

Still time to inspire pupils

How do you encourage children to write good poetry? Don't begin by lecturing to them about simile, metaphor and assonance. Don't tell them what a poem is. And don't talk down to them.

Children are little philosophers, capable of taking onboard much more than we adults might think. Show them by example. Children intuitively know about how to play with words – as long as they feel confident and are not put under pressure to “succeed”.

A good way to warm up, at least for primary school children, is to have the children sit on the floor around you as they would when they listen to a story. Get a sense of closeness. Make sure that you make good eye contact – try to engage with all of them. Now you are ready to start.

Warming up

Riddles are a good way of warming up – of limbering up the writer's brain. Ask them if they know what a riddle is.

They may say that a riddle “has to rhyme”. Well, it could rhyme but it doesn't have to. They may say that a riddle is a puzzle – that you mustn't give away the answer. Now they are getting warmer.

Ask them if they think they are good at riddles. They will say that they are. Put them to the test. Read some riddles with them – Ted Hughes's animal metaphors (from *What is the truth?*) are a good place to start. Ask the children to guess what animal each “riddle” is about. Here are some more animal riddles along similar lines from Jill Pirrie, inspirational poetry teacher and author of *“On Common Ground”* (published by the World Wide Fund for Nature, 1994):

Sizzle-spark, dizzy-dancer
Sweet-sucker, furry-guzzler
Fat-fairy, window-banger
Sun-buzzer, rose-duster
Drowsy-dope, honey-hummer
Sting-in-the-tail.

Clod-hopper, head-hanger
Rump-swayer, ear-flicker
Rough-rugger, knee-bender
Tail-twitcher, swivel-eye,
Sporty-trotter, dung-dropper
Beach-bum.

The children will get excited about guessing. Hands will go up in the air. Ask them why they think the rose-duster is a bee, not a wasp. Ask them which line they like best. Tell them

With just over two weeks to go before the closing date for entries to this year's EDP/Bayer CropScience Young Poets of the Year competition, **ANNE OSBOURN** offers some tips on inspiring children to write poetry.



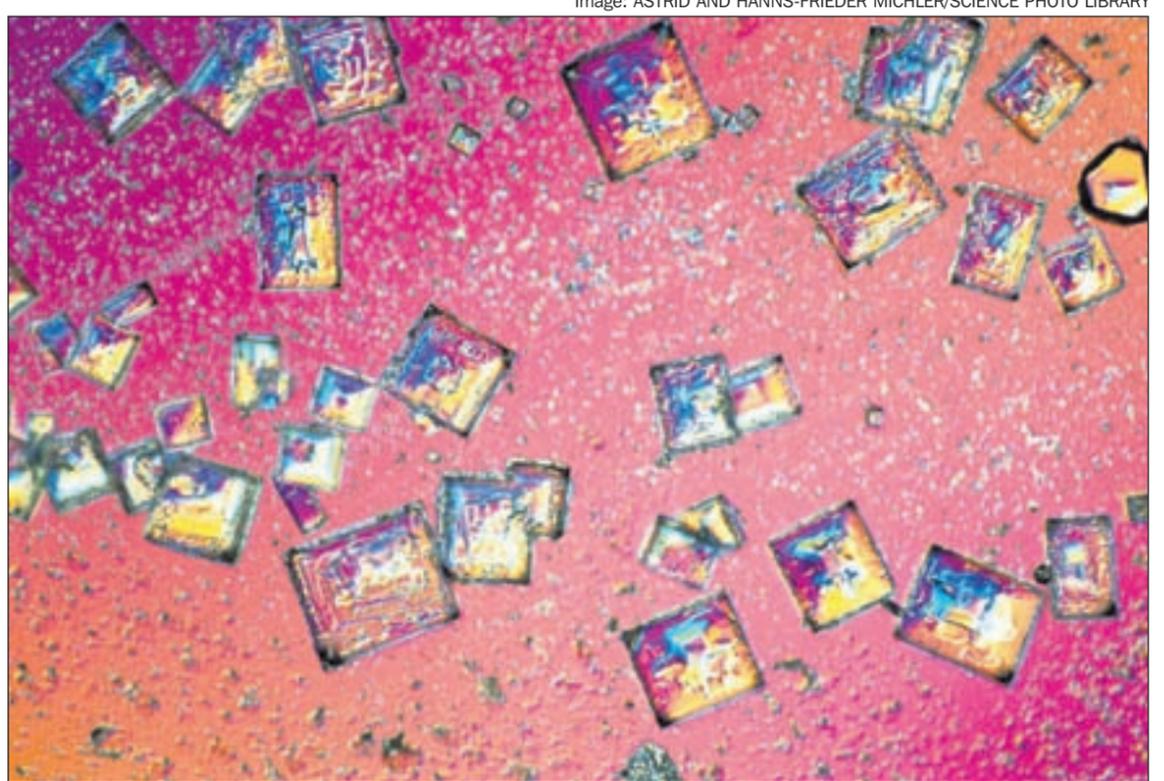
that there is no right or wrong answer. It is their choice. What does rose-duster mean? Keep quizzing them. Engaging them. What about the second riddle? Is it a horse? No? Why not? You will then probably realise that most children these days have not ridden on donkeys on the beach!

