

# Using Poetry & Repeated Readings to Promote Fluency

(with a little phonemic awareness as well)

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When I began teaching first grade in 1989, my district, North Royalton, Ohio City Schools, was just beginning to move away from using basal readers and venture into whole language. As part of that transition, our first-grade team would print weekly poems onto chart paper and we would lead the students through a choral reading of the poem each day. At the end of the week, they would get their own copy of the poem to place in a binder and we would send it home to share with parents. As a young teacher, I had a vague sense as to why we were doing this; but, never felt like it was a large part of my literacy instruction. The poems were often seasonal in nature or related to whatever “theme” we were focusing on as a part of our whole language instruction.

We quickly realized after a few years that pure whole language instruction wasn’t cutting it and began moving towards what would now be categorized as a more balanced literacy approach. However, the poems stuck around, and I started trying to tie them more closely to our weekly story from our reading anthology; still, they didn’t have a sharp focus for me.

Several years into my career, (around year nine or ten...but, it could have been later) our Curriculum Director arranged for an after-school in-service with Dr. Tim Rasinski, from Kent State University. The topic was fluency and that is when I finally figured out how to incorporate those weekly poems into my literacy instruction in a meaningful way.

Together with an amazing colleague, we began to thoughtfully choose poems each week that complimented another area of our curriculum. Often it was our weekly story, but it might also be seasonal or related to a science or social studies topic. We sought poems that were not too short or too long, were fun to read, and that allowed us to squeeze in a little phonemic awareness work along with that fluency practice. *First Day of School* by Aileen Fisher, *The Homework Machine* by Shel Silverstein, and *Cats* by Eleanor Farjeon were just a few. Others, like *Autumn Leaves*, *Colors* or *Halloween Soup* were “anonymous” allowing us to talk about what that word meant.

In addition to these thoughtful choices, we also produced a 5-day plan that we followed each week. I did mine during my Opening Activities, my colleague did hers as her ELA opener. Here is the schedule:

Monday...we would introduce the poem, usually by projecting it on the screen. First, we would talk about the title, the poet (Aileen Fisher was a repeat favorite!), build some

background knowledge or make predictions. Next, I would read the poem to the children while pointing to each word (remember this was first grade). Then, we would re-read the poem with me reading each line and the children echoing me. At this point, I might pause after a particular line and talk about any figurative language or vocabulary that was unfamiliar to the students. I might also talk about “poetic license” (which I described as “poets don’t have to follow the rules”) if it lent itself to that poem. I wanted them to understand that things like capital letters and periods at the end of sentence didn’t always apply in a poem. We might also talk about this on Wednesday when we did “rhyming words.” (more on that later!) Finally, we would chorally re-read the entire poem. Each reading always started with the title, then the poet’s name (unless anonymous) and then the poem.

Tuesday...as part of the morning routine, the students would be given a paper copy of the poem that was introduced on Monday and spend time illustrating it. If I thought that the children might have a difficult time illustrating a poem, we would talk about things to draw on Monday. Illustrations had to be colored (my quirk!) and they had to be AROUND the words, not on top of the words so that we could do our highlighting on Wednesday. After illustrating, we would chorally re-read the poem and they would place their copy in “work” folders for the next day. (Note...for those weeks that were short we combined Monday & Tuesday.)

Wednesday (this day took the most time) .... again, during Opening/Calendar time, the students would take out their poems and we would chorally re-read. The poem was also projected on the screen each day. After reading, I would read each section that contained a rhyming pair of words and call on a student to identify the rhyme. It was always exciting when my struggling readers began to volunteer to name the rhymes as the year progressed! Collectively, we would all use the same color highlighter (different color for each pair of words), and we would highlight the words, students on their illustrated copies, me on the screen. Then I would write each pair of words on a new screen and separate them visually and verbally into the onset (beginning SOUND) and rhyme. For example, sh-are and p-ear. I would talk about how sometimes “ear” said /ear/ and sometimes it said /e(ə)r/. I would also write any homophones like “pare” and we would talk about what those words meant. This was all very quick and without a lot of fanfare since we did this every week and words or sounds often repeated. Then, I would ask for students to volunteer any other words that THEY could think of to add to the rhyming list. I usually limited this to 3-5 students. And, again, if there were homophones, I’d hit on those at that time as well. Finally, after we highlighted all the rhyming pairs, we would read the poem chorally before placing them again in our folders.

