

Poetry Wordgames: Activities for Creative Thinking and Writing

The term poetry “wordgames” applies to these activities as it is suggested that teachers present them as team-created poetry writing or as team-created, competitive writing; this implies a sense of “fun”, which is in fact how students experience them. The 50 writing activities below are from *Wordgames: Activities for Creative Thinking and Writing* © Dianne Bates (Longman, 1993).

Wordgames in the classroom

The poetry wordgames listed below can be used on a regular basis as skills-based activities: alternatively, you might wish to use single poetry wordgames as lesson gap-fillers. Because each game takes no longer than a few minutes to complete, they are ideal for reluctant students who are more willing to write and more likely to succeed because the task is short and there are fewer opportunities for mistakes to occur.

Wordgames can be undertaken individually or as part of a team, thus students work independently or collectively, depending on how the activity is presented.

Wordgames as a team activity

Interpersonal skills, such as leadership and teamwork, can be developed if participants undertake poetry wordgames as a team activity. Teams can be formed in the classroom with a scribe appointed for each. A time limit can be imposed for each game, and then the team's effort can be read out by a team member. It is up to you to decide if and when students should write individually within the team or if the team should write collectively. Students can take it in turns to be the scribe or oral presenter.

Writing in a team like this helps to develop skills such as writing under pressure, self-evaluation of work, editing, oral reading and listening. In reading work aloud, students should be encouraged to project their voices and to read with expression.

Team size can be from two players upwards, but six is an ideal number. Teams work best with a mix of abilities: this allows more gifted writers to work with and help develop the skills of less able writers.

Extension activities for talented or more capable children are suggested after some of the poetry wordgames.

Wordgames as competition

The teacher may like to promote poetry wordgames as a team competition with points being awarded to teams for speed or quality of writing or both. Points can be accumulated over a given period, say a week, with one team being pronounced ‘writing champs’ at the end of that time.

In assessing quality of writing, the teacher should stipulate a set of criteria; for example, the writing should create vivid images, use interesting words and make sense.

Students should always be made aware that assessment of writing is a subjective matter. Thus, the teacher should attempt to praise all contributions, specifying particular strengths of the piece being presented.

Scoring of poetry wordgames on a team competition basis can be as for tabloid sports, with bonus points awarded for teamwork and expressive oral reading. Written work can be presented by individuals, pairs or the whole team.

Poetry wordgames challenge students' usual belief that 'a real poem rhymes'. Indeed, some of the activities here (e.g. Terse Verse, Couplets, Internal Rhyme games) do require rhyming lines, but others (e.g. Seasons Poem) require blank (unrhymed) verse: Some activities (e.g. Last Word, Modelled Poem, Cloze Poem) use given poems as the basis for writing. Many activities (e.g. Patterned Poem, Describing Poem, Emotions) challenge students to create original verse based on emotional response or personal experience.

Poetry Wordgames help students to become aware of poetic devices such as rhythm and repetition. They invite students to choose words to convey an emotion, to place words for greatest effect or to respond to sound and meaning.

The games

About Me

Students are given a sequence of line beginnings and must complete each line to make an autobiographical poem. For example:

*I seem to be as prickly as a cactus spike
But really I am as soft as the juicy flesh inside*

Note: Each set of lines can be repeated any number of times.

Suggested beginnings:

- I'm good at.../ I'm not good at...
- I used to be.../ But now I'm...
- I am.../ I am not...
- If you.../ Then I'll...
- I like.../ But I don't like...
- I know a lot about... / I know nothing about...
- I admire.../ I don't respect...
- I believe in... / I don't believe in...

Acrostic Name

This poem is similar to the Acrostic Poem Name. Students are given a person's name, which they must write vertically down the left-hand side of the page. Starting each line with the letters that spell out the person's name, students must write one word per line so that by the end of the line, a message about the person is revealed.

