productive, and imaginative citizenry.
- Due to the dominant practice of using poetry to teach grammar, phonics, or explication and analysis in the classroom, many students develop negative attitudes towards the art form. If students’ only exposure to poetry is through being taught skills that primarily involve either complex analysis or rote memorization, the art form quickly loses its luster and appeal.

Quick Tips

The following activities aim towards helping students to experience poetry in a variety of contexts. If you decide to implement any of these strategies prior to a field trip, please notify the field trip coordinator. Knowing this will be able to help her customize the trip to your student’s experiences.

- Read a poem at the start of every class. You can have student’s journal their responses, or hold discussions that emphasize associations and personal connections. Not every discussion of a poem need be in-depth.
- Read poems together as class in call and response style. Memorize short poems together as a class and use as a class slogan or cheer.
- Have students contribute their own poems to a basket, jar, or other receptacle and read the work periodically for a short break or motivation.
• Ask students to interact with poems in a variety of ways: sketch or draw their responses to a poem, write their own poems, create music, body movements for a favorite poem.

• Incorporate poetry across the curriculum and look for poems that respond to topics in math, science, history, and other subjects. Collaborate with teachers from other content areas for an even richer, in-depth study.

• For older students, consider assigning extra credit for those who attend poetry readings. In addition to the Poetry Center’s reading series, we recommend the Tucson Youth Poetry Slam, the Tucson Poetry Festival, and some events that take place at Casa Libre. All these organizations have information about upcoming events on their websites.

• Write poems collaboratively. Collaborative poems can be great ice breakers, hooks, and commercial breaks to incorporate into your daily routines, curriculum, and lesson plans. Display, read, and refer to these poems often. Some creative writing guidebooks that contain fresh ideas for inspiring student writing include:


  **Middle School:** *The List Poem* by Larry Fagin, *Old Faithful* ed. Christopher Edgar and Ron Padgett

  **Elementary School:** *Wishes, Lies and Dreams* by Kenneth Koch.

• Some poetry anthologies we recommend include:

  **High School:** *Poetry 180: A Turning Back to Poetry* edited by Billy Collins and *180 More: Extraordinary Poems for Every Day* edited by Billy Collins.

  **Middle School:** *Red Hot Salsa* by Lori Carlson and *This Same Sky: A Collection of Poems from Around the World* edited by Naomi Shihab Nye

  **Elementary School:** *Hip Hop Speaks to Children* ed. Nikki Giovani and *A Child’s Anthology of Poetry* edited by Elizabeth Hauge Sword, Victoria Flournoy McCarthy, Tom Pohrt

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i National Endowment for the Arts

ii As discussed in Gordon Pradl’s *Literature as Democracy: Reading as a Social Act*, 1996.

iii As discussed in Louise Rosenblatt’s *Literature as Exploration*, 1995.