

# Poetry Power! Using Poetry to JumpStart Language & Literacy!

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Poetry can be used to support students emotionally, to inspire them, to bring them joy . . . and to help them be successful readers and writers.  
*Poetry Immersion:* supports phonemic awareness, language, and literacy development.  
*Poetry Performance:* brings poetry alive for students  
*Poetry Production:* uses scaffolding to promote poetic writing.

Poetry can be used to support children emotionally, to inspire them, to bring them joy . . . and to help them be successful readers and writers.

**Poetry for Life:** Through listening to poetry, poetry performance, and poetry writing, children can express their emotions, look at the world a new way, and share their wishes and dreams. As a 13th Century Persian writer expresses it, poetry can be "hyacinths for thy soul."

**Poetry for Learning:** Poetry can be a springboard for supporting learning in many areas. Ex:

- listening to poetry can support phonemic awareness
- poetry performance can be a great vehicle for device use as many levels
- poems can help children explore onsets and rimes
- the rhythm, rhyme, repetition, and predictability found in many poems makes them accessible to early readers
- choral reading of familiar poems can enhance reading fluency
- poetry is an excellent vehicle for emergent writing, especially for children with limited vocabulary
- poetry helps students think about voice and word choice in their writing

## Another Balancing Act!!

So how can we balance the possibly competing goals of using poetry to help students learn and letting them gain joy, discovery, and self-awareness through poetry? I'm not sure! I'm right in the middle of a lifelong Poetry Journey and have "miles to go before I sleep!" (from Robert Frost, Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening - did everyone recognize that line??) I have been helped on that journey by student's reaction to poetry activities, by reading many wonderful poems and books about teaching poetry, and by talking to gifted poets and teachers of children, including Allen Wolf of Poetry Alive and Nick Hogan and Lois Wolf who teach workshops on Facilitated Poetry Writing©. So here is my "Answer de Jour," February 7, 2000:

- 1) **Immerse** children in all types of poetry, from silly to serious. Use it thematically, theatrically, and throughly!
- 2) **Model** the love of poetry listening, poetry performance, and poetry writing in your daily interactions with students.
- 3) **Use poetic activities** to jump-start learning, but if you are really just "versifying" (playing around with words in ways that resemble greeting cards), consider using terms such as rhyming, playing with sounds, letter play, etc. Also, always ask yourself "why am I doing this activity in this way — could I make it more meaningful and authentic and still address the same learning goals?"
- 4) Make sure you **find the time to help students express** their thoughts through poetry creation. For this purpose, consider using light-tech, high-tech, and teacher facilitation to help them extend their reach.

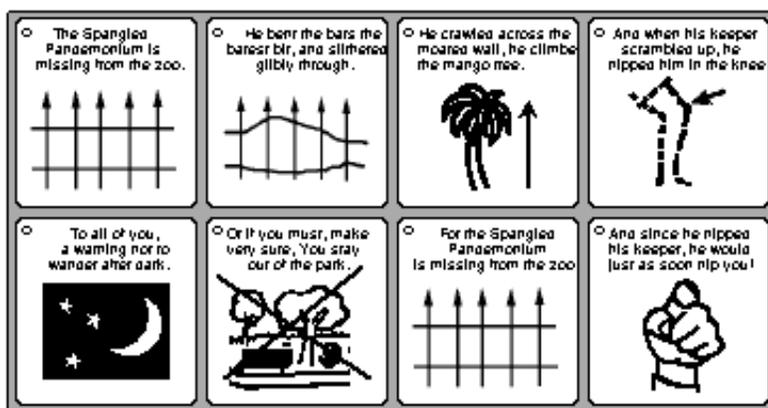
## Poetry Immersion

Many poems have inherent features that make them delightful for children, and excellent vehicles of emergent literacy and AAC learning. These features can also make poetry especially accessible for students with disabilities:

