

Tips for Reading Poetry Aloud in Your Classroom (from Laura Purdie Salas)

Lots of teachers love reading stories, chapter books, and novels aloud, but shy away from reading poetry aloud in their classrooms. They sometimes feel unsure of the "right" way to read poetry (especially free verse, but rhyming poetry, too). Of course, there IS NO ONE right way to read a poem, but there are some habits you can adopt to be a more effective poetry reader. Here are some tips I shared during National Poetry Month in 2015 on my blog in my **Poetry Tips for Teachers series** (<http://laurasalas.com/tag/poetry-tips-for-teachers/>). Each day, I also shared one of my poems, and some days, I shared an audio clip, too. To hear the audio clips, visit my blog:>)

This is not an exhaustive list! It's just a few things to keep in mind or try out when sharing poetry:>)

Choosing Poems

Mix It Up!

I hear people advise teachers, "Just share poems you love!" I kind of disagree with that. Your poetry taste may be very narrow. If you only share silly rhyming poems all year because they're your favorite, that does students a disservice. So, yes, share poems you love, because your enthusiasm will help kids love them, too. But make a conscious effort to share a broad variety of poetic moods, forms, lengths, genres, topics, etc. In fact, invite students to select poems that you will present. This ensures you'll get a mix that reflects the taste of your students. I believe the goal is to expose kids to many types of poems in the hopes that students will find poems that they can connect to—poems that matter to them.

Here's a poem that's kind of sweet, so it's pretty different from my usual poetry style. It's from [Gift Tag](#), a Kindle poetry anthology edited by Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell, who have gone on to create all the amazing Poetry Friday Anthologies! In fact, Janet and Sylvia's [Poetry Friday Anthology books](#) are awesome options for teachers who are nervous about sharing poetry in the classroom. They cover a wide range of styles and moods, include Take 5 tips for sharing each poem, and are, in some cases, organized by grade level and theme.

"We Are Woven" goes with the gift of potholders (remember making them on those fun plastic looms?).

We Are Woven

Where one loop goes,
Another follows.
No lonely lines.
No empty hollows.

They dance and chase.
They hold on tight.
Like you and me,
They fit just right!

-- Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved,
from **Gift Tag**

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The Basics of Reading Poems to Your Students

Post It

Present the poem visually—project it, write it on a pad or whiteboard, put it on a bulletin board, etc. This is extra helpful for poetic forms with a visual element to them, like acrostics or—ahem—raccontinos, such as the one below.

The Challenge of Ireland

When selkies slink shoreward, the emerald waves **WRITE**
their lives into legend. Who dares undertake

the quest of unearthing a wild Irish **POEM**
by Sleah Head's great greyness, in seagull's pale wake?

This little green land spins infinity **IN**
its glacier-scraped, sheep-filled hills, ruin-rimmed lakes.

Relentlessly crumbling to ale-darkened **SEA**,
a land to enchant or to make your heart break.

Touch ancient etched rock from a time before **INK**.
Risk cliff's knitted passage that weaves like a snake.

Hear old fables told in old tongues or played **ON**
tin whistles in roundabout songs full of ache,

so haunting you'd have to be cast in cold **STONE**
to not drink in death with each breath that you take.

As mullioned moon glides past your gold linen **SHEETS**,
embrace the small story that's all you can make.

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

Slow Down

Read slowly. Much more slowly than you would read prose. Poems are dense and compact and a lot to take in!

Washington: Move It!

Wander the Hoh
but don't stand there too long
The rain forest welcome
is grasping and strong

Rain drips on necklaces
mossy and fair
A Sitka spruce sapling
takes root in your hair

Fog gives you lichens
and leaves for your clothes
Your ankles grow roots
while ferns sprout from your toes

Water keeps everything
leafing and growing
So if you're not staying
you'd better be going!