Note: This game will be more fun if the name of a real, known person is used. For example:

DOUG	ANNE
Dread	Always
Of	Neat
Ugly	Never
Girls	Enthusiastic

Acrostic Poem

Students are given a one word topic the letters of which are written vertically down the left hand side of the page. When the game begins, they must write statements about the topic starting each line with the letters that spell out the topic. For example, for the topic `Parents':

*Parents are always
Active and caring,
Running after you
Every day of your life
Needing to take care of you
Tender when you're sick
Shouting when you're naughty.*

Suggested topics: Families, sports, graffiti, bedtime, planets, Africa, chopsticks, telephones, carpets, winners, Easter

Adverb Poem

Students choose an adverb (or the teacher nominates one). The adverb must be used as the first word of each line of the rhyming poem. For example, for the word `quickly':

*Quickly horses move around the track
Quickly planes fly to Rome and back
Quickly pigs gobble down their dinner
Quickly I declare, 'I'm winner!'
Quickly lightning zips up the sky
Quickly birds in formation, fly,*

Suggested adverbs: Lazily, sadly, bravely, merrily, optimistically, stupidly, crazily, sleepily, slowly

Alliterative Phrases

Students first write (in words) the numbers one to five vertically down the left hand side of the page. When the game starts, each number must be followed by an adjective, then a noun, both of which must begin with the same first letter, or sound, of each number. For example; if the topic is animals, the alliterative phrases might be:

One overweight ox
Two timid tortoises
Three thriving tarantulas
Four fierce fish
Five fearless flamingos

Extension: Develop each alliterative phrase into an alliterative sentence. For example:

One overweight ox over-ate outrageously
Two timid tortoises tiptoed tiredly
Three thriving tarantulas tickled their trainer
Four fierce fish fought ferociously
Five freed flamingos fled in a flap!

Suggested topics: People, fruit, vegetables, imaginary creatures, in the library, in the supermarket, under the floorboards, in the ocean, under my bed, in the haunted house

Best Letter

Students write a series of couplets (that is pairs of rhyming lines), using a given letter of the alphabet to begin as many words as possible. For example, for the letter 'B':

B is best!
Babies, balloons, bunnies and brothers
are loved by all from children to mothers.
Buttercups, begonias and bluebells in bloom
The sweetest smells to fill a room.
If you know your ABC,
You'll know the best letter of all is B!

Extension: Instead of using initial letters, students could be challenged to use blends. For example, words beginning with 'bl' or 'cr' - or words containing specific letter combinations or sounds - for example, 'or' sound, 'end', 'ild'.

Boring Poem

In this poem, the second and alternate lines are always the same. This line is specified by the teacher. Students must write the first and subsequent odd-numbered lines. For example:

*I get up and go to school
Day after day, day after day!
Do what I'm told,
Day after day, day after day!
Listen to the same old warnings,
Day after day, day after day!
Get most of my sums wrong,
Day after day, day after day! Etc*

Suggestions: Week after week, month after month, year after year, payday after payday, weekend after weekend, minute after minute.

Clerihew

Students write a four-line poem with a rhyming scheme of a/a/b/b about a nominated person. For example, for *Ben the Traveller*, the poem could be:

*Brave and bold is our friend Ben
He's going overseas, we don't know when.
We'll see him off with many tears
We hope he's not away for years.*

Suggested names:

- Gwen, a Pirate
- Roger, a teacher
- Natalie, a two-week-old baby
- Charles, a prince
- Ronald, a rogue
- Cyril, a singer
- Ferdinand, a fake
- Marcia, a magician
- Sammy, a snail-catcher
- Esmeralda, a trapeze artist

Cloze Poem

Students are given a poem of up to twenty lines, which contains missing words. The missing words are supplied in a separate, jumbled list. Students read the poem and fill in the missing spaces.

Note: The poem chosen could be one already treated in class; alternatively, this could be a good lead-in activity to a poem to be studied.

Contrast Poem

Students write a poem on contrasting subjects: for example, poverty and wealth.

Suggested subjects: Life and death, light and dark, wisdom and foolishness, freedom and imprisonment, youth and old age, boys and girls, friends and enemies, the sun and the moon, drought and rain, black and white

Conversation Poem

Students write a poem in which one person is speaking to another. The first line presents one speaker, the next line the other, and so on. For example:

*Put your shoes on, son
But I can't find them
I'll count to ten: one...
I can't, they're gone
Hurry, or you know what I'll do-
I've found them. They've got knots!
I'm not waiting any more. two... etc.*

Suggestions: Butcher to customer, teacher to pupil, small child to Santa Claus, driver to police officer, teenage boy to another, editor to author, actor to director, lizard to worm, snake to snake, clown to a small child

Couplets

Students write two lines of poetry that rhyme and make sense. For example:

