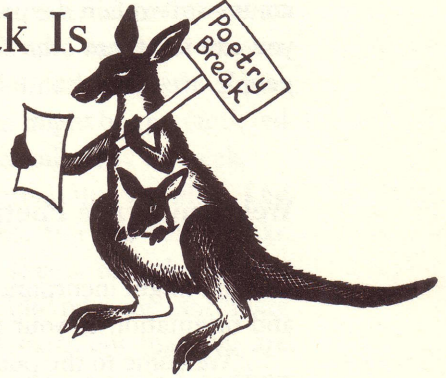


# 1

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## What the Poetry Break Is



It's easy. It's quick. It's effective. Essentially, someone walks around your building with a sign and a poem. He or she pops into each classroom, office, or department and calls out: "Poetry break!" Everyone in the room looks up, a poem is read aloud or recited. The listeners return to their activities, the poetry person continues to the next room. Here's how you do it.

### You need:

- a sign
- a presenter
- a poem

### How to:

Ask for volunteers to be the poetry people. Who? Administrators, staff and faculty members, children, young adults, parents, and other library patrons. Anyone who is willing should be welcomed.

Explain the program at a staff meeting so that everyone understands that at any time during the day, a poetry presenter might appear to present a poem. If some do not want to participate in the program on any given day, or not at all, they may post a sign on the door that says, "No poetry today, please." Undoubtedly, there will be at least one misanthrope in your institution who will not want this sort of disturbance in her or his room or office. Don't worry. When they see how little time it takes and

## *The Poetry Break*

how much everyone enjoys it, they just might capitulate and become strong supporters of the idea of the poetry break.

If you have a large group of willing volunteers you may want to hold a meeting—call it a reception or party to be sure that everyone remembers to come—to explain the procedure. If there are only a handful of presenters involved, you can tell them over a glass of milk or a cup of coffee in the lounge. The poetry people are special and should be treated with respect and appreciation.

### **Welcoming the Poetry Break Volunteers**

You might incorporate some of the following points into your words of welcome and orientation to your new group:

“Welcome to the poetry troupe. You have been chosen (emphasize chosen even though they might have been coerced into volunteering this first time) to introduce the joys and wonders of poetry to our library patrons (or class, cub scout troop, etc.).

We will be touring the school (or library or mall) every day. You may go as individuals or with a partner. When you have a few minutes, pick up the poetry break sign and go to each classroom in the building. When you arrive at a classroom take a look at the door in case a notice has been posted saying, ‘No poetry today please.’ This sign will be on the door if the leader feels that an interruption, even for poetry, is inappropriate that day. If there is no sign, knock on the door, open it and announce, ‘Poetry break’. As you walk to the front of the room the children and the adults will have a few seconds to adjust to your presence. Put the poetry break sign on the floor or desk while you read or recite, as you will want attention paid to the words of the poem and, if you are using a prop, you will need your hands to manipulate it.

The most important components of the poetry break are choosing a poem that you like and practicing reading or reciting it.”

### **Choosing Poems**

This book should provide you with numerous selections from which to choose some favorites, so browse through it or read it from cover to cover until you find a poem that pleases you. You can read directly from the book, or copy the poem so that others may use the book. When presenting, place the poem inside a folder or

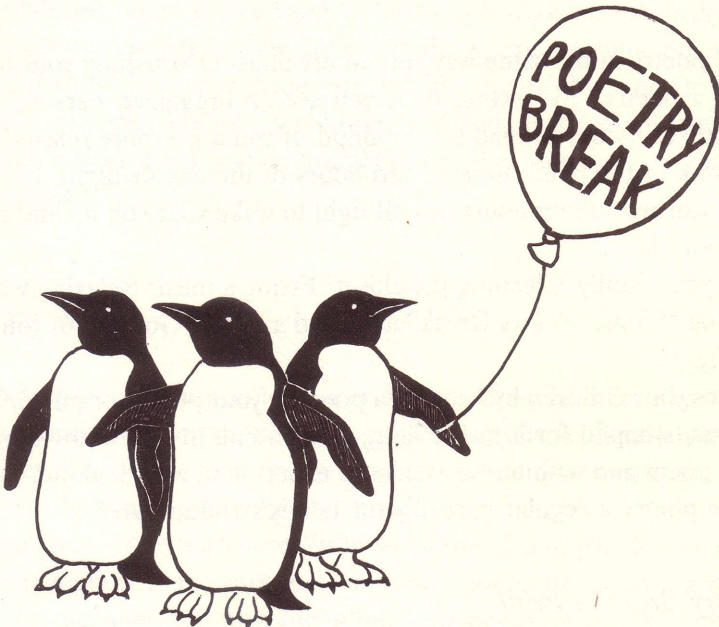


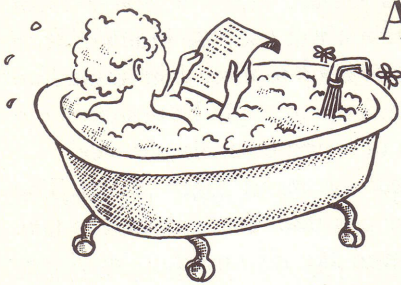
## *What the Poetry Break Is*

glue it onto poster board to give a more professional look. Pulling a ragged piece of paper from your pocket is a bit *déclassée*.

