



Poems Put To Use

Adapted from the NEA's "Poems Put To Use" Lesson Plan

Oregon Content Standards

EL.CM.RE.26 Draw conclusions about the author's purpose based on evidence in the text.

EL.CM.SL.17 Analyze how language and delivery affect the mood and tone of the oral communication and make an impact on the audience.

EL.CM.SL.02 Choose appropriate techniques for developing the introduction and conclusion (e.g., by using literary quotations, anecdotes, references to authoritative sources).

EL.CM.WR.08 Revise drafts to improve the logic and coherence of the organization and controlling idea, the precision of word choice, and the tone--by taking into consideration the audience, purpose, and formality of the context

Introduction: In Track 2 of the Poetry Out Loud CD ("The Power of Poetry"), National Endowment for the Arts Chair, Dana Gioia, spells out four practical advantages to be found in studying and reciting poetry.

- Poetry offers mastery of language, and stocks the mind with images and ideas in unforgettable words and phrases.
- Poetry trains and develops our emotional intelligence.
- Poetry reminds us that language is holistic—that how something is said is part of what is being said, with the literal meaning of words only part of their whole meaning, which is also carried by tone of voice, inflection, rhythm.
- Poetry lets us see the world through other eyes, and equips us imaginatively and spiritually to face life's difficulties.

Later, in Track 17, poet Kay Ryan concurs. "Poetry is for desperate occasions," she says. By memorizing a poem, you have it to pull out when you need it—not necessarily the whole poem, but the scrap of it that comes to mind in a difficult time. This lesson will help students imagine situations in which a scrap or two of poetry—whether recited or simply thought of—can be put to use. Using fiction, letters or political speech, students will write about poems being put to use, and, in the process, imagine the practical advantages that having poems memorized can bring.

Period: One to three 50-minute sessions



LESSON PLAN 2: POEMS PUT TO USE

Learning Objectives

- Students will listen to poems being recited, and to the commentaries of the performers.
- Students will find passages in poems which they find striking or memorable and use them appropriately in a short speech.
- Students will research the various uses of poetry in public speaking via internet research and resources.
- Students will imagine situations in which those passages might be put to use, whether to console, encourage, taunt, seduce, or otherwise make an impact on a listener.
- Students will write short speeches in which at least three passages could be quoted effectively to move an audience.

Materials and Resources:

- The Poetry Out Loud CD
- CD player
- Access to the Poetry Out Loud anthology in its print or online versions

Day One

1. Introduce the idea that poems can be useful to recite – the whole poem or just part of it – in a variety of real life situations. Brainstorm what some of those situations might be:
 - When faced with bad news or difficult times
 - At a wedding, funeral, or other life-cycle event
 - As a toast or grace before meals
 - During a courtship, seduction, or marriage proposal
 - During a speech or other effort to move an audience, whether voters, colleagues, teammates, or others you wish to lead

To illustrate such moments, cite historical examples, such as Winston Churchill’s recitation of the Claude McKay sonnet, “If We Must Die...” to rally resistance to the Nazis during World War II. Or you might turn to fiction and movies. Many children’s books and adult novels have scenes where a scrap of poetry is deployed to good effect. In Eloisa James’s romance novel, *A Wild Pursuit*, characters court one another by reciting “scandalous” poetry: specifically, a Renaissance sonnet and a passage from the Biblical “Song of Songs.” In each book of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, poems are recited by characters; for example, in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, there are poems prominently featured in the chapters “The Shadow of the Past,” “The Old Forest,” “Strider,” “A Knife in the Dark,” and elsewhere. In the film of *The Return of the King*, meanwhile, Theoden cries out a short poem to the Rohirrim as they ready their cavalry charge to break the siege of Gondor.