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From **WACKY, WILD, AND WONDERFUL:**
50 STATE POEMS

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Twice Is Nice

When you introduce a poem, read it twice. Poems are dense, like black holes of imagery, and they often hold way too much to absorb in a single hearing. Generally, read the poem through one time without any direction to your students. THEN, if you like, you can give them cues of things to look for in the poem, before you read it the second time. And, as Irene Latham said in the Comments below my blog post, more readings are even better! Poetry is wonderful for multiple readings, so there's no need to stop at two:>)

You might read this poem once, then ask students what/who they think is narrating this poem. Then on the second read, have them look for the clues that helped them figure it out. Or...just read it twice to enjoy it twice!

DAILY CHORE

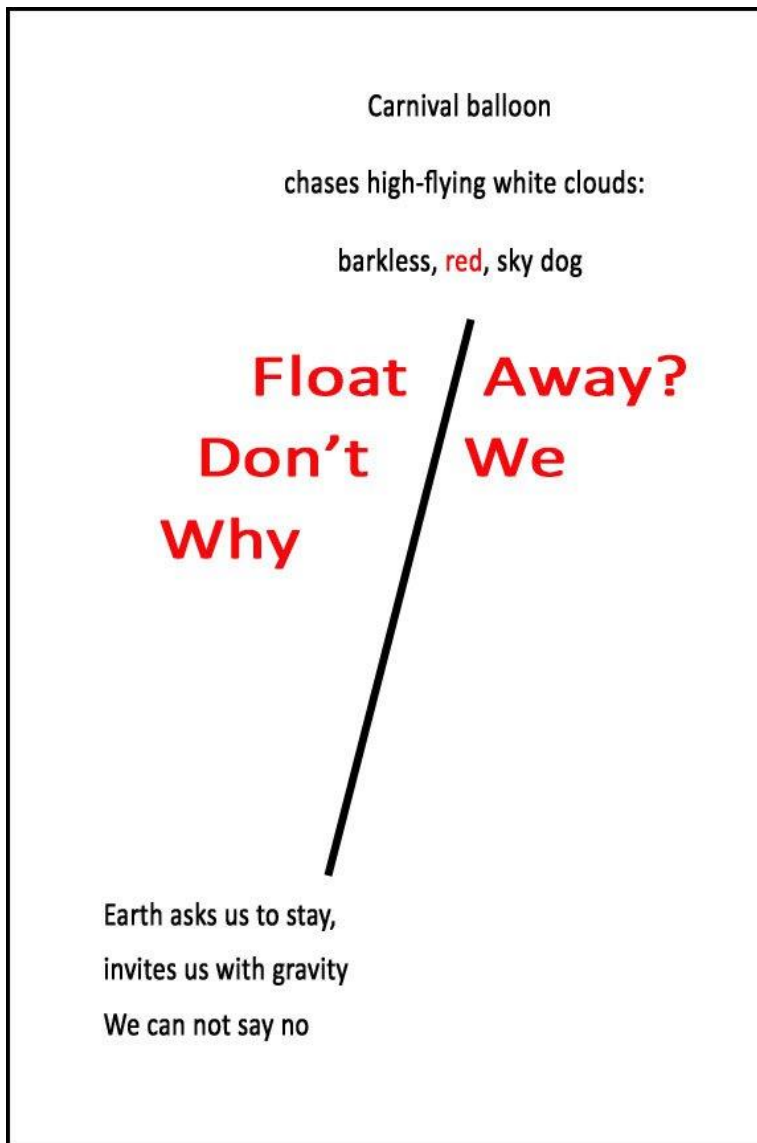
**I ROLL ALONG THE MOUNTAIN ROADS
HOLD TIGHT TO HILLY GROUND
MY BOXY BODY'S YELLOW
MY MASSIVE WHEELS ARE ROUND
I'M BORING AND PREDICTABLE
BUT THAT'S MY SACRED CHORE:
TO GET YOU SAFELY TO YOUR SCHOOL
AND LEAVE YOU TO EXPLORE**

