



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative  
2009 Volume IV: The Sound of Words: An Introduction to Poetry

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## **Embracing the Frumious Bandersnatch: Sound, Rhyme, and Nonsense in Poetry for Young Children**

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### **Overview**

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Anyone who has ever read the poem "Jabberwocky" by Lewis Carroll aloud cannot help but smile. The smile does not necessarily come from the story of the poem, which is actually quite gruesome. The smile comes from the silliness of the words. The pure nonsensical joy of the poem comes alive somehow when it is *heard*. The silent reading of the poem may have its charms too, I suppose, but only in the full grandeur of its oral expression does "Jabberwocky" encompass all the things I love about poetry for young children; it includes wonderful sound; intriguing, silly, nonsensical words; remarkable rhymes; and inescapable rhythm.

Here, as beautifully illustrated in the first two stanzas, you will see what I mean:

"Twas brillig and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe. Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! Beware the Jubjub bird and shun The frumious Bandersnatch!"<sup>1</sup>

I ask you to disregard the advice of Lewis Carroll in his brilliant poem; rather than succumbing to the urgency of his caveat to "shun the frumious Bandersnatch"<sup>2</sup> I ask that you suspend your sensibilities, embrace him, and explore the sounds, rhymes, and pure nonsensical joy of poetry for young children.

This unit is designed to introduce poetry, in its various forms, to first graders. The students in my classroom are between the ages of five and eight years old. They begin the school year with varying degrees of emergent literacy skills, with the majority on the pre-primer level or lower. My school is culturally diverse, with an approximate demographic of 76% African American, 20% Hispanic, and 4% Other. It is also a Title I school where 93% of the total enrollment receives free or reduced lunches. Many of the children have limited access or exposure to literature in any form, other than when they are in school. Although this unit focuses primarily on first grade, many of the ideas and activities, as well as the poems and books on the reading list, could be easily adapted for both older and younger children.

To increase the adaptability of the unit, I have provided an annotated reading list of both teacher resources and books of poetry which I have used in developing the unit activities. The poems and books are so

engaging, I can think of many ways that older students could use them - either in a "stand-alone" activity in their own classroom or in partnership with a primary class.

## Rationale

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Kenneth Koch tells us, in his book, *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, published in 1970 that:

Children have a natural talent for writing poetry and anyone who teaches them should know that. Teaching is really not the right word for what takes place: it is more like permitting children to discover something they already have. I helped them do this by removing obstacles ... and encouraging them, in various ways to get tuned in to their own strong feelings, to their spontaneity, their sensitivity, and their carefree inventiveness. <sup>3</sup>

What was true almost forty years ago is still true today. Children may have changed in some peripheral ways, but their essential core remains the same. They are still children with feelings - sometimes big feelings about big events in their young lives. They have minimal coping skills and often have no viable, valid outlet. I believe poetry can help in situations such as this. I believe, as Koch did, that children are natural poets, artists, and authors. When we break down the boundaries of *correctness* (as if there were such a thing in poetry for emergent readers), we provide for them, not only necessary literacy skills, but also a conduit to a safe release of sometimes silly, sometimes sad, sometimes angry, but always powerful, emotions. Powerful emotions can often be enough to hijack a classroom and disrupt learning for everyone. Even if there is no constructive way to express them available, those big feelings will come out - one way or another.<sup>4</sup> Poetry has the ability to channel all that energy, and potential negativity, into a positive means of expression.

Whether we teach in the inner city of a major metropolitan area or in a remote mountain hollow in deepest Appalachia, a high percentage of our students live in poverty. Poverty not only robs students of the basic necessities in life; it can also rob them of a quality education and a better future. Often we make certain assumptions, based on our own experiences, about the children we teach. Sometimes, those assumptions are valid, particularly if we were raised in similar environment or circumstance, but sometimes we couldn't be more wrong. We take for granted that all babies are rocked and read to as infants and toddlers, but that is not always the case. Some children may be *tabulae rasae*<sup>5</sup> in this regard. This may be particularly true in urban and culturally diverse communities where financial realities make books a scarce commodity. Books, after all, are wants and not needs. In these economically deprived areas, the basics of food, clothing, and shelter must take precedence in a family's budget. It is an unfortunate truth that our urban children have often not had the pleasurable experience of being read to and hearing nursery rhymes and poems. It would only make sense then, to begin at the beginning. No child should be deprived of that *seemingly* trivial, but really quite important, pleasure. Because it is not just a pleasure; it is a bridge, a connection, an avenue on which children can make their way from listening to reading to writing and creating.

It is a personal goal of mine to spend time each day reading poetry aloud to my students - even if it is just a short rhyme. The children receive these offerings enthusiastically and always want more. They will request favorite rhymes to be repeated over and over again. By the end of the year, some of my students can recite these poems on their own. I love to hear their intonations and inflections. Poetry has that unique capacity for individual interpretation. Each student brings their own background, circumstance, and distinctive way of

making a poem new and fresh while making it their own.

From the very first lessons introducing nursery rhymes, I will make a concerted effort to facilitate the memorization of poems as well as reinforcing concepts of print by having my students copy some of their favorite poems and rhymes into composition books. There they can refer to them again and again. For some of my past students, these dog-eared, tattered composition books become treasured possessions.

The lessons of this unit will encourage creative endeavors which may include anything from writing or recording poems, to listening to poems, to recitation. Because there are few absolute rights and wrongs in creating poetry, this particular medium is tailor-made for children to experience success. Building self-esteem and providing an outlet for feelings are just a few of the collateral benefits that go hand-in-hand with the literacy skill building inherent in the activities.