- **Rhythm:** Poetry offers endless opportunities to introduce students to various types of rhythm. This rhythm may be repeated verse by verse, such as Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky":
- **Rhyme:** It is no longer considered obligatory that a poem have rhyming to be considered a "real" poem. However, as with storytelling, rhyming can help children feel more "connected" to the poem, and can help with emergent literacy skills. Children who are developing language may begin to organize words on the basis of sound similarities as soon as they begin to talk (Bradley, 1988). The Russian writer Churkovsky (1963) explored the fascination that young children show with sound play, including rhyming. He provides a wealth of examples of spontaneous rhymes produced by children from different countries while engaging in word play. Bradley (1988) cites studies indicating that the origins of phonological awareness lie in the early word play of children.
- **Repeated Lines, Phrases, or Words:** Repetition can help children with special needs be a part of the action. Many poems offer one or more repeated lines or phrases, as seen in the chart.
- **Alliteration:** Young children enjoy listening to and exploring alliteration, and it serves the educational purpose of putting phonemes "on display". For example, e. e. cummings offers us "maggie and milly and molly and may", while Robert Francis's "Base Stealer" gives alliterative descriptions of his baseball player: "Running a scattering of steps sidewise, How he teeters, skitters, tingles, teases, Taunts them. . ."

### Poetry, Literacy, and AAC: Learning Opportunities

This section covers a range of issues for interventionists: 1) Guidelines — choosing poetry to promote classroom or individual goals; 2) Listening To Poetry — an important element, with a range of listening approaches and objectives covered; 3) Poetry Exploration — experiencing poetry related to thematic materials or specific poets; 4) Poetry Performance — “. . . a method of learning which uses theatrical techniques to enhance the study of poetry. Using poems as scripts and working primarily in small performance teams, students read, discuss, direct, and dramatize poetry” (Wolf, 1990, p. 3); 5) Responding To Poetry — oral, written, or other forms of response to the ideas and feelings evoked through poetry.



*Spangled Pandemonium by Palmer Brown (Display by Musselwhite, 2021)*

This 8-Location version of "The Spangled Pandemonium" by Palmer Brown can be used for:

- \* poetry exploration
- \* thematic link to unit on critters
- \* supporting left to right reading
- \* supporting text "sweep" from top to bottom row

### Levels Of Poetry for AAC Users

For children with disabilities, it may be possible to identify successive levels of participation that provide the greatest possible scaffolding, and therefore the greatest possible success (Musselwhite & King-DeBaun, 1996). The easiest level identified is use of a repeated line as a refrain, including a "get-ready" cue. Samples Levels of Poetry are included in this handout.

# Vocabulary Sets for Writing

Musselwhite & Hanser, 2004, Write to Talk book

The vocabulary available to AAC users can have a huge impact - positive or negative - on their writing. We have identified three basic categories of vocabulary sets, with features described below:

## CLOSED SETS:

- small # of pre-programmed words and phrases
- vocabulary chosen by another person and arranged for the AAC user
- vocabulary is temporary, set up for a single activity

## CORE + CONTENT VOCABULARY SETS:

- pre-programmed words and phrases
- same set of vocabulary always available to the AAC user
- semi-generative depending on creativity of user
- continuum from small # of words (less than 100) to large # of words (thousands)
- alphabet may be available but not used
- word prediction may be available

## GENERATIVE SETS:

- core vocabulary set still available, to support quick writing
- alphabet used to generate novel vocabulary not in core

**Why Use Closed Sets?** Closed vocabulary sets may be used to support students who:

- 1) Engage in emergent writing, exploring print and learning that print carries meaning
- 2) Struggle with access, requiring a limited vocabulary set
- 3) Engage in content writing, including 'fringe' vocabulary
- 4) Want to participate fully and quickly in a writing activity

Closed vocabulary sets may be used for:



Core Vocab: Unity



## Why Use Core + Content Vocabulary Sets?

Core + content vocabulary sets present vocabulary that is consistently available to students, rather than available for only a specific activity. These sets may be used by students who represent a wide range of writing skill. For example, students who are not yet spellers may need to translate their thoughts, using words they know to give hints to words that are not represented.