What about a slightly harder riddle? For example, this one by the well-known poet Judith Nicholls:

Fly-by-night,
moon brusher,
searcher of light;
flibbertigibbet,
translunar kite.
Now a leaf,
now a message,
silent in flight;
wisp of torn paper
that drifts out of sight
then lifts in the wind
and is lost
to the night.

“Moth”, from Storm's Eye – published by Oxford University Press, 1994, used by permission of the author

Ask the children to read this riddle with you. Which word or line do they like best? Why? One of them may choose “flibbertigibbet”. What does “flibbertigibbet” mean? Have they ever been called “flibbertigibbet”? Read it again. What other lines do they like? They may say “moon brusher”, or “translunar kite”. What does



INSPIRATION: Images from science like this – regular cubic crystals of table salt (sodium chloride) viewed under the microscope – can inspire poems (see salt crystals poem on facing page).

“translunar kite” mean? What do they think the riddle is about? Someone may say it's an owl or a bat. Read it again. Eventually one of them will shout “Moth”. “Yes, very good. Why is it a moth and not a bat or an owl?” They will say they know it is a moth because moths go to the light, or because their wings are like wisps of torn paper. Excellent. Now you are on a roll.

Sit back and ask them what you need to be able to do to write a good riddle. They may say that you need to find good describing words. “Well, that's true.” They may also say that you mustn't give the answer away. “That is also true. But what must you be able to do, before you even start writing your riddle?”

Eventually one of them may get to the answer. You need to know what it is that you are writing about – you need to study it, note detail, really understand what it is that you are trying to write about.

Scientists do that when they are trying to understand how something works. They observe and note detail. So do artists and poets. You can't write a good riddle about something unless you really know your subject well.

You could ask them all to close their eyes, think about something that they are very familiar with and then start to make a word picture – the beginnings of a riddle – in their heads.

Ask them to put their hands up when they have a line or two, and then see if the other children in the class can guess what it is. Praise the children for using good descriptive words.

Hopefully they will have picked up on the kinds of words that you are expecting from them through the riddles that you have read with them. If they say “It's warm and fluffy and it lives in a cage” you need to try to move them on from that – “Is it an animal? What is its fur like? How would you describe it? Does it make a noise? Is it a straw-scrabbler, a wheel-spinner, a noise-at-night seed nibbler...?”

Tell them that they are very good at observing. They are going to be very good poets.

Preparing to write a poem

Now you need to set the scene for crossing the threshold into the land of poetry. There are many different strategies for doing this.

The children need to step from the real world into a different place, and they need to be supported in doing this.