If you are a teacher or a school librarian, you may feel that it is important, even necessary, to find a poem that relates to the school curriculum. Please think of the poetry break as a separate, extracurricular activity. If you are impelled to tie a poem into the day's lesson plan this idea will fizzle because it will take too much of your time to find appropriate poems every day. There is no need to force everything into the study of the Civil War or photosynthesis. In fact, a poem might be remembered simply because it was different from the activities of a particular day or week.

Similarly, there is no need to find a poem for each age group that you visit. The idea is to make this project as easy to implement as possible. You will want to take just one poem throughout your institution on any given day. If your school or library caters to children from preschool to grade twelve it would take an inordinate amount of time to find a poem for each classroom or department that you are visiting each day. This means that one day you will be presenting a poem for young children and perhaps another day for older children. Everyone in the building gets a chance to hear all the poems. Eventually, the entire community will have heard all the poems in this book.





## Audiences

The obvious audiences for the presentation of poetry are children in a family, school students, and children at the public library, but these ideas can also be used in church and club groups or in any activity in which children are involved. The poetry break is successful for one child waking up from a nap and 600 children having lunch in the school cafeteria.

### At Home

Think of poetry in the same way you do breakfast or brushing your teeth. Your family needs a poetry “fix” everyday. If you are an organized person, you might establish a time every day to read poetry aloud. If you are a more relaxed caregiver, you might think of the poetrytime at odd hours of the day or night. Listen, if you forget poetry during waking hours, it’s all right to wake your son up and read him a poem. He’ll love it!

Surprise your family. Cleaning the closet? Fixing a meal? Relaxing with a book? Patting the dog? Shout “Poetry Break” and read a poem. Go back to your chore or leisure activity.

Embarrass your children by keeping a poem in your pocket or purse. When you are on the bus, stopped for a traffic light, or standing in line at the supermarket, whip out the poem and with enthusiasm and expression, read it aloud. Some other ways to make poetry a regular part of your family’s routine are:

#### *The Poetry Break in Print*

Printed poems can be tucked into lunch boxes, placed on pillows and taped to the bathroom mirror. You can think of other places to post poetry in your home.



## *Audiences*

### *Bathtub Poems*

You may not approve of reading books while bathing. What if your childhood copy of *Black Beauty* falls in the water? While your child is bathing, hand her or him a poem to enjoy. Or pop into the bathroom and read aloud. Your child will be a captive audience for your favorite.

### *Mealtime Poetry*

Take time out from cooking, serving, eating at any meal to serve up a poem.

### *Bedtime Poetry*

Let's assume that you have already set aside time to read to your children at bedtime. Now add a minute or less to your book time and share a poem along with your nightly reading.

### *Age Differences*

If your children range in age from toddlers to teenagers, you may be puzzled about what to choose to read to the entire family. There are some poems that may seem too sophisticated for your three year old, but she will be happy to listen along with her older siblings. The older children will feel all the more grownup when they recognize a nursery rhyme or animal poem that they know intimately from their younger years.

## **Reaching Parents**

When parents are holding a meeting or come to the school for a back-to-school evening make time to explain the poetry break idea and its applications at home and in school. They may decide to try the idea at home, or you may enlist one or two as volunteers to help present the poetry break.

If your students' parents are already aware of the idea or you don't have time for a thorough explanation, make sure that you have a poetry break during the meeting to reinforce the message. Is it possible to have one or two of your students come to the meeting and demonstrate the poetry break? Remember that it only takes a few seconds and the adults can return home with a poem repeating in their heads.

## *The Poetry Break*

### **At School**

An obvious and convenient occasion for a daily poetry break is during the school day. Once the staff understands that the poetry break will not be disruptive and will fulfill multiple needs, they will welcome this brief, but revitalizing interruption.

Try to avoid actually scheduling a time for the poetry break, as that will lock the presenters into a designated time which may sometimes end up being inconvenient for them and for the listeners. After all, since this activity only takes a few seconds from actual classtime, it would be more expedient to pick up the poetry break sign and walk through the school whenever the presenter has a few minutes.

