

LAURA PURDIE SALAS

small writes for brighter days

THINGS TO DO IF... POEMS

I've written Things to Do If... poems for many years with students of all ages. Its unique construction forces writers to use language in a different way. Because of that, a poem written in this way instantly feels more...poetic, somehow. Give it a try!

Grade level: All

Time: 10 minutes for group poem

SHARE EXAMPLES

First, share some sample Things to Do If... poems. Here are some by me and by groups of students.

Things to Do if You Are a Macaroni Noodle

Invite all your friends to a party
Soak in a hot bath until you're
 completely relaxed
Dress in sharp cheddar layers
Wear a scratchy cracker cap
Sunbathe under an electric sky
Bubble over with happiness

– © Laura Purdie Salas

Things To Do If You're a Rope Swing

Wear a bristly jacket.
Leap to the sky.
Float safely back to earth.

– © Laura Purdie Salas

Group poems written with students

Things To Do if You Are a Ship

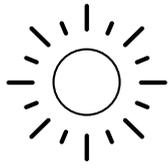
Wear striped cloth
 and wooden shoes
Dance in swerves to the
 music of the waves
Hope for sailors to steer you
Fly across the water

Things To Do if You Are a Firework

Wear straight clothes
 that make up a tutu
Shout out loud, "Happy Birthday!"
Whisper when you whistle up
 into the air
Wish to explode!

NEXT STEPS

- Guide students to notice that a verb/action word begins every line.
- Discuss with students whether the topic of the poem can literally take these actions. "Can a dandelion give high fives?" Chat about personification, where writers give nonhuman things the ability to do human actions.
- Share an image with the class. A clear, colorful, not too busy image works best. I've used things like a ship, a bumblebee buzzing around a flower, and a firework.
- Brainstorm a list of things the kids know about the object. Jot down words that answer questions like:
 - Where do we see this?
 - What's it made of?
 - What noises does it make?
 - What does this thing do?

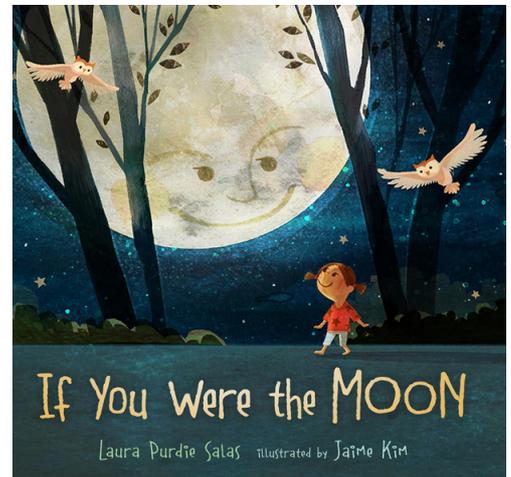


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- Choose a verb to start the first line with. (Wear, skip, chase, etc.) Don't pick a verb that makes sense with the topic. For example, if your topic's a firework, don't pick "explode" to start the line. Invite a volunteer to finish the line.
- I often start with "wear." I'll say something like, "Now, does a roller coaster really wear clothes?" After they tell me it doesn't, I'll ask someone to describe what they would tell the roller coaster to wear, in a way that tells us a little something about a real roller coaster. So I might get responses like, "Wear a metal dress." Or, "Wear a bright red shirt." That first answer works well, but the second answer could literally describe a person. So then I'll say, "That's great! Who can add another word or two so that we tell the reader this isn't a regular bright red shirt?" Then we might end up adding something like "curvy" or "steel" or "screaming." Something that makes the line more interesting! Remind students that they can pull words from the brainstorming list.

My book ***If You Were the Moon*** began as this kind of poem. You can read this book with students before or after writing a group poem and ask students which lines they think were part of the original poem.



- Continue on, giving a new verb to start each line and inviting a volunteer to finish the line. For the last line, I often use "wish" or "dream" as the first word. "Imagine this ship could have one wish come true. What do you think it would wish for?"
- Read the complete draft aloud and celebrate the group's nifty new poem!

You can find more examples of this poetic form on my website:

<https://www.laurasalas.com/tag/things-to-do-if/>