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2. Play Tracks 7 and 17 of the CD, which illuminate contexts in which poems – whole poems and scraps of them – were recited: by David Mason to his girlfriends, and by Kay Ryan’s grandmother to her, as she grew up. Pose questions to your students about these uses of poetry, for example:
 - Why might Mason have wanted to recite John Donne to his girlfriends?
 - Are there different lines or phrases from the poem that would have been better to recite in different contexts? (Some might work better as a “pick-up line,” perhaps, while others might be better for an apology or an excuse.)
 - Why might Kay Ryan’s grandmother have treasured those lines from Longfellow?
 - Why might she have wanted her granddaughter to hear them, growing up?
3. Start your students searching for their own striking lines and phrases. Have students select an “occasion” for a public speech from the list of brainstormed occasions at the beginning of the class. Send students to the Poetry Out Loud anthology website in search of striking lines and phrases. They should gather at least three lines and phrases from different poems, but they should consider how the passages and lines can function to support their specific speaking occasion. The meaning of the passage in its original context is less important than the power the student finds in it, and the student’s ability to imagine each passage being put to use in some situation.
 - If students are using the online anthology, you can keep them from being overwhelmed by telling them to look first at poems whose titles begin with a particular letter. (Note that poems whose titles start with “The” are all grouped under “T.”) Or, if you prefer, suggest they use the “Keyword Search” feature on the website.
 - Try not to steer them to particular poems or poets, as one goal here is simply to encourage exploration, and to help students discover poems, poets, and lines they might not otherwise have encountered.
 - To keep students from grabbing lines at random, tell them to justify the choice – either orally, in discussion, or in writing – by briefly imagining a moment when that line or phrase would come in handy. A few sentences will usually do.
4. Ask each student to take his or her chosen lines and phrases home and write a short speech – two pages maximum – in which the lines or phrases are used to support their specific speaking occasion. Make sure that students realize that people often quote scraps of poetry totally out of context; they don’t need to know the whole poem, or keep the whole poem in mind. The important task is to imagine situations where it can make a difference to know a poem – or even part of a poem – by heart.

Day Two

1. To begin the second day of this lesson, have students announce to the class the type of speaking occasion they selected from the brainstormed list and then read out, without the rest of their speech text, the lines and passages from the poems they found to use in their speech. Have the other stu-

dents discuss what they think about the passages. For example, do the passages seem to fit the occasion? Do the passages or lines from the poems have a particular emotional feel? Passionate, angry, apologetic, inspirational, etc? How might these passages be used in a speech (i.e., in an introduction, conclusion, as support for a point, to create a mood, etc.)

2. Once all of the students have discussed their speaking occasions and their poetic passages, break them into groups of two or three based on their topic choices. For example, students who have selected a political speaking occasion can work together, while students who have chosen a wedding, funeral, or other similar occasions will also work together. Have these students read their speeches to each other and seek feedback. Specifically, have students comment on the following issues:
 - Does the speech follow a specific pattern or structure?
 - Does the speech use language appropriate to the occasion?
 - Do the passages and lines from the poems support or distract from the purpose of the speech?
 - Does the speech have an appropriate introduction and conclusion, and does it use transitions between major sections? These questions will determine if the students can evaluate the relative strengths and weaknesses of each other's speeches and encourage them to think about how poetry and language could be used to help augment or strengthen a speech. Students may want to consider researching other poems or poetic works for use in transitions, in their introduction or conclusion, or to help create a more appropriate mood.

GUIDE THE DISCUSSION:

- Were there some speaking occasions where the poetry seemed more appropriate? What were those occasions? Why might poetry be more appropriate or useful in those occasions?
- How did the use of poetry affect the speaker's credibility? How did you, as an audience member, respond to the speaker when poetry was used? Positively? Negatively?
- Were there places within the structure of the speeches where poetry seemed more effective? Introductions? Conclusions? Why might this be the case?
- How did the use of poetry change the vocal and physical delivery of the speakers? Does poetry need to be delivered differently from the language you would use in traditional public speaking? Why?



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3. At the end of the day, have students identify areas of their speeches that need work and identify specific approaches to improving those sections. Assign them a “rewrite” in which they will address these problems at home before the next class meeting. Encourage them to consider how to use poetry to help improve these sections. Inform students that, at the next class, they will read their poems to the class and receive oral feedback from their classmates.

Day Three

1. Provide your students five minutes of preparation and rehearsal time before beginning their poems.
2. Ask students to pay particular attention to the use of poetry and tell them that, at the end of class, there will be a discussion.
3. Ask students to recite their poems to the class.
4. After all students have spoken, open up the class to discussion of the poems.
5. Announce the Poetry Out Loud recitation competition and discuss students’ interest. Note: Students who indicate an interest in the competition may use the poem they selected in class as their poem for the school competition.

“Poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

-ROBERT FROST

“The crown of literature is poetry. It is its end and aim. It is the sublimest activity of the human mind. It is the achievement of beauty and delicacy. The writer of prose can only step aside when the poet passes.”

-W. SOMERSET MAUGHAM