**-LAURA PURDIE SALAS, FROM ALWAYS GOT MY FEET:
POEMS ABOUT TRANSPORTATION (CAPSTONE PRESS)**

Reading Effectively

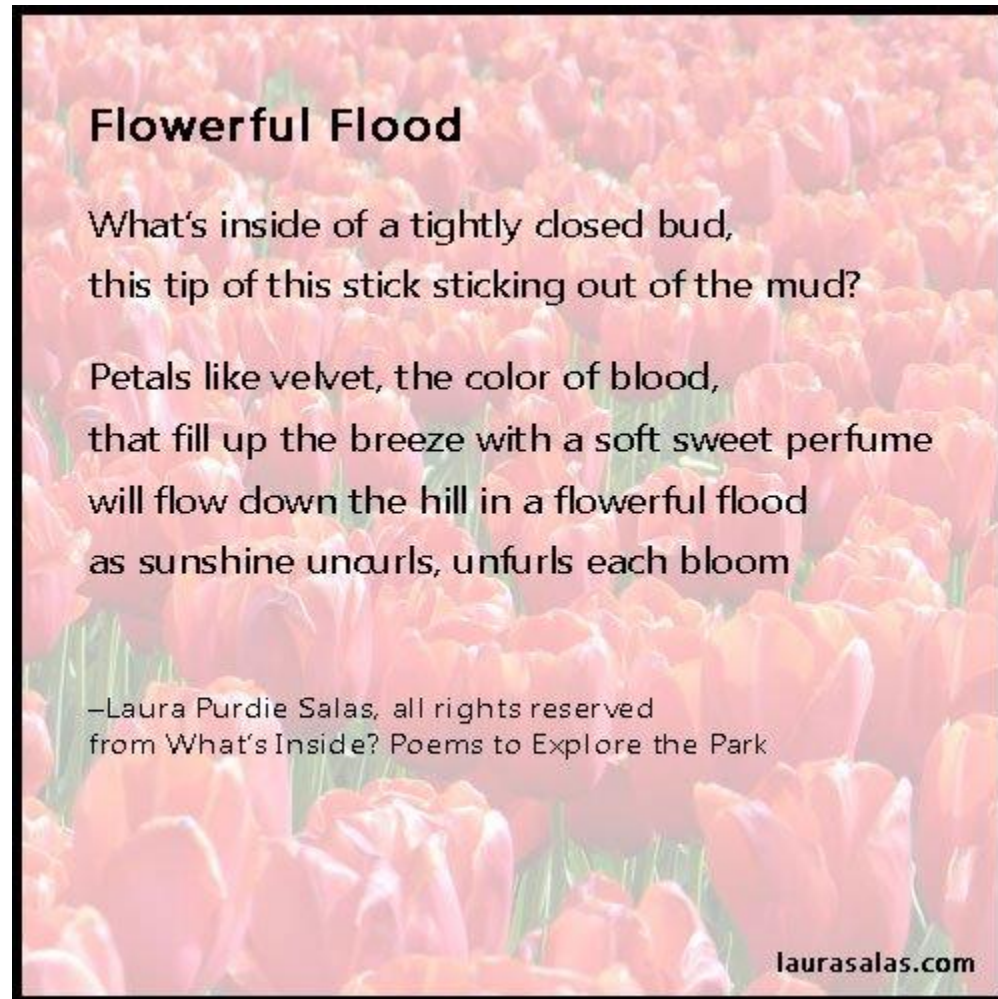
Let the Poet Read

If you're self-conscious about reading poetry aloud, one way to ease into it is let poets themselves read! I love the [Poetry Speaks to Children](#) anthology that comes with a CD of many of the poems in the book, most read by the poet. It's awesome, and there are other books in the line, too. And of course, there are tons of us poets online sharing audioclips of our work ([Amy Ludwig VanDerwater](#), [Irene Latham](#), and [Renee La Tulippe](#) are three who come immediately to mind). It's great to hear how poets read, and it's reassuring, too, because there's usually nothing fancy about it. On top of that, you can't help but absorb reading tips (your students, too) as you listen to poets read.



Lights Out

Turn out the lights to help students focus. When you remove visual input, students are often able to listen more carefully. Fewer distractions. Something unexpected and new. It can add a little more focus AND excitement to poetry time. Try listening to today's audio clip both with and without the lights.



