



# A Celebration of

*Poetry can lead children to a love of language –  
and help them build literacy skills as well*

BY NILE STANLEY

Everyone knows that developing a love of language helps children become successful readers and writers, and we know that one way to teach children to love words is to introduce them to poetry. Sallye B. Mathis Elementary School, a challenged urban school in Jacksonville, FL, is full of children who love words because they love poetry. You'll hear students performing poetry on the morning TV announcements and see interns in the classrooms teaching literacy through poetry lessons.

The Poetry Stars, the school's performance troupe, entertain their classmates and people outside the school as well, at teacher conferences, senior citizen luncheons and internationally through an on-line poetry club. Guests have included poets Brod Bagert and Karen Alexander and Alaskan storyteller Brett Dillingham. I have a dual role. At Sallye B. Mathis, I'm a performance poet for the school and at Univer-

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sity of North Florida, I'm a reading education professor.

Reading and performing poetry provide numerous opportunities for children to practice – with pleasure – the essential skills of phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Additionally, children who perform poetry aloud learn to write poetry in a certain "voice." Other benefits of performing poetry include increased self-esteem and connectedness to community and culture.



MAGGIE SWANSON

**Skill-building activities.** Children in preK through grade three can get practice in word recognition by performing actions along with a poem, such as the ones in roman type below.

**Weather**  
by Anonymous

*Whether the weather be fine,  
(put on sunglasses, smile)  
Or whether the weather be not,  
(remove sunglasses, frown)*

*Whether the weather be cold, (put on coat)  
Or whether the weather be hot,  
(remove coat, wipe sweat from brow)*

*We'll weather the weather,  
Whatever the weather, (open an umbrella)  
Whether we like it or not,  
(walk off happily, twirling umbrella)*

I start by performing the poem and motions for the class as they listen without looking at the text. Next, I read the poem to the children and have them echo-chant it line by line. Then they follow along while I point to the poem line by line on a wall chart. After that, we perform the poem together, with the children mimicking the actions and repeating the lines.



They want their work to be noticed; that was one of the reasons I started the Climbing the Poet-Tree Website, [www.unf.edu/~notanley/climb.htm](http://www.unf.edu/~notanley/climb.htm) where students can publish their poems and video clips of their performances online. Here's one of their poems:

**A student teacher** (left) acts out the poem "Weather," complete with props.

**The Poetry Stars** (above) put on a show for their poetry-loving classmates.

**Beyond the lines.** There are many other things I do to build literacy skills after the children learn this poem, including:

- Play a matching game in which students pantomime actions that correspond to each line the teacher reads aloud.
- Students integrate the key words "weather" and "whether" into their sight vocabularies by matching sticky-note copies of the words with the text.
- Students can use the Rebus Rhymes website ([www.cerco.nyu.edu/kravitz.com/Rhymes.html](http://www.cerco.nyu.edu/kravitz.com/Rhymes.html)) to get visual clues for reading the poem and nursery rhymes independently.
- Target the sounds of "w" in "weather" and "wh" in "whether." Can students hear the difference? Have them brainstorm a list of "w" words and "wh" words and add correctly-spelled "w" and "wh" sight words to a word wall.
- Write sight word phrases from the poem on sticky-notes (e.g., weather be hot, weather be cold). Have children act out the phrase to see if the rest of the class can correctly guess and orally match the phrase.
- Play tongue twister by reading the poem rapidly. Write tongue twisters using the target sound "w" (e.g., *Wee Willy Worm wants watermelon!*)
- Develop meaning, vocabulary, and concepts by reading and discussing other weather-related poems.

**Online publishing.** Children like to write original poetry and perform before others.

### Power of Reading (a rap)

by Cora Royal-Hackley and her class,  
Sallye B. Mathis Elementary, Jacksonville, FL

*Reading gives you power; reading  
gives you knowledge.*

*Knowing how to read prepares you for college.*

*The more you read, the more you learn.*

*This has an effect on what you earn.*

*"Amazing Grace" - the Book*

*You need to take another look.*

*That I can be anything I want to be.*

*And there's no end to my possibility!*

*The power of reading feeds your brain.*

*And that's one thing you can explain.*

*So read! read! read!*

The power of reading, as described in the children's poem, can put a hold on students when we instill a love of language within them. Poetry offers lots for them to fall in love with, while honing their language skills as well. ♡

## INTERNET CONNECTIONS

### Topic: Poetry

#### 1 Poetry for Kids: [www.42explore.com/poetry.htm](http://www.42explore.com/poetry.htm)

Links for writing poetry, researching poets and teaching poetry terms. Choose a poetry webquest or find links for publishing student poetry.

#### 2 Academy of American Poets: [www.poets.org/](http://www.poets.org/)

Use Find a Poet, Find a Poem and Listening Booth to browse the more than 500 poets, 1400 poems and 100 audio clips at this website. Be sure to check out the Poetry Month resources.

#### 3 Cybernetic Poet: [www.kurzweilcyberart.com/](http://www.kurzweilcyberart.com/)

Download the free Poet's Assistant that guides the creation of poetry using rhymes, and suggestions for words and phrases. A poetry screen saver also writes original poems.