*December is a month of goodwill
But too much food and you'll be ill.*

Suggested topics: False teeth, grasshoppers, rain, poetry, pimples, madness, swimming pools, rhubarb, toucans

Curse Poem

Students write a poem that begins with pronouncing a curse or a spell on someone or something. For example:

*A curse on Samantha
Who ate my dessert
I hope her belly begins to hurt,
I hope her toenails all turn green
(I hope this doesn't
Sound too mean.)*

Suggested curses: A curse on gossipers, smokers, speeding drivers, rainy weather, daylight saving, pot holes, homework, long queues, late buses, flat lemonade, jack hammers, boredom

Describing Poem

This poem is similar to the single-words poem game. Students are given a topic and write a list of related phrases: For example, for the topic '*Small Things*.'

*Small things are important
My white mouse Minnie
Tadpoles in a pond
A seed ripening
A rose bud
A kiss from Mum
Three simple words,
'I love you.'*

Suggested topics: Happy people, swift things, soft things, the colours of the rainbow, dreams, moustaches, ripe fruit, clouds, autumn leaves, old people

Dylan Thomas Couplet

Students are given a subject and must write a couplet, the first line of which always begins with, 'Have you ever seen a...'; the second line always consists of three hyphenated descriptive words. For example:

*Have you ever seen a bulldog?
Heavy-jowled, open-mouthed, wide-eyed.*

Suggested topics: Train, postman, an old man, a marathon runner, a koala, a vampire, a haunted house, a robot, a ballet dancer, a race-horse

Emotions

Students chose an emotion (or the teacher nominates one). Each line of the poem must start with that emotion. For example, for this topic 'Loneliness', the poem could be:

Loneliness is a telephone that never rings
Loneliness is spending every weekend alone
Loneliness is setting a place at the table for one
Loneliness is nobody remembering your birthday.

Suggested emotions: Fear, happiness, frustration, enthusiasm, despair, excitement, anticipation, moodiness, boredom, sadness

Ezra Pound Couplet

In a two-lined poem, students should capture the feeling of something by making a comparison. For example,:

A butterfly on a leaf -
Hands held in prayer.

A glass marble in the grass -
A death adder's staring eye.

Suggested topics: An autumn leaf, a grey hair, a train entering a tunnel, rain clouds, a bald head, smelly feet, a very funny cat, a cactus leaf, a heartfelt smile, a stern word

First Line

Students are given a (published) poem with its first line missing. They supply the most appropriate first line.

Note: If the poem rhymes, the first line must conform to the rhyming scheme.

Form Poem

Students write a poem in the form of 4/3/4/3 words per line, rhymed or unrhymed. For example, for the topic Television, the poem could be:

Violence, fantasy, glamour, gimmicks
Tempting, fast, sensational
Comedy, drama, soaps, ads
Mind-deadening, time-killer, appealing.

Suggested topics: Foreign countries, traffic, clowns, spiders, stars, monkeys, adults, caravan, shoes, country towns

Give it a Name

Students are given a little-known (published) poem without its title. They must read the poem and give it the most appropriate title.

Grave Poem

Students write a suitable epitaph for a given person. For example:

Shirley Moore
Here lie the remains
Of Shirley Moore
No Shirl
No more.

Suggested subjects: Fred Pound; Kit, a cat; Moya Young; a house-painter; an optometrist; a zoo-keeper; a greengrocer, Les Best; a motorist; a big game hunter; Trent Trend, fashion designer

Group Poem

Students are given four words that fit a rhyming scheme: for example, ABAB = page, star, rage, far. The idea is to compose a poem using these words as the last words in each line of a four line poem.

I Can't

Students are given a format to work to and must write restrictions and consequences within that format. The first line begins with 'I can't'; the next line begins with 'Cause'. The poem may or may not rhyme. For example:

I can't go out alone
'Cause the bogeyman is about.
I can't whinge and moan
'Cause I get into trouble.
I can't say, 'No way, Mum',
'Cause Mum's the boss.
I can't cheek Dad
'Cause he gets very cross.

Internal Rhyme

The teacher gives an example or two of internal rhyme. Students must then complete as many lines of verse about food using internal rhyme. For example:

Ice-cream makes you scream
Apple crumble makes you rumble
Fish and chips give you greasy lips
Ice-block, drips on your frock
Burger bun helps you run

Note: As a pre-writing exercise, less able students could first compile a list of -foods, such as ice-cream, green peas, jelly.