Emphasize Important Words

Sometimes when you're sharing a poem, you might be talking about a specific aspect of it, whether that's the rhyme or a repeated word or something else. I might include this poem, "Dancin' (Snow)Man," for example, in a discussion about different countries or dance styles. So as I read it, I would slightly emphasize those words—the names of countries and the styles of dance. You don't have to overdo it in a ridiculous manner, but a little raise in volume, accompanied by raising up your arm or stopping walking around, will help kids notice and take in those important words.

DANCIN' (SNOW)MAN

TODAY THE SNOW FALLS FAST AND FRESH
FROM SKY OF PAFFISH BLUE
IT DANCES ALL ACROSS THE WORLD
SO I START DANCING, TOO

IN MEXICO I CROSS MY ARMS
AND GIRCLE 'ROUND MY HAT
IN EGYPT I TRY BELLY DANCE
(I'VE GOT THE BUILD FOR THAT)

IN IRELAND I HOP A JIG
I LEAP WITH SILKY STRIDE
IN FRANCE I DANCE A PIROUETTE
AND SLIDE AN ICY GLIDE

IN CUBA I DO SWIVEL HIPS
NOW I'M THE MAMBO KING
AND THEN I HEAD BACK HOME AGAIN
TO TRY MY TWIG AT SWING

I TWO STEP AND I BUNNY HOP
I JIVE AND BREAKDANCE, TOO
I CRUNK AND DO SOME HULA
I CHA-CHA 'TIL I'M BLUE

MY SNOWFIENDS ALL MAKE FUN OF ME
THEY LAUGH AND POINT, PERPLEXED
"JUMP RIGHT IN--" I YELL TO THEM,
"THE MACARENA'S NEXT!"

---LAURA PURDIE SALAS

Focus on Sounds

If a poem features repeated sounds in it, emphasize those sounds as you read it so that kids will pick up on that aspect of the poem.

With the poem below, which I wrote for [Ed DeCaria's March Madness Poetry](#) a couple of years ago, I might talk about how the long and short e sounds work. The long e has kind of a sly and evil sound that makes me think of the dragon, and, to a lesser degree, the short e words have a slightly breathy sound to them that supports the idea of breathing, sleeping, waking. So I would emphasize those two sounds as I read the poem.

Dragon Dreams

Flesh-made mountain: dragon sleeps,
tending dreams of fire and death.
Steaming vapor streams and creeps—
misty wreath of dragon breath.

Hemlock ribs cage granite heart:
beat by beat, bright valley quakes.
He'll wage a war to break apart
creation.

Hush!

The dragon wakes.

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Focus on Transitions

In narrative poems that tell a story, emphasize transition words, like “then,” or “first,” or “next,” to help kids follow the chronology and logic of the poem. Or if the poem doesn’t use obvious transition words, say words louder that you think will help ground kids in the story and make sense of what’s going on. Listeners really depend on your voice modulation and inflection to help them know immediately which words they most need to hear and comprehend.

Here’s a poem that summarizes the fairy tale of Jack and the Beanstalk from my [Fairy Tale Garage Sale](#) collection. It introduces the set of poems based in the world of Jack.

JACK AND THE BEANSTALK

Jack’s mother gave a cow to Jack
to sell and bring the money back

When he came home with beans,
she frowned
and flung them down onto the ground

A beanstalk grew,
and Jack, defiant,
climbed the sky-high vine to giant

Jack stole gold, a hen, and harp,

then chopped
the plant
with axe-blade
sharp

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved
from FAIRY TALE GARAGE SALE: POEMS
OF AFTER EVER AFTER

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Make a Face

When you're reading a happy, joyful poem, you should be smiling! This seems obvious, but sometimes when we're nervous, we lose our natural expressiveness. Then it feels disjointed, like on American Idol, when a contestant sings a rock anthem with a wooden face or sings a heartbreaking ballad with some inauthentic grin. Don't do that! If you feel nervous, just think about what emotion the poem makes you *feel*. Then add the appropriate facial expression. You might have to consciously make your face match your emotions at first. But it gets easier, I promise. Even if you don't consider yourself a performer, try taking your expressions up a notch. After a few weeks, go another step up. You don't want to be completely over the top, but the more life you put into your poetry reading, the more involved students will get.