Building self-esteem is important, particularly in neighborhoods with gang activity. Children and young people with poor self-esteem are fodder for predatory gangs trying to recruit new members. According to our city police department, gang members have stooped to a new low and have been known to recruit children in elementary schools. We, as teachers, need to strive to instill in our students a sense of pride and belief in a future. If we can do that, we can prepare our children to resist the malevolent advances of street gangs.

## Objectives

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In framing my objectives, I was reminded of a quote by Sylvia Ashton Warner, "I see the mind of a five-year-old as a volcano with two vents: destructiveness and creativeness. And I see to the extent we widen the creative channel, we atrophy the destructive one."<sup>6</sup>

In the purest sense, this unit is meant to give students another genre to develop that creative channel. The unit's lessons and activities will maintain adherence to, and foster growth of, necessary literacy skills. The three major elements of the unit: sound, rhyme, and nonsense will be a constant, either separately or together, underpinning the lessons. I believe that reading and recitation of poems also provides a most appropriate vehicle for explorations in oral language development.

As I have considered the nature of the first grade child, it has become evident to me, that a subject as big, broad, and beautiful as poetry cannot be relegated to a "clump" of learning to be done all at once — attacked briskly and forgotten quickly. The poems selected for the lessons and in the bibliography for the unit will support, as well as provide models of the components, of literacy skills being learned. The sequence of lessons and activities in the unit evolve as a first grade child does, over the course of a year.

The unit will blanket the entire school year with *couplets* of lessons on poetry. In this context, a couplet refers to a pair of lessons rather than verse. These couplets will be interspersed every two weeks or twice a month, depending on how your calendar falls. For my schedule, Thursdays and Fridays will be optimum days for presenting these lessons as attendance tends to wane at the end of the week. I am hoping these lessons will serve to provide extra motivation to be in school on Poetry Days. The couplets will gain in both content and complexity in conjunction with the emergence and gradual growth of the first graders' literacy skills. The lessons will be entwined within the scope and sequence of the language arts curriculum. Each couplet of

lessons will seamlessly merge, not only with the district's pacing chart, but with the pace of the children's ever changing abilities.

I want my students to understand that there is something other than just story books or "readers" available to them for reading, listening to, and appreciating. Another goal is for the students to understand that poetry is not always conventional in its use of grammar, spelling, and structure. They need to know that poems are a form of art and because of that; they are not bound by the usual rules. I will achieve this goal by illustrating the way that nursery rhymes and poems play with words - this includes playing with sound, creating nonsense words, and inventing spelling. I want my students to know that there are many types of oral language experiences, including choral speaking, recitation, individual sharing, and finding the rhythm and patterns in poems. I will encourage my students' creative endeavors by modeling writing with think-alouds and write-alouds, then supporting and guiding their individual forays into writing poems. My students will learn that writing is not the only means available to them for capturing the poetry they create. We will use manipulatives (small, hands-on objects such as blocks, seashells, uncooked macaroni, beads, etc.), photography, recording, both video and audio tape. My students will understand that poetry can be very private or it may be shared, by choice, with others. Most of all, I want my students to understand that listening to the sounds of words and turning those words into poetry, can be fun.

## Background Information

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Poetry is an important ingredient in a fully-formed, multi-dimensional, comprehensive language arts curriculum. Yet, even though appreciation of short poems is mentioned in the state standards for first grade, it appears to be marginalized — marginalized in the sense that it is often relegated to coverage by formulaic poems that are constructs of the reading program. It is hard for me to comprehend why it is frequently barely addressed, squeezed in as an afterthought, or covered only by strict adherence to the constraints of a scripted reading program designed for at-risk learners. Teachers who neglect to enrich their language arts instruction with poetry, and the means by which to create it, do themselves and their students a disservice. Even in its most primitive form, it connects children to phonemes, and it provides means of engagement for eventually connecting to reading. Continued exposure to sounds and listening to words in rhymes, poems, and other explorations in language and sound will engender a love of words and the endless ways they can be arranged.

In his study of six landmark research studies, including *Learning to Read: the Great Debate* by Jeanne S. Chall in 1967 and *Beginning to Read: Thinking and Learning About Print* by Marilyn J. Adams in 1990, J.E. Cowen concludes that nursery rhymes and poems are necessary elements of literacy education.<sup>7</sup> Nursery rhymes are also important to the oral language development of all students, but are particularly useful and effective in helping English Language Learners overcome limitations. In learning to recite, ELL students gain a certain comfort level with the sound of their words and the movements of their mouths in forming these new words.

The element of sound is intrinsic to all five of the components of reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. Phonemic awareness is the understanding that spoken words are made up of sounds or phonemes.<sup>8</sup> It is the ability to identify, segment, blend, and manipulate sounds in spoken words. Phonics entails the understanding that there is an unchanging, consistent relationship between phonemes and graphemes.<sup>9</sup> Phonics, in short, foregrounds the importance of the sound/symbol relationship in reading. Together, phonemic awareness and phonics are of critical importance to

the explicit, systematic instruction of reading recommended by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) in 2000.<sup>10</sup>

The other three elements of literacy instruction are also inherent in poetry. They are vocabulary development, fluency, and comprehension. Poetry is conducive to teaching them in the following ways:

### **Vocabulary Development**

Generally speaking, most poetry is way ahead of the curve in exposing students to high level vocabulary. The speech of poetry is, well, poetic: the choice of words and their sounds are highlighted more than in prose. Poetry also provides a practical framework in which to discuss words with multiple meanings, as well as how meaning can be derived from context.