One way of achieving this is through reflections. Reflections reveal the surprising, the extraordinary within the ordinary. When we look at a reflection in a child-like way, in a window for instance, our mind censors what we see. We separate the three layers – the glass, the reflection, the scene outside. When we resist this censorship and look with the poet's eye we find the strangest of things. Try reading a poem about reflections with the children:

Fish tank

Staring at the water, my face ripples along.
The fish dances about, up my nose and back.
Clumps of rock form in my hair, weed tattoos my cheeks.
A stream of bubbles streak my face,
ruined as the water carries it away.

*Amelia Rix (age 8)
Rockland St Mary Primary School*

Ask them what lines they like. What bits they found most surprising. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers.

Now ask them to make a list of natural reflective surfaces (eg water in a pond, well, drinking trough, bird bath) – all with water surfaces, and write their ideas down on the blackboard/whiteboard.

Next ask them to make a list of unnatural reflective surfaces (eg mirror, glasses, clock face, computer screen, window, etc) and write these ideas down too. You could use one of these ideas as a starting point to write a group poem as a class.

Then invite them to go back to their desks, choose one of the reflective surfaces and give them 10 minutes or so to write individual poems. Having gained confidence through the riddles, through reading poems by other children about reflections and through writing a group poem they should now have a good idea of what is

expected of them.

They should all be able to think of some kind of reflective surface and to start writing. They could find reflective objects in the classroom (or perhaps outside) and use these as inspiration. Walk round the room watching what they are doing. If you see a good line or a good idea then stop and say “Listen to what Gemma/Johnny has written”.

Read it out. Say how exciting/surprising/observant it is. The other children will look up, take note, and then get their heads down and try to do something at least as good. You will need to keep going round the classroom, coaxing and helping, as the children work on their poems.

If you are stopping at the end of this exercise then make sure that you leave five minutes for the

children to read out their work. Once one or two children have read you will find that you have a queue of eager readers lining up. If you are going to go on and do another exercise then you may wish to leave the readings until the end of the session.

Other thresholds could include the “Magic image” – startling photographs that give us a new way of looking at things, for example by using microscopes, X-rays or thermography.

As a scientist I find it exciting and rewarding to see how children respond to images of this kind. These scientific images will inspire the children and encourage them to come up with some fantastic ideas for poems. Show them images using the interactive whiteboard – or hand out large printed versions. Get them brainstorming.

A beautiful image of a backlit cobweb covered in dewdrops looked like “A pearly rib cage”. Another child added “...breathing in and out

Change of name and number for CarLink

CarLink - Norfolk's volunteer driver car service - is part of **Transport Plus** from Monday 30 June.

The new contact number is 01603 422807.

Lines are open between 9am and 4pm.

Three days' notice of a journey is required, as before.

Transport Plus

is a new partnership between Voluntary Norfolk, Norfolk County Council, the East of England Ambulance Service and NHS Norfolk.



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to enter poetry competition

in the breeze." You say, "Well done – what excellent ideas". Another child says, "No, it looks like the lights in Las Vegas". You show them another image. Salt crystals under the microscope become "ice cubes falling from the sky" or "tumbling crisp packets/on a sugar pink sea". Ask them to choose an image that they would like to work with. Tell them to look closely at the image they have chosen. What can they see? What is inside the picture? Invite them to enter this world. What can they hear? What can they feel? Is there movement? Is there, maybe, a poem?

Now let them have 10-15 minutes to write, while you move around the classroom helping them and reading out highlights. The reading of selected lines here and there is very important. It provides a link between the children while they are writing so that they don't feel isolated. And it enables you to show them what you think is good writing.

Salt crystals

Tumbling crisp packets
on a sugar pink sea,
left on the sand
by careless people.
Rolling towards
the dark of the seabed,
collected by lobsters and crabs.
Lost
forever.

Cerian Ellson (age 7)
Mundesley First School

An image of the Earth from space can generate very evocative poetry. This is the theme of this year's EDP Bayer CropScience competition (see panel, right).

Children can be asked to imagine that they are "Earthsick astronauts" exiled in their cold metallic spaceships, looking back at Earth. What would they miss? How would they feel? After reading one or two poems by way of example, the children can then be asked to write poems in which they dream of home.