So, for example, I would want to read the poem below with a determined, predatory look on my face...not a silly smile.

Lionesses:

Girrrrrrl Power!

Calmly we stalk through

African grass: Girrrrrrl power

Times five, at least!

We shadow some shapes by moonlight's glow:

Our sharp-horned, wild-

Maned feast! We strike it down and

Eat our mid-

Night snack of

WILDEBEEST

--Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved

From A NEED TO FEED: POEMS OF
PREDATORS AND PREY

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Speed It Up!

Speed up a poem! When you're repeating a poem about a fast topic, speed up your reading. Often, I'll start out reading the poem slowly, so kids get to know the words and meaning a bit. Then we stretch or a few deep breaths. Then we read faster and faster until we can't read it any faster. We "poetry athletes" dive into the poem, full steam ahead. This usually results in a class full of out-of-breath (OK, that may just be me), laughing kids, having a blast with poems.

A couple of years ago, I wrote two pantoums. They both were built around the same line: "I have better things to do than survive." [One pantoum was weighty and serious](#). It would benefit from a slow, thoughtful reading. But the other one, "Otter's Winter Song," is light-hearted and zippy—and it needs that kind of reading, too.

Otter's Winter Song

The frigid air sings—
time to tumble and dive!
I've got better things
to do than survive.

Time to tumble and dive!
There's so much more
to do than survive.
The ice! The squeal. The slippery shore.

There's so much more!
The river's my toy!
The ice! The squeal. The slippery shore.
I'm a fumble of joy.

The river's my toy—
I'm a slip-sliding flurry.
I'm a fumble of joy.
Let other otters worry.

I'm a slip-sliding flurry.
The frigid air sings—
Let other otters worry.
I will do better things.

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Getting Kids Involved in the Reading

Echo Read

Try echo reading. You read a line, and then the students echo it back to you. This is great for helping students' fluency, and I'm always amazed at how quickly and how well they pick up on performance nuances. Kids don't feel self-conscious reading loud or emphasizing words or whatever, because they're just doing what *you're* doing. Over time, though, they absorb those skills and use them in other reading contexts.

I've usually used this technique with rhythmic, rhyming poems, though I think it also has applications with free verse or other non-rhyming forms. If I were echo-reading a non-rhyming poem, I would point out that I was going to demonstrate ONE way to read the poem, and they were going to mimic that way, just as a way to absorb the poem and where I emphasize words, pause, and such. I would also make sure to let kids know, though, that my way is definitely not the *only* way to read it. Another plus of echo reading is it takes away the intimidation factor.

Two tips: Choose relatively short poems, and choose poems with short lines. Otherwise, the reading will get cumbersome and the poem will seem to drag on forever!

Here's a poem I might use with this technique, from the brand new [Poetry Friday Anthology for Celebrations](#)—Janet Wong and Sylvia Vardell's latest brainchild!

A Paper Bag Is Never Empty

Even when empty,
a bag's always packed.
It's full of ideas--
bazillions, in fact!

Puppets and silly hats,
fringed vests and flags
are just a few things
packed inside empty bags.

—Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved
from The Poetry Friday Anthology for Celebrations

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Add Sound Effects

Have kids make sound effects appropriate to the poem. Kids love being sound effects experts, and it give pre-readers, especially, a great way to be part of a poem reading when they don't actually know the poem yet. Today, I'm visiting three schools/libraries, and kids will be barking, monkey noising, and roaring and blowing tornadoes. Here's a poem that kids have loved adding sounds to. Make sure to preview the sound effects ahead of time and then have them do the sound as you leave a space after the word/phrase.

Hydrophobic

I swallow up **dragons** and
cannons and
wars.

I don't fear old mansions
with **slow, creaking**
doors.

I quite like the dark—
murky midnight's no
threat.

The one thing I fear
is the feeling of—

wet!

When puddles attack me or
raindrops are
sprinkled,

they leave me quite soggy—
they turn me all
wrinkled!

—Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved
from BookSpeak! Poems About Books

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Here I am reading it aloud. Notice that I kind of emphasize the sound effect words and then leave time for the kids to do the sounds.

Riddle Me This

Turn a poem into a riddle. Kids love riddle poems, and they are super fun to both read and write. (I had a blast with riddleku in National Poetry Month of 2014 and even [turned them into a riddleku book](#).) But you don't have to use poems that were specifically written AS riddles. Some poems only name the topic of the poem in the title. If that's the case, just read the poem without the title and see if students can figure out the title/topic. I love it when poetry is a game!

Here's a poem that can easily be riddle-fied!

Wind Is an...

Expert blower
Seed sower
Sailboat go-er
Hat thrower
And, best of all, a
Kite tow-er

—Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved
from *Seed Sower, Hat Thrower: Poems
About Weather* (Capstone Press)

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Talking About Poems with Students

Connect with the Poem



Help kids connect before reading the poem. Let's take this poem from Lee Bennett Hopkins' charming new board book poetry anthology, [Lullaby and Kisses Sweet: Poems to Love with Your Baby](#). I am so excited to have a poem in this book that might be the cutest poetry book I've ever seen, with so many poets I like and respect! It's a great choice for introducing babies and toddlers to poetry. I know I'll be giving it as a baby shower gift often. OK, sorry—I



digress.

Anyway, before I read "Spaghetti" to kids, I'm going to ask them a few questions to help them to connect with this poem. "Do you like spaghetti? What color shirt do you think I should wear when I eat spaghetti? Do you have a little brother or sister who eats spaghetti? What happens then?" And, if I should happen to have it with me, I will show them this picture of my daughter Annabelle eating spaghetti when she was a toddler—teehee! By talking to kids about your own life and their lives—around a poem—you help them connect to poems.

Spaghetti

Spaghetti scoots around my plate.
It twirls, curls. It won't stay straight.
I slurp one noodle--reach for more.

Oops!

Most of lunch is on the floor.

—Laura Purdie Salas, all rights reserved,
from **Lullaby & Kisses Sweet** (ed. Lee Bennett Hopkins)

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Ask Kids Questions

Reading poems to kids is awesome. And if all you ever do is read a single poem each day, sincerely, with expression, to your students, they will benefit tremendously from that. But to help kids dig into poems, learn how to comprehend them, how to find meaning for themselves in them, how to love them—there's another important practice: talking about the poems.

The best way to talk about poetry, in my opinion, is not to start out with, "What does this mean?" Ack! How is a kid supposed to know what the poet meant, when the poet doesn't even consciously know it half the time! So I like to ask lots of open-ended questions when discussing poems with kids (my poems or other people's poems). Here are some to get you started.

- "What do you notice about this poem?"
- "What else have you read that connects somehow to this poem?"
- "What's your favorite word in this poem?"
- "Are there any words you think are weak here?"
- "What do you wonder about in this poem?"
- "Do you like the poem?" And then, more importantly, "Why?"
- "Who doesn't like this poem?" And then, "Why?"

Remember that you don't have to know all the answers about a poem. Sometimes saying, "Yeah, I'm trying to figure out what that line means, too," is all the answer a kid needs to feel supported and encouraged. But if you talk regularly with your students about poems you guys read, they will start digging into poems with relish. It's amazing how astute even young students can be about poems if they're exposed to a variety of poetry and meaningful conversations around poems on a regular basis.

Thanks!

And that's it! I hope you found these tips helpful. I love helping teachers become more comfortable with poetry. In addition to my children's poetry and rhyming books (including ***BookSpeak!***, ***A Leaf Can Be...***, ***Water Can Be...***, and ***A Rock Can Be...***), I have written a set of six books just for teachers called **30 Painless Classroom Poems**. Each book includes 30 or more poems, a teaching guide written by an educator, and lots of poetry thoughts from me. You can learn more about 30 Painless Classroom Poems here. I also love to speak at educator conferences and do teacher inservices. (Learn more at my site, www.laurasalas.com.)

Cheers,

Laura