Last Line

Students are given a short poem (up to eight lines), the last line of which is missing. They supply an appropriate last line.

Note: If the poem rhymes, the last line must conform to the rhyming scheme.

Last Word

Students are given a poem (such as a limerick) with the last word of each line missing, a rhyming scheme and a jumbled list of words.

They must complete the poem using the rhyming scheme and the list of supplied words. For example:

There once was a sailor named_(A)
Whose mates rushed him off to the_(A)
Said he, I've a_(B)
As a pet in my_(B)
There's no reason for raising a_(A)

Jumbled words: Stink, skunk, link, clink, bunk.

Extension: Give the poem a title.

Limerick

Students are given a first line and then complete the limerick. A limerick is a five-line poem in which the first two lines rhyme and the third and fourth lines rhyme. The fifth line rhymes with the first.

Suggested first lines:

- There was a young man, so cool
- There was an old woman from Bow
- There was a hopeless old clown
- There was a small boy from Ryde
- There was a haughty young thing
- There was a very poor writer
- There was a rain-maker from the Hay
- There was a pig named Polly

Extension: Write a complete limerick; provide your own topic and the first line

Metaphor

Students are given a subject and are asked to write three metaphors (word pictures) for the subject. For example:

*The moon is
a pearl from a necklace
a cold, cheesy pizza
earth's halo*

Suggested topics: Cloud, cat, apple, cheese, ocean, autumn leaf, the sun, a lake, a beach, a sunflower, chewing gum, a baby

Modelled Poem

Students are given a poem, such as this one by Bill Condon:

*If I was an old lady
And we came to blows,
I'd shove my umbrella
Right up your nose!*

Students then use the rhyming scheme to write a variation.

Note: It is suggested that the poem chosen be no longer than four lines; this keeps the exercise short and manageable. However, as an extension activity, you could challenge the students with a longer poem.

Suggested first lines:

- If I was a bird
- If I was a fish
- If I was a tramp
- If I was a dog
- If I was a baby
- If I was an elephant
- If I was a stick
- If I was mud
- If I was an old grump

Muddled Poem

Students are given a poem of up to ten lines which is 'scrambled', that is, the lines are not in the usual order. They must number the lines in correct order.

Number Poem

Students write a poem, every line of which begins with a number. For example: *Two*

Two is a pair, a couple
Two is not being alone
Two is my brother and I
Two is sharing, sometimes fighting
Two is not always getting your own way.

Examples: One, three, twelve, one hundred, one million, a half, a zillion

One-Rhyme

The aim of this game is to write the longest piece of verse using only a single rhyme. The first line begins with the letter 'A' and each subsequent line must start with a consecutive letter of the alphabet. For example:

A was an ape, a hairy thing
B was a ballerina who'd rather sing
C was a cord, a long thin string
D was a dog, mangy and barking
E was an eagle, a bird on the wing
F was food we were asked to bring, etc

Parody Rhyme

Students are given a well-known nursery rhyme and asked to rewrite it as a parody, that is, a humorous imitation. For example: 'Rock-a-bye baby' could be written as:

*Rock-a-bye baby,
On the treetop,
When the wind blows,
The cradle will rock,
When the bough breaks,
The forester yells, 'Timber!'*

Pass the Poem

Students are given a poem length such as six lines. The first player writes the first line of a poem. The next player adds the next line and passes it to the next player, who adds the next line and so on until the poem is completed.

Suggested titles:

- Who's the Boss?
- What Not to Tell Your Mum
- Get Well Quick
- I'm the Greatest!
- Invaders
- Monster Mother

Suggested first lines:

- My pen is dry
- If you're trying to think
- Deep in the desert
- So much to tell you
- An emu is an Aussie bird

Note: The teacher might prefer to supply students with a title or first line or both. The lines do not have to rhyme.

Patterned Poem

Students write to a given pattern using various parts of speech: first line = noun; second line = two adjectives that describe the noun; third line = three verbs associated with the noun; fourth line = a phrase that sums up the poem. For example:

Fire

poker-hot, blazing

flickering, scorching, thrusting

dangerous to meddle with!

Suggested topics: Wind, bully, scarecrow, rock-