Children have a natural curiosity about words. Giving them access to a wide range of words and their meanings greatly enriches their literacy instruction. I have never watered down my vocabulary in teaching. Consequently, I have always had at least some of the students absorb and make use of the vocabulary I use. My students discover very quickly that using high-level vocabulary is met with high praise in my classroom. I strive each year to establish a non-threatening environment and I try to be very approachable so that my children feel free to ask questions - especially when they don't understand a word or if they need clarification.

Poetry has the ability to draw children in. I have seen children insinuate themselves into the poetic experience by anticipating rhyme, predicting and joining in with refrains, and reveling in the silliness of nonsense. When their collective ear hears a fascinating word or passage, they want to hear it again and again. I encourage them to say it and hear it for themselves. As a result, they will learn to use words in a meaningful way.

Sometimes they will even develop fondness for particular words. Last year I read Robert Frost's "Acquainted with the Night" to my class. One of my students became fascinated by the word *acquainted*. After clarifying the meaning with me, he used it in a sentence and asked if that was right. When I affirmed that he had indeed used it correctly, he seemed satisfied. With the knowledge that he could use it properly, he then stored it away for future use.

The next week he was absent for a day. While he was absent, we got a new student in our class. When he arrived back at school the next day, he came up to me and said, "Is that a new student? I am not acquainted with that person." Of course, I was thrilled and praised him generously for remembering and using such a big word. After that, he became a word aficionado of sorts, always trying out the new words he heard in class and using them as frequently as he was able. A couple of other children caught on and made the connection to the idea that using new words was an easy way to receive praise. Soon others in the class were trying it. If I had ever seriously thought of diluting my choice of vocabulary, I was cured of it that day. Not everyone will always "get it," but I will always have the expectation that there are children who will, and by their example, stimulate others both to try and to see the value and fun in doing so.

### **Fluency**

Fluency is a natural by-product of repeated readings and recitation. It is also generated by practicing choral and paired poetry reading. Even before students fully develop actual reading skill, it is important to model "sweep and return" — tracing from left to right as you read from large reproductions of poems. By pointing to words as you read them and demonstrating the directionality of the print, students begin to utilize their skills unconsciously. It is important to remember that fluency is comprehension's "partner-in-crime"; you rarely

have one without the other..

## **Comprehension**

Comprehension is present in several forms - even for first graders - in discussion of the structure of phrasing in poems and how meaning is affected by inflection. Encouraging expressive and repeated readings of poetry helps to unlock its implications and increase retention. These skills can easily be applied to any literary genre in order to help improve understanding, for any grade level you may teach.

## **Strategies**

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On its most basic level, this unit is about the way that poetry and oral language combine to enhance literacy development. The poems contained within the lessons will be from literature. When selecting poems, I shy away from the use of commercial texts and reading series in which the poems are written for the express purpose of being illustrative of a specific element of poetry, and would encourage you to do the same. There are so many extraordinary poems and poets to study in these lessons; it only takes a small amount of effort to find just what you need in the vast array of what has already been written. Occasionally jazz and blues music will also serve as vehicles for their own particular brand of poem. I think it is important to include jazz and blues poems in this unit. Teaching blues and jazz poems without music would be analogous to teaching someone how to bake bread without flour. In both cases, you would be missing the main ingredient.

As children become immersed in and inquisitive about the poems they hear, the lessons will include additional information about poets, their backgrounds, and the history of selected poems. In addition to following the scope, sequence, and pacing of the curriculum, subject matter of the poems may be linked to seasons or special months. We will read nursery rhymes and sensory poems in September, "scary" poems in October, fall poems in November, holiday poems in December, tongue twisters in January, African American poets highlighted during Black History month in February, Dr. Seuss poems aligned with his birthday celebration in March, poems about the Earth and nature in April, and Mexican and Mexican-American poets featured around Cinco de Mayo in May.

In implementing the activities in the unit, I will be employing a variety of strategies, sometimes alone, but most often in combination. These would include, but not be limited to the following:

### **The Read-Aloud**

Read-alouds are a strategy in which literature is used to introduce a specific element of content to students. I conduct my read-alouds by sitting in a chair in front of the students who are gathered in a large group or reading circle on a carpet. Then we look at the cover, make predictions, discuss the author and illustrator, sometimes we take a picture walk, then I read aloud from the book and the children listen and respond.

I like this setting, with the children on the carpet, because it is particularly effective in creating a close, non-threatening atmosphere that lends itself easily to listening to, discussing, and seeing books being read. This arrangement increases the likelihood of sharing as it is a more relaxed and less formal setting than being seated at tables or desks.

## **The Write-Aloud**

Write-alouds are a strategy in which the teacher works with the children in a whole group setting to create a story, letter, or poem. I solicit ideas from the students and write them on the board, chart paper, or a graphic organizer. Together, we share ideas, organize the print, and edit the finished work. This is an excellent practice for modeling various writing processes, i.e. friendly letters, sentences, paragraphs, etc. This method also promotes a cohesiveness that I like to see develop in the class where everyone can work toward a common goal cooperatively.

## **Audio Recording**

In order to capture spontaneous thoughts and ideas, my classroom will be equipped with a recording center. Small, simple, handheld voice recorders will be available for student use. This will be helpful for students practicing working with sound - either that of their own voice or hands-on sound creation with manipulatives. This method truly fuels creativity. There is nothing my students love more than hearing themselves.