**Why Use Generative Vocabulary Sets?** Access to the alphabet permits students who can spell (including inventive spellers) to attempt to represent any word that is in their heads! The independence this fosters is huge! Students should have access to the alphabet early and often, and communication partners should model use of the alphabet for spelling words that are not easily found in the device. Without this ability to directly generate a message that matches their thoughts, AAC writers must resort to finding the next best device vocabulary to describe their thoughts.

# Sample Poetry Forms / Structures for Emergent Writers

## Musselwhite, Wagner, & Odom, 2006 - [www.aacintervention.com](http://www.aacintervention.com)

### List Poems

List poems are the simplest of slot-filler poems. They can take many language forms. List forms can support practice of verb morphology for students who are oral or students using devices such as a PathFinder or a DynaVox/ DynaMyte. For example, a word or phrase can be inserted to indicate the:

**Location:** Shells on the beach / in my hand / in the sky / beside the bed.

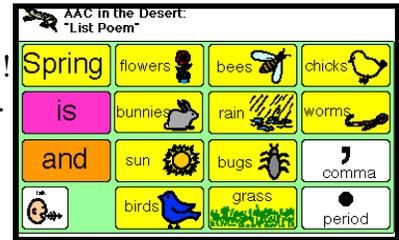
**Description:** Rocks are sharp and bright and big and cool.

**Actions:** I will run / dance / sing / glide / slide at the beach.

Bears run / eat / climb / growl / chase / scare / but never ever fly!

Jenny: running / dancing / singing / laughing / shouting / Jenny.

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary Access:* this is a high-success format, and can easily be scaffolded by using word banks, etc. Tip: Look at the Action Rhymes & Object Rhymes books from Warren Publishing House for more ideas.



Spring Poem: Boardmaker Display  
Phonics Phun Disk

### Poetry Parody / Innovations

See: *Emergent Literacy Success* (Musselwhite & King-DeBaun, 1997, Chapter 6), *Write Me a Poem* by Wilson (1994).

Take a familiar poem and use it as a frame. Do this with:

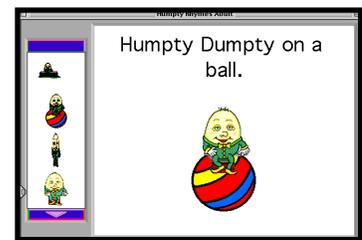
**Nursery Rhymes:** Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall / ball / in the mall, etc. See *Nursery Rhyme Time* by Julie Maro for ideas and communication displays ([www.aacintervention.com](http://www.aacintervention.com)).

**Jump Rope Rhymes:** the book *Anna Banana* has a wonderful set of rhymes to parody.

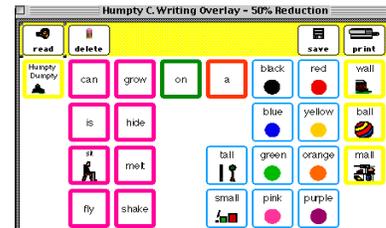
**Chants / Raps:** See *Raps & Rhymes* and *Jump for Joy* by Susan Hill for ideas.

**Poems by Children's Authors:** look at the student's favorite authors (Silverstein, Prelutsky, etc.) to find sample poems to innovate; Denman (1988, p. 99) points out that students can substitute just their own rhyming words (easier) or can substitute their own ideas (more thought required).

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary:* This is another high-success activity for students with limited language, and one that can be easily scaffolded through light-tech or high-tech supports.



Humpty Dumpty: Intellipics  
Nursery Rhyme Time Disk



Humpty Dumpty: Overlay Maker  
Nursery Rhyme Time Disk

### Poetry Construction

See Musselwhite & King-DeBaun (1997, Chapter 6) for numerous ideas for story construction.

**Word Scramble:** (See Heard, 1999) - students have word cards from these parts of speech:

- 5 nouns
- 5 verbs
- 5 adjectives
- 3 colors
- endings (-s -ed -ing)
- 3 small words (the/and/it)
- 3 prepositions
- 3 pronouns

Now lay out all these words so you can see them at one time, then use them to create a group poem!