The poetry break will work for any age group. You may find that the elementary-school staff is more amenable to the idea than the more structure-minded teachers who work with middle- and high-school students. However, they too, will see that the poetry break adds to rather than detracts from their busy school day.

Involve as many people in the poetry break as you can. The search for the daily poem often involves reading many poems until the perfect one is found which adds to the poetry experience. Children will enjoy the responsibility of walking through the halls, offices, and classrooms with an important errand. Teachers and administrators will find that they learn from being in all the classrooms in the school. And, it will be interesting for adults to observe the different reactions to the same poem in each classroom.

Classrooms are not the only place in the school to give a poetry break. Start each assembly with a poem. Preface all announcements with poetry. Use the school intercom for a poetry break. Even the school bus might be a good place for a poetry break. And don't forget to send each child home with a printed poem to share with their families.

Any place and any method of presentation will work if you are dedicated to keeping focused on the idea.

### **School and Community Boards**

Attending an important meeting of the school board, the library commission, or the church elders? Bring your poetry break sign and a poem. Select something that you like, no need for it to relate in any way to the subject to be discussed.



## *Audiences*

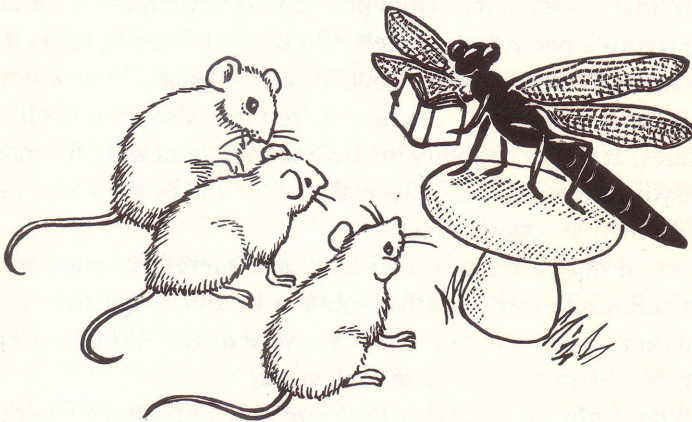
### **In the Public Library**

Naturally, you will want to initiate a poetry break at the public library. The children's room is the obvious place to begin, but consider the entire library as a stage for the presentation of poetry. If you have a large reference room, you may not want to disturb the more serious patrons, but you can experiment with the idea at non-peak periods and see if there are more people who enjoy the idea than are disturbed by it. In any case, the poetry break can be considered at the entrance of the library as a promotion idea. It may encourage the circulation of poetry volumes.

The outreach program is perfect for the poetry break idea. Any time a library staff member comes in contact with the public he or she can think, "Maybe this would be a good time to whip out a poem." Certainly, if you are exhibiting at a community fair or mall, the poetry break would give you an opportunity for brief effective programming to promote library services.

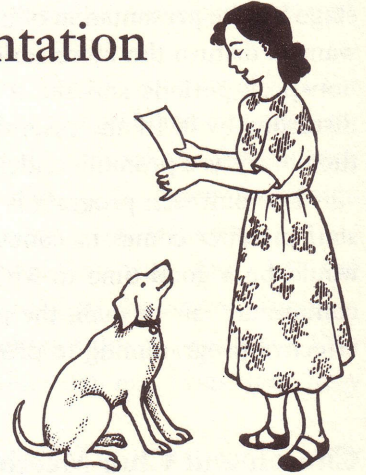
### **Church and Club Meetings**

Explore the idea of introducing the poetry break to Saturday and Sunday schools as well as club meetings. You may feel that you should present a poem with an ecumenical slant, but this is not always necessary. You are trying to expand the poetry knowledge of your listeners, and if you choose a poem that seems appropriate for the group and setting, you'll most likely be demonstrating that poetry can be uplifting and inspirational.



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## Methods of Presentation



### Reading Poetry Aloud

The whole idea of this book is to take the intimidation out of poetry, so it would be inappropriate to begin by giving you rules and regulations regarding reading poetry aloud. A few suggestions and hints may be in order, however, since poetry looks different than the narratives that are generally read to children.

Make sure that you give the title of the poem and the author. It is best to do this before *and* after the poem. You will want your audience to know and remember that poetry is written by real people, and that, if they like that poet, they can seek out more of his or her work.

Most likely, you will often read directly from the book. You will want your listeners to know that poetry comes from print and is written down for all to share.