## **Video Recording**

As in the use of audio recording, video recording will be used to capture students' creative moments, as well as performances. Over the course of the year, I plan to use this technique frequently, often in conjunction with one or more of the other strategies. Sometimes it will be in the foreground; sometimes it will be just "on" in the background so that the students will become accustomed to it and not be tense, silly, or unnatural when being recorded.

## **Digital Photography**

I will often be using photography in these lessons as yet another means to record student work. Since the advent of the digital camera, its utility in the classroom has increased substantially. It is convenient and cost effective as most of us have the use of printers in school and no longer have to pay for film and developing.

In my experience with first graders, I find it to be an invaluable tool. So much of what we will do in this unit, at least initially, involves the use of manipulatives. I believe photography will be especially useful in capturing the constructs of those lessons which will be sensory in nature and difficult to make a record of by other means.

## **Interactive Bulletin Board**

Over the course of the year, as poems are introduced, I will add each poem to a "Poet's Corner Hall of Fame." By displaying poetry in this manner, it will always be available to the students. Even though the students may not be able to read the poems at the beginning of the year, this strategy harkens back to the whole language method. The children will have a visual image of the poems to go with the spoken words. By applying phonetic principles to the *whole words* in the poems, the sound-letter associations they have will enable them to begin to recognize and remember some sight words and decode those words which are regular in spelling.

The Poet's Corner will add to the "print richness" of my classroom. This will be a great way to showcase "Our Poetry." This will include a listening station where students may hear themselves as well as classmates' recordings. As skill level increases, original work by the students will also be displayed there.

## **Recitation**

Recitation will be an important strategy that will be used to meet oral language standards. I will have my students memorize and recite poems either chorally, in a large group setting, or individually. The choice of poem will depend on the lesson. Sometimes I will choose the poem or rhyme and sometimes they will. I like to offer choices as often as I can to give the students a measure of autonomy. I also like to see what they choose. Their choices often lead to interests that I can use to differentiate instruction. For instance, a student choosing to memorize a poem about the ocean might indicate an interest in going to the beach; I can then use that as a starting point for that particular student when he or she is trying to think of something to write about. I can take that information in another direction by providing additional poems about the ocean to motivate more reading. I can expand even further by helping the student explore his or her interest by introducing books with different sea animals or ocean environments that could be used to inspire ideas for writing.

## **Reader's Theater**

I like to adapt poems to be used in the Reader's Theater format. I will use mixed ability, collaborative learning groups to make an arrangement of a poem to perform. These adaptations will be either from literature or they may be from original student work.

## **Collaborative Learning Groups**

Students will work together in heterogeneous groupings to complete activities related to specific lessons. Research has shown that these mixed ability groupings can be very effective for students working together to complete literacy tasks.<sup>11</sup> These groups are also effective places to brainstorm, strategize, and problem solve.

## **Invented Spelling**

I encourage the use of invented spelling to help students flex their creative muscles. Even in first grade, children can become consumed with the idea of perfect spelling. Imagine if you were trying to write a poem and you had to stop and ask someone how to spell almost every word. What would your stress level be? Would your creativity suffer? I know mine would. When you advocate the use of invented spelling, children can approach writing in a much more relaxed manner without the restrictions imposed by correctness. Promoting its use can lead to poetic creation, fuel the imagination, and generate word play - and the practice you are providing for newly acquired phonics skills is an added bonus.

## **Word Play**

There are many interesting forms of word play I like to use. The most practical, according to state standards, involves the creation of new words by means of rhyming and word families. I also like to include the use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, nonsense words, and figures of speech. I have to admit, though, for some of the more sophisticated elements, I just introduce the concept and not the terminology. I call onomatopoeia, words that make noise; and alliteration, tongue-twister words. Students get the idea, but they aren't perplexed by terms that are even difficult for some adults.

## **Reflection and Self-Evaluation**

Because of the nature of poetry, especially in the primary grades, reflection and self-evaluation are the only means of assessment I would recommend using. I cannot find a valid reason to parse and grade a first



grader's first forays into creative use of language. Grades imply that there is just one right way to do something. In this case, being *right* is not the objective - the objective is allowing the creative use of sound and words, as well as providing a vent for feelings. In support of this, I can list three valid reasons not to grade:

1. It might dampen enthusiasm for the very thing we are trying to promote.
2. It could be damaging to self-esteem. Again, completely anathema to what we want to accomplish.
3. It could construct a lifelong writer's block and negative feelings about the genre.

I recommend the use of writing portfolios. Establish one for each child. Then provide choices and allow students a degree of autonomy in what they would like to retain in the portfolio. When necessary, assist in the thoughtful consideration that should be given and help children develop their own criteria for making his or her choices.

### Conferencing

In order to help guide discovery and differentiate instruction, I think it is important to provide opportunities for conferencing with individual students. I know that this is difficult to accomplish at times, especially if you are the only adult in the classroom. I would encourage everyone implementing this unit in a primary grade to solicit volunteers. You can use parent volunteers, mentors in the school, people from churches or other organizations in the community. Having more than one adult assisting during the activities will free up more time for one-on-one guidance to help students achieve success.

### Debriefing and Sharing

Debriefing is not just for the military. All activities in the unit should be followed by a short period reserved for reviewing what we have just completed and sharing the results of the activity. Taking time to debrief reinforces the value of the activity. Taking time to share student creations validates their work while teaching an appreciation of one's own work as well as the work of others.

## Unit Activities

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Because I designed this unit to be a yearlong endeavor, it is imperative that it becomes a part of the school routine as soon as possible. I plan to introduce "Poetry Days" during the first week of school and explain that this is something we will do all year long, twice a month, on Thursdays and Fridays.