Looking Back

Out here I can see
your world going round and round.
Rocks crashing
down and down.
Pigs snorting
louder and louder.
People on the Great Wall of China,
dancing the cha cha cha.

Group poem by children age 4-6
Rockland St Mary Primary School

Editing poetry

There is never enough time to really get a poem to perfection in a single lesson. It is disappointing when you see very promising but flawed poems left abandoned.

Encourage the children to revisit their poems, either as homework or in another lesson, and to think about whether it needs editing. Ask them if there are any words in there that haven't earned their place. Do they use the same word too many times? Note that it is all right to use the same word several times if this is for effect.

Are they being overly dramatic and sensational or are they true to themselves and their cause? How does the poem sound when they read it?

Ask them to think about the layout of the poem – the lines and stanzas. Do they have a strong last line? And don't forget to remind them that they need a title. The title can often add a whole new dimension to the poem. You can't edit the poem for them, tempting though that may be. They need to learn how to develop their own critical skills. And they don't have to stick to rules – rules are there to be broken!

At first it may be easier to teach revision intuitively by freeing the children from the investment that in fact the work is theirs. One of the best ways to get children comfortable with revision is to compose a group poem. One child will shout out a line and then another will often change a word or two in it. Composing line by line like this also make the children aware of patterns that are being established – two statements then a question, or an exclamation mark every so often. They can also learn punctuation and syntax this way too. After the initial draft you can read the poem over again with the class and discuss the arrangement, the word choice, the parts that sound repetitive, or especially good.

Because it is a class poem, and not one individual's poem, children are more willing to play with the words, even their own. This will help to prepare them for applying the revision skills that they have learned as a group to their own work.

Once the children have become intuitive masters of simile, metaphor, assonance and all of the other literacy curricular requirements, they can retrospectively learn the formal names for these devices – and be impressed by how much they know.

NOW ENTER EDP/BAYER CROPSCIENCE SCHOOLS POETRY COMPETITION



Actor Roger Lloyd Pack is the final-stage judge in the EDP and Bayer Crop Science (Norwich) Young Poets of the Year competition.



This year's theme is Earth from Space, with school pupils challenged to think creatively about our home planet as seen from space. To help, we have put on our website (www.edp24.co.uk) a stunning photograph of the Earth as seen by the Apollo 17 crew in 1972. Youngsters can respond in any way they like, for instance imagining how an astronaut would feel in his sterile spaceship, longing for the sights, sounds and smells of home. The competition has two age categories: 8 to 9-year-olds and 10 to 11-year-olds in the EDP's circulation area. Prizes include £100 for the winner in each category, plus a day at Norwich City FC, with £500 for each winning school. Poems must be entered by the schools, which have been sent entry forms. The closing date is July 15. For more details go to www.edp24.co.uk

■ Prof Anne Osbourn is a plant biologist at the John Innes Centre, where she is head of the department of metabolic biology. She is also a poet, was this year's Schools Poet for the Poetry-next-the-Sea Festival and is a judge in our competition. Anne has been fortunate to work closely in schools with renowned children's poetry teacher Jill Pirrie. Many of the ideas in this article are strategies that are used by Jill. Anne founded Science, Art and Writing (SAW Trust) in 2006. The SAW initiative uses images from science as a starting point for scientific experimentation, art and creative writing, breaking down barriers between science and the arts. Find out more about SAW by reading See Saw, an anthology of children's poetry and artwork from the first SAW project. See the SAW website for details: ■ www.sawtrust.org

Earth-sick astronaut

I long to see a face other than my own in the sleek surfaces of space.

I long to hear a sound other than the occasional crackle of the static on the radio.

I long to smell sizzling bacon on a hot stove, not the cold metallic odour of loneliness.

I long to feel clear, white water trickling through the tiny gaps between my fingers.

I long to be in my warm home, to wake up from my dreams in a place where I'm not roped down by the blackness

of Space.

Jack Sutton (age 11)
Framingham Earl High School

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