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 make out. Show them by example. Children intuitively know 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 riddles 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, 1984):

**Sizzle-spark, dizzy-dancer
Sweet-sucker, furry-guzzler
Fat-fairy, window-banger
Sting-in-the-tail.**

They may say that they think the riddle is about a wasp. Ask them why they think the rose

**Tail-twitcher, swivel-eye,
Rough-rugger, knee-bender
Sting-in-the-tail.**

They may say that they think the riddle is about a bat. Read it again. Eventually one of them will say “It’s a bat. They will say they know it is a moth because moths go to the light, or because their wings are like”:

**Fish tank**

Start the exercise again. Read it again. What other lines do they like? They may say “moon brusher” or “translunar kite”. What does “translunar kite” mean? They may think the riddle is about a comet. Sometimes they say “It’s a comet that must be able to do, before you can even start writing your riddle”!

Eventually one of them may get to the answer. You need to know what to do that 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 turn 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 “shiver in the breeze”? If it is a straw-scraper, 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.

**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.

**PERSONAL FINANCE**

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**Saturday**

**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).

**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**

Start at the water, the fish ripples along. The fish dances about, up my nose and back.

A stream of bubbles streak my face. ruined as the water carries it away. A beautiful image of a backlit cobweb covered in dewdrops looked like “A pearly rib cage”. Another child added “breathing in and out...” 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 make out. Show them by example. Children intuitively know 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.

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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. 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 Eastern Daily Press/Bayer CropScience competition (see panel, right).

Children can be asked to imagine that they are “Earth-sick 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 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

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

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 rework 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 makes the children more aware of patterns that are being established - two statements then a question, or an explanation mask 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.

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 judge in 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 Pinto. 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 poems and artwork from the first SAW project. See the SAW website for details: www.sawtrust.org

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. You 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

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NOW ENTER EDP/BAYER CROPSCIENCE SCHOOLS POETRY COMPETITION

Eastern Daily Press, Friday, June 27, 2008

www.EDP24.co.uk/news