In order to avoid being redundant in sharing the unit activities, there are a few things that will be part of the procedure for each lesson. First, all lessons will begin by gathering the children on the carpet, most often in a circle. During Read-Aloud activities, I will always be in a chair to enable a clear view of the pages or the "sweep and return" when I am reading from large print reproductions of poems. At the conclusion of most activities, the work of the children will be displayed either in the hall or the Poet's Corner. Once per quarter, I will give each child an opportunity to choose items from their work products to be filed in his or her writing portfolio. Finally, even if not explicitly referred to, all lessons will end with everyone gathering again on the carpet for a time of debriefing and sharing of either work products or personal reflections.

## **September Couplets**

September is the month for introducing "Poetry Days." The introduction will be followed by nursery rhymes and phonemic activities, both of which may serve as informal readiness indicators, depending upon your needs.

Introduction and Nursery Rhymes, Day I - I will introduce the concept of "Poetry Days" along with its two lesson, twice a month structure. We will talk about what a poem is, and how it is different from a regular book or story. I will explain that the kinds of poems we will listen to, talk about, and write may include rhyme, interesting sounds, and nonsense. I will clarify any questions students might have about what we will be doing on "Poetry Days." I will then start things off by reciting a few nursery rhymes, in English and Spanish, and asking if anyone would like to share nursery rhymes they might know. After a time of sharing and discussion, I'll end this lesson by asking students to think about nursery rhymes they might like to learn and recite.

Nursery Rhymes, Day II - I'll begin Part II by reviewing the previous lesson. We will share some of our favorite nursery rhymes, then narrow those down to three or four choices. The children will choose a nursery rhyme to memorize and recite. We will break into small groups, each with an adult or fifth grade helper, to aid in memorizing the rhymes. At the end of class, children will be given the opportunity to recite part or all of their chosen nursery rhyme.

Mouths & Mirrors, Day I - This is a phonemic segmentation exercise where children will practice separating words into their individual sounds while looking in a mirror to observe the shapes and movements of mouth, lips, and tongue. On Day I, we will begin with volunteers reciting the nursery rhyme they learned a few weeks ago. I will then explain the importance of the sound of the words being correct. As a large group, we will practice segmenting words orally, phoneme by phoneme. After practicing this, I will pass out small mirrors. We will go through the alphabet, letter by letter, practicing proper sound formation while watching the movements of our mouths in the mirrors.

Mouths & Mirrors, Day II - We will practice phoneme segmentation using the mirrors in small groups. The children in each group will choose a single word for a "word poem." Each child will pronounce a phoneme for their chosen word - one sound for each child in the group. I'll take a picture of each child making his or her sound. I'll print the photos and place them in order on some colored paper. We'll post them in the hall to challenge passersby to figure out the words by "reading lips." Under each photo will be a flap with the letter for the sound underneath, so the "lip readers" can check their answers.

## **October Couplets**

October is the month for mystery and "scary" poems. The first couplet explores sensory poems with first attempts at onomatopoeia through word play, invented spelling, some hands-on investigation followed by creating visual poems. The second couplet examines the nonsense, sense, sound, and rhyme of Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky."

Mystery Boxes, Day I - I will prepare several small, sealed boxes with a variety of objects in them, i.e. jingle bells, seashells, rice, feathers, stones, paperclips, buttons, etc. I will invite the children to manipulate the boxes any way they like - shaking them, turning them, anything they can think of to affect the sound coming from inside the box. The children will create a word for the sounds they hear, either on their own or with the aid of a helper. Invented spelling for the "noise" words will be encouraged. I will gather the children as a large group to share their new words. I'll list the words, and in a think-aloud, we will create a group poem using the

sound words that were generated.

Mystery Boxes, Day II - In the next lesson, I will ask the children to predict what is inside each box. One by one, we will open the boxes. After all the boxes are open and the items have been revealed, the children will choose a sheet of colored paper and arrange the objects from the boxes to make a "visual" poem. I will photograph the visual poems and print them for sharing. As the children share their visual poems, I will ask each child to title their poem and answer this question, "If your poem had words, what would it say?" Their response will be posted with the visual poem.

Jabberwocky, Day I - I will gather the class to discuss Halloween and why we like it. I will explain that there are a lot of "scary" poems we can listen to at Halloween, but my favorite is "Jabberwocky." At this point, I will read the poem - with no illustrations. After reading, I will ask "What is the poem about?" After several responses, I will ask, "How can you tell? The poem has a lot of made-up, nonsense words in it." I will read it again, placing emphasis on the nonsense words and the "monstrous" parts. Then, we will discuss several of the nonsense words and assign our best guess at the meaning of some of the words by context and the way the words *sounded*.

By this point, if the students haven't figured out that the Jabberwock is a monster, I'll steer the discussion in that direction. We'll talk about "monsters" a bit, assuring the class that monsters come from the imagination and are not real. I will ask the students to imagine what the Jabberwock looks like. I will list their responses on the board or chart paper. I will explain that many people over the years have also imagined what the Jabberwock looks like. Then using an LCD projector, I'll show 10 to 15 artists' images of the Jabberwock found on the internet, as well as hard copy illustrations from various books. Then, I will read the Christopher Myers version of "Jabberwocky" to illustrate how creative people can use their imaginations to make something unique.