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary:* This is a very high-success activity for students with limited language. Scaffold through eye gaze, picture banks, word banks, alternate keyboards, onscreen keyboards, or communication devices.

From: *Poetry Power: Jump-Starting Language, Literacy, & Life!* by Musselwhite & Wagner, 2001.

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## Cinquain Poems: Language Arts Version

Note that true cinquain is ". . . a delicately compressed unrhymed stanza, contains twenty-two syllables broken into five lines in a two-four-six-eight-two pattern . . . originated by Adelaide Crapsey" (*Pass the Poetry, Please!*, 1998, p. 182). Lee Hopkins Bennett also notes that this is a very abused form, being reduced to ". . . an exercise in grammar and calling for lists of nouns, adjectives, and participles" (p. 184). That being said, I see a purpose for using this form in its "language arts version" especially for students with limited expressive language! The modified form is as follows:

1st line = Title

2nd line = two action verbs

3rd line = three descriptors

4th line = 4-word summary

5th line = title again

Dad  
working playing  
busy happy grouchy  
Dad is way cool!  
Dad

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary:* This form lends itself well to scaffolding through word banks in the form of notebooks, eye gaze, device overlays, or computer support.

## Poetry Starters / Repetition Poems

See: *Wishes, Lies, & Dreams* by Kenneth Koch (1970); also see models by Christina Rossetti (Who has Seen the Wind), David McCord (Where), etc.

**Wishes:** I wish . . . Sometimes I wish . . . **Dreams:** I dream . . .

**Lies** = a "lie" or fantasy in each line, such as: I'm a boat that sails or I live on the moon

**Loaves & Hates:** (Wilson, 94): I love sugar / I love tea / I love \_\_\_\_ / Rhyming sentence

**Colors:** (See Koch, 1970, p. 199-215): he suggests putting a color in every line. Bennett (1998, pp. 222-224) suggests first reading *Hailstones and Halibut Bones* by Mary O'Neill (12 verses about color), then asking "How do certain colors make you feel?" Bring in touchables for children to explore!

**Senses:** Many authors suggest using the senses - for example, color + senses could yield:

Blue looks like \_\_\_\_ / Blue sounds like \_\_\_\_ / Blue feels like \_\_\_\_, etc.)

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary:* this format is very easy for children who write with ease, not so hard for children who talk and can "drite" (dictate-write) their ideas, but can be quite difficult for students with very limited vocabularies. Consider providing "idea banks" with the facilitator helping to draw out the poem by using prompts.

## Comparison Poems

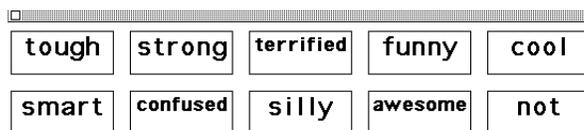
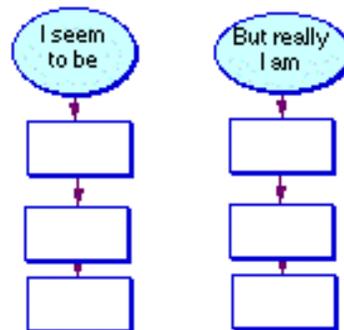
Comparisons can be a good way to introduce children to simile (using the words like or as) and metaphor (where one thing *is* another). Again, colors can be used - the \_\_\_\_ is as green as \_\_\_\_

**I Used To / But Now:** This form (Koch, pp. 156-174) gets students to think about changes in their lives.

**I Seem to Be / But Really I Am:** In this frame (Koch, 246-256) students compare facades / inner selves.

**I Used to Think / But Now I Know (or See):** This comparison pair from Koch lets students explore how their attitudes or visions have changed across time.

*Issues for Students with Limited Vocabulary:* These forms force students to think carefully about ideas and word choice.



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