Feel free to repeat a poem immediately. If it is worth hearing once, it should be worth hearing again. Poetry is like a good piece of music. Your enjoyment and understanding increases each time you hear it. You may also want to offer the same poem several times, at different poetry breaks and even read with different presenters, as the more your listeners hear a piece, the better will be their understanding of it and the deeper their reactions to it.

Poems are often only a verse or two long, and therefore, every word counts. When you are reading a longer narrative, you may be able to get away with glossing over a word you don't understand or slurring a word or two. When you read poetry, make sure that you distinctly articulate each word.

If the poem has a rhyming construction, you may find yourself so caught up in the rhythm that there is a danger of offering the poem in a singsong manner.



## *Methods of Presentation*

Rhymes give a lilting feeling to poetry, but there is no need to over emphasize the meter.

Make sure that you know the meaning of each word in the poem and how to pronounce all the words. Don't guess. You may be imparting the wrong meaning to the entire poem, and worse as the presenter you will "teach" your listeners the wrong pronunciation as well. As a young storyteller I often told Ruth Sawyer's "the Flea." The story contains several Spanish words. In one part of the story, the young shepherd arrives at the King's castle to try his luck at answering a riddle that has eluded far more educated men. The guards at the palace pass the young man from guard to guard saying "pobrecito." In my ignorance of Spanish, I thought that surely they were announcing him to the next person and at first I shouted the word as though I were the butler. Luckily, before I actually told the story I asked someone how to pronounce the word. It turned out that the guards were actually shaking their heads and intoning, "poor thing." Imagine how ridiculous I would have felt if I hadn't taken the time to find out the true meaning of the word. (Incidentally, the person I asked for help was a colleague of mine at the New York Public Library. Since I had approached him with my question he felt less shy and asked me to dinner. So, asking a question to sharpen your storytelling skills may get you a dinner date!)

Poets generally use standard punctuation. Look at the poem to see where the commas and periods are placed. They will tell you when to pause and stop just the way they do in stories or articles. This seems like an obvious thing to point out, but since poetry does look different on the page, it can be tempting to ignore the signals you're used to in other forms of oral reading.

You may find conversation in poetry. This is your chance to perform in a mini-play. When we read stories aloud that contain conversation, we often omit the "he says" and "she wondered" because our changes in voice, no matter how slight, will give the listener indication of who is speaking. You can't do that with poetry; you must read every word. To maintain the form of a poem, it may not be amended or it becomes unbalanced.

The tone or subject of a poem will further guide you in your oral presentations. If the poem is funny you will want to use a lighter tone than if the poem is serious. One word of caution: Just because a poem is about the loss of a pet or death does not mean that you must present it in a grim or lugubrious manner. Let the words tell the listeners what to feel. You don't need to signal a sad poem by bringing out a handkerchief—or smelling salts.

Try not to be so tied to the book that you fail to look up and physically share the poem. If you glance up into the eyes of your listeners they and you will feel more involved.



## **Recitation and Memorization**

If you decide not to read a poem it's obvious that the alternate way to present the poem orally is to memorize it. Some adults and most children can do this easily. However, to require you or one of your volunteers to memorize before presenting may lessen the chances that the poetry break becomes a permanent, daily part of programming in your institution simply because it takes too much time and effort.

One of the easiest methods of memorizing a poem is to use it one day in the poetry break. If you are in a school with twelve classrooms or more, by the time you have made your way through half of the school, you undoubtedly will have memorized the poem. Now, you can use it another time and will already know the poem.

Knowing the words, of course, is not enough. After the words have been committed to memory, you still have to work on your delivery. As above, think in terms of the tone of the selection. Practice your recitation with a live audience. Perhaps you can find a willing friend or even a reluctant spouse to listen and give comments. I sometimes joke about practicing on my dog. At least with a pet, you are talking to a living creature rather than trying to recreate the performance feeling in the vacuum of a deserted kitchen or living room.

Another way of practicing is to tape yourself and listen to how you sound, critiquing your performance. An audio tape can serve another function, too, as it can help with the memorization. Hearing a poem over and over will be like listening to the words of a song. You will learn it through repetition.

If you would like to try reciting, but feel anxious about forgetting the words, why not take a copy of the poem with you and slip it into your pocket or place a book mark in the book so that you can open the book and easily find the poem if you get stuck. This may give you the security you need to help you through the first memorized presentation. After all, one of the reasons you are presenting poetry is to give your audience, the children, the knowledge that all those wonderful poems that they have been listening to come from books. If they see you carrying a book and referring to print it will reinforce the idea "poetry comes from books."

Take every opportunity to use your newly memorized poem so that it will become embedded in your memory and can be used whenever needed.

Once you and your volunteers have a repertoire of poems, you can tour outside your own facility with an entire program of memorized poems which will seem more professional to an outside audience.