In addition to rhyming pairs, I might use Wednesday’s poetry time to identify the poet’s use of contractions in the poem or other topics. For example, we read a rainbow poem in March that listed the colors of the rainbow in order. We would circle each color word with that color crayon, and I would have the students write ROY G BIV vertically on the back of their poem, trace those letters in each corresponding color, and write the color word in pencil

horizontally beside each letter. I found that occasionally adding variety to the Wednesday activity was helpful.

Thursday...students were divided into two groups (usually boys & girls OR odd & even mailbox numbers) and they stood in a line facing each other with their paper copies of the poem in hand. Everyone chorally read the title and poet's name, then we alternated lines between the two groups (boys read the first line, girls read the second, etc.). We would do this a second time with the group that had gone first, going second. At the beginning of the year, this took some practice; but they soon caught on after a few weeks. **I would also like to mention here that I made a VERY BIG deal EVERY DAY about reading with expression!**

Friday...as part of their morning routine, the students would obtain a plastic sheet protector and place their poem into their poetry binders. (I started using the sheet protectors after a great deal of time spent mending ripped poems). Two poems could go in each "sleeve" back-to-back. I purchased the cheapest ones I could find through my limited classroom budget; or, as you well know, from my own pocket on occasion! After placing the poem in their binder, they were to "partner read" with their assigned poetry partner. I made these assignments based on approximate reading levels and changed them as needed. Occasionally there were three to a group depending on how numbers shook out.

After several minutes of "partner reading", the students would all return to their seats and the groups from Thursday (boys/girls; even/odd) would go to the front of the room to chorally read for the other group. After both groups "performed" for the other, we would set off to find another audience to perform for. This did not happen every week depending on our schedule, but I tried to do it as often as possible. We would read to a different grade level class, or we would read to the principal, or the custodian, or the office staff or the kitchen staff (the kid's loved to read "Me Stew" by Shel Silverstein to the kitchen staff!) or whoever we could find. Sometimes, we would stay in the classroom and just reread old favorites for several minutes.

I continued this practice until I retired after 34 years in 2023. In addition to my observations of students choosing to read and reread the poems, their excitement at "performing" for others, and my own passion for instilling a love of reading, I was also bolstered by the boost in one subgroup in DORF (DIBELS Oral Reading Fluency) and DRA (Developmental Reading Assessment) assessments. Surprisingly, that subgroup was not the one performing at the lowest levels (although that group also showed demonstrated progress); but rather, those who were in that "gray" middle area. Not all of them soared to mastery (though some did!); but their scores increased noticeably, along with my observations of their confidence and oral reading prosody.

Having said all that, to me it was the confidence displayed while reading the poems that spoke the loudest. The children's binders did not go home until the end of year; but, stayed in their "book bins". When it was time to read quietly, alone or with a buddy, they would often

pull out those binders and re-read their poems, sometimes alone, sometimes with a buddy or a small group. They ALL did this, no matter what their reading levels or abilities and it was especially heartwarming, to me, when my reluctant readers would do this and beam with pride because they could read a poem that we had practiced together so many times, even if they might not be able to read other texts available to them. In addition to my observations of readers from all levels choosing to read and reread these familiar poems, I also frequently heard from parents that the children enjoyed “performing” the poem at home. Since I did not send the binders home, I always copied the weekly poem on the back of my newsletter for that purpose. One student would make everyone in the family sit on the couch while he stood on the fireplace hearth and read the poem to them. Reportedly, he was very dramatic!