Jabberwocky, Day II - I'll begin Day II by reciting "Jabberwocky" and reviewing the previous lesson. Emphasis will be placed on how we derived meaning from the sound of the nonsense words. During the discussion of nonsense words, I will explain that some words that started as nonsense in "Jabberwocky," such as *chortle* actually have become real words that we can practice using. After discussing nonsense words and why the poet might have chosen to use them instead of known words, I will direct attention again to images of the Jabberwock. I will show the same images and add additional ones. Note: When teaching this to younger grades, be selective about the images you show. You may start with a few "scary" ones, but show some of the more benign depictions at the end of the viewing. Discuss why there are so many different images of the Jabberwock. Follow up by distributing drawing paper and asking each child to make a drawing with their vision of the Jabberwock. Circulate during the creative process - conference and share. At the end of class, debrief and share the drawings as a large group.

## **November Couplets**

In November, we'll concentrate on autumn and Thanksgiving. The first couplet will feature the use of rhyme in descriptive autumn poems. The second couplet will survey poems of thankfulness.

Autumn, Day I - This activity begins by emptying a bag of fall leaves in the center of the children's circle on the carpet. I will ask each child to select a leaf and share what they like about fall. When the children finish, I'll explain that though I love the colorful leaves and other things they mentioned, I love fall poems most of all. I will collect the leaves, and then share some fall poems. After each reading, we'll discuss the use of rhyme and word families in the poems. I'll end the lesson by asking everyone to think about poems, as we will talk more

about them in the next lesson.

Autumn, Day II - After reviewing the poems from the previous day, students will practice identifying rhyming words in the poems in small groups. This lesson will culminate with students choosing a pair of rhyming words from one of the poems and extending it into a word family. Word families are groups of words, different only by the beginning sounds, such as bat, fat, hat, mat, slat, chat, and that. They will use both written and recorded means of creating the word family. Some students may elect to extend this activity by using audio or video recording to create a short poem or a line or two of rhyme.

Thankfulness, Day I - I will begin by asking, "Who knows what holiday is coming very soon?" I will have prepared a graphic organizer on a sheet of poster board using a simple drawing of a turkey with Thanksgiving written on its belly and space for writing on the tail feathers. This will be covered with a sheet of craft paper. After we determine the answer to the question, I will uncover the organizer. As we discuss Thanksgiving, I will write the ideas about Thanksgiving on the tail feathers. I will lead the discussion to the idea of being thankful. Then I'll share and discuss poems of thanks with the class. At last, I'll read "For Word" by Benjamin Zephaniah. After discussing it, I'll explain that in the next lesson, we will use this poem as a model for our own poems of thankfulness.

Thankfulness, Day II - Reviewing "For Words," we will create a think-aloud/write-aloud poem following the pattern of Zephaniah's poem. After modeling the format, students will create similar poems with three lines beginning with "Thank you for ....," followed by three lines beginning with "Thanks for...," and ending with the line, "Thank you very, very much." Some students may be able to extend the poem; some may only do a few lines. Struggling and Emergent readers may be permitted to draw pictures to finish sentences, if necessary. The lesson will conclude with sharing and debriefing.

## **December Couplet**

December is a busy month with many holiday and winter activities. Due to winter vacation beginning mid-month, there will be only one couplet of lessons in December.

Happy Holidays, Day I — The December lessons will be less skill-driven and more about appreciation and performance. I will expose my students to a wide variety of Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas poems. We will make our first foray into repeated and choral readings. My aim will be to teach this couplet the first week of December.

Happy Holidays, Day II - After the children listen to a variety of holiday poems, I will arrange choral readings for the children to practice daily. Our goal will be to perform them at the December PTA Program. During this lesson, we will practice choral reading and assign parts where necessary. We may also choose to write something original to perform. I will arrange for videotaping of the performance so the students will have to the fun of watching it later.

## **January Couplets**

January is going to be twisted and turned by the end of the winter vacation, the Martin Luther King holiday, and the end of the semester. Due to the short month, we will have only one couplet of lessons capitalizing on twist and turns by tackling tongue twisters.

Twists and Turns, Day I - This lesson will play with alliteration, which will be known to my students as tongue-

twister words. I will share some one-line tongue twisters with them first, followed by more complex tongue twister poems. We will discuss how using words that begin with the same sound can make poems fun. I'll share some particularly easy lines first for students to practice and enjoy. I will wrap up this lesson by letting students know that we will be writing some "tongue twister" lines in the next lesson.

Twists and Turns, Day II - I'll begin by reviewing the elements of a "tongue-twister" and explaining they are a way to play with words. We'll move into groups and generate lists of words for the tongue-twisters they'll write. With helpers, groups will collaborate on their tongue twisters. During debriefing, each group will share its creations.

## **February Couplets**

February poems will feature those written by African American poets in conjunction with the observance of Black History Month. Along with the poets themselves, blues and jazz poems will be highlighted.

Famous Poets, Day I - I'll begin by asking who knows what is special about February. After concluding that it is Black History month, I will explain that there are many famous African American poets. Using the CD from the book *Hip-Hop Speaks to Children*, I'll play poems read by the poets themselves, i.e. Langston Hughes, Maya Angelou, James Berry, Nikki Giovanni, and others. We'll finish by sharing impressions about the poems.

Famous Poets, Day II - I'll begin by reviewing the names of the poets along with the poems we listened to in the previous lesson. I will then play Langston Hughes' "Dream Boogie" and "Dream Variations," followed by an excerpt from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech. We'll share thoughts and feelings about the three pieces. Students will return to their seats to write their own dream themed poems.

Jazz and Blues, Day I - I'll begin by clapping a rhythm as the class comes to the carpet, but intentionally not speaking. If students ask questions, I'll nod toward my clapping hands. Before long, the class will join in clapping the rhythm. I'll ask if anyone knows what we call repeating a sound like this? (Rhythm, beat, pattern) I'll ask where we find a beat or rhythm like this? (Music or poems) I'll explain that today we will learn about a kind of poem sometimes set to music called *jazz*. I'll show the book "Jazz Baby" by Lisa Wheeler and allow time for predictions about what it's about, then begin a rhythmic read-aloud. As I read, I will encourage the students to join in repeating the predictable parts of the book/poem. We'll talk more about what jazz is, and I will share excerpts of the CD from "Jazz" by Walter Dean Myers. We will finish by completing a think-aloud/write-aloud poem using elements of jazz.

Jazz and Blues, Day II - We will take a few minutes to recall what we learned about jazz in the last lesson. I will play some music from the *Blues Journey* CD and ask if this is jazz. Then, I will define the concept of blues and read some blues poems with the blues music still playing in the background. Using a Venn diagram, we will compare and contrast the two different styles of music/poems. Then, with instrumental blues still playing in the background, students will write a poem about what gives them the blues.

## **March Couplets**

March poems will begin with the annual recognition of Dr. Seuss's birthday. We will listen to and emulate his unique brand of poetry. Due to the sheer volume of the work of Dr. Seuss, both sets of couplets will be dedicated to his writing.

Dr. Seuss, Day I - Prior to the lesson, I will gather as many Dr. Seuss books from the library as I need for each

child in the class to have one available to them. I will randomly pull a book from the stack and read it aloud. After finishing, we will go through the stack, looking at and discussing the different books. Upon returning to their seats, the class will color and cut out "Cat in the Hat" style hats they will wear during these lessons.

Dr. Seuss, Day II - I will ask what Dr. Seuss books and poetry have in common. By this point in the year, everyone should know that Dr. Seuss books are good examples of nonsense and rhyming poetry. We will break into pairs and I will give each a pair of books to read aloud to each other, identifying the rhymes and nonsense as they find it.

Dr. Seuss, Day III - Working in collaborative groups, students will work together to find as many rhyming and nonsense words as they in a Dr, Seuss book of their choice. They'll record their finds in list form on a large, prepared a "scroll" made from craft paper. At the end of the lesson, we'll gather to share the results of our group word hunt.

Dr. Seuss, Day III - Students will vote for their favorite Dr. Seuss book. I will read the winner to them, asking the children to listen for the rhyming words, then signaling "thumbs up" for each pair they hear. After finishing, I'll distribute the books again and have the students work individually or in pairs on making a Dr. Seuss style poem.

### **April Couplets**

April poems will celebrate nature and Earth Day. We will take our lessons outside, enjoying the spring weather and using nature as an inspiration for creating free verse. Due to Spring Break, there will be only one couplet for April.

Earth Days, Day I - We will move class outside, sitting on blankets under the trees. I will ask students to look around them and see what the Earth provides for us. I will ask how it makes them feel. I will read aloud the picture/poetry book, *S is for Saving the Planet*. I'll finish this lesson explaining that this day is about appreciating the springtime, nature, and thinking about ways we can save our good Earth.

Earth Days, Day II - Returning to our outdoor "classroom" with notebooks, pencils, and crayons, we will use this opportunity to write a poetic tribute to the Earth. In the free spirit of nature, I will encourage the students to use free verse, which I will simply explain as poems that don't have to rhyme. They may also choose to do something similar to what was modeled in the previous lesson by the *S is for Saving the Planet* book. I will encourage the students to draw a picture from nature to go with their poem.

### **May Couplets**

Cinco de Mayo, noted Mexican and Mexican American poets will be explored in our first couplet. May is also traditionally the month when students begin to struggle with peer relationships. As the end of school looms, some students tire of their classmates. In an effort to counter that annual challenge, poems about friendship and writing poems for each other, will be the focus of our second couplet.

Cinco de Mayo, Day I - I'll begin the class by asking if anyone knows anything about a holiday called Cinco de Mayo. I'll explain that Cinco de Mayo is a holiday similar to our independence day, not because the Mexicans got freedom from France on that day, but because they won an important battle that showed the patriotism of the Mexican people. To honor that patriotism, we will listen to poems of Mexican American poets such as Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo, as well as the Mexican poet, Octavio Paz.

Cinco de Mayo, Day II - I'll begin by reading the poem, "The Street" by Octavio Paz and explaining that he was a unique writer because he broke a lot of the traditional "rules" of poetry. He sometimes would write half essay, half poem, and sometimes his writing had words from as many as four different languages. Using their notebooks and workbooks from Spanish class, I'll ask for some Spanish words we could use in poems. I will list the responses in both Spanish and English on the board. As a large group, we will create a write-aloud/think-aloud mixed Spanish/English poem. After completing the group poem, I will encourage the children to write mixed language poems on their own.

Friendship, Day I - I will begin by reading several friendship poems. We will discuss why people would write poems about friendship and why having friends is important. We will brainstorm a list of traits we value in a friend. We will also brainstorm a list of traits that do not make a good friend. Everyone will then return to their seats. Each child will trace his or her hand on construction paper. Using the hand outlines, the students will create a shape poem using words and phrases from the lists of traits we value in a friend. We will use these to create a bulletin board called "Extend a Hand in Friendship."

Friendship, Day II - I will review the previous lesson and read a few more poems about friends. After reviewing what it takes to be a good friend, each child will make name poems for everyone in the room. I model the creation of a name/sound poem. I'll put my name on the board, leaving a big space between Ms. and Banning. I'll ask if anyone can think of a nice word, beginning with the same sound as Ms. that describes me and another word beginning with the same sound as Banning that also describes me. Good example: Ms. Mellow Blue-eyed Banning. Bad Example: Ms. Mean Boring Banning. I'll explain that I can laugh at my bad example because I know it is kind of a joke, but bad examples could hurt someone's feelings, so we don't want to see any. I'll remind the class that when we make name/sound poems to please be kind and remember all the things we learned about friendship. When finished, we will distribute the poems, to their namesake, as tokens of friendship.

## Suggested Poems by Month

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Everyone teaching this unit will probably want to make it personal by choosing the poems that are right for their class. It is not always easy to find poems by subject, so to provide ease in this, I will list suggestions by month. I will specify the book and page number or chapter where they can be found. The books will be mentioned by title only in the list. Full information can be found in the bibliographies.

September: I will use nursery rhymes from Chapter 14 of *The Poetry Break* by Bauer and pp. 10-13 in *A Child's Introduction to Poetry* by Driscoll.

October: There are many, many incarnations of "Jabberwocky." You will find it on p. 15 of *A Child's Introduction to Poetry* by Driscoll, on p. 53 of *Talking to the Sun* by Farrell and Koch, and pp. 14-15 of *Poetry Speaks to Children* by Paschen. You will also need the re-imagined version of *Jabberwocky* illustrated by Christopher Myers.

November: For Fall and Thanksgiving poems, I'll use *Around the Seasons* by Farjeon and the website [www.apples4theteacher.com](http://www.apples4theteacher.com). I found the poem "For Word" on p. 29 of *Hop Speaks to Children* edited by Nikki Giovanni.

December: I will use these books *The Story of Kwanzaa* by Washington, *Hanukkah Lights: Holiday Poetry* by Hopkins, and *The Family Read-Aloud Christmas Treasury* by Low, as resources for this month's activities.

January: I found the book, *Tongue Twisters* by Keller to be an excellent resource for this month's lessons.

February: The most useful books I will found for these lessons are *Hip-Hop Speaks to Children*, edited by Nikki Giovanni, *Jazz* and *Blues Journey* by Walter Dean Myers, *Jazz Baby* by Lisa Wheeler, and *Soul Looks Back in Wonder* by Tom Feelings.

March: In March, it is all Dr. Seuss, all the time. Select any of his books you enjoy for these lessons. Please feel free to personalize with your favorite Dr. Seuss preferences.

April: The book I will use as a reference for these lessons is *5 Is for Save the Planet* by Brad Herzog.

May: Poems by Sandra Cisneros and Ana Castillo can be found in *Poetry Speaks to Children* on pages 11 and 74, respectively. The Octavio Paz poem is located on pp.88-89 of *A Child's Introduction to Poetry* by Driscoll. A good source for friendship poems is the website

<http://www.apples4theteacher.com/holidays/valentines-day/poems-rhymes/>. The url for this site is a little misleading as it refers to valentines, but there are great friendship poems at the bottom of the page.

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## Notes

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3 Koch, Kenneth, and Ron Padgett. *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*. (Brattleboro: Harper Paperbacks, 2000). 25

4 *Resolving Conflict Creatively: A Teaching Guide for Grades K-6*. New York: New York City Board Of Education, 1994.

5 Latin for "blank slates"

6 Ross, E. Wayne, Jeffrey W. Cornett, and Gail Mccutcheon. *Teacher Personal Theorizing: Connecting Curriculum Practice, Theory, and Research*. (New York: SUNY, 1992). 38

7 Cowen, J.E. (2003) *A Balanced Approach to Beginning Reading Instruction: A Synthesis of Six Major U.S. Research Studies*. (Newark, DE: International Reading Association, Inc.). 8

8 The smallest unit of sound in language.

9 The graphic representation of sound, i.e. letters or groups of letters.

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## Appendix A — Virginia Standards of Learning

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### Oral Language

1.1 The student will continue to demonstrate growth in the use of oral language.

a) Listen and respond to a variety of media, including books, audiotapes, videos, and other age-appropriate materials.

c) Participate in a variety of oral language activities, including choral speaking and reciting short poems, rhymes, songs, and stories with repeated patterns.

1.2 The student will continue to expand and use listening and speaking vocabularies.

a. Increase oral descriptive vocabulary.

1.3 The student will adapt or change oral language to fit the situation.

- c. Use appropriate voice level in small-group settings.
- d. Ask and respond to questions in small-group settings.

1.4 The student will orally identify and manipulate phonemes in words.

c) Create rhyming words orally.

## Reading

1.5 The student will apply knowledge of how print is organized and read.

a) Read from left to right and from top to bottom.

b) Match spoken words with print.

1.6 The student will apply phonetic principles to read and spell.

- a) Use beginning and ending consonants to decode and spell single-syllable words.
- b) Use two-letter consonant blends to decode and spell single-syllable words.
- c) Use beginning consonant digraphs to decode and spell single-syllable words.
- d) Use short vowel sounds to decode and spell single-syllable words.
- e) Blend beginning, middle, and ending sounds to recognize and read words.
- h) Read and spell common, high-frequency sight words, including *the*, *said*, and *come*.

1.8 The student will read familiar stories, poems, passages with fluency and expression.

## Writing

1.12 The student will write to communicate ideas.

- a) Generate ideas.
- c) Use descriptive words when writing about people, places, things, and events.
- g) Share writing with others.
- h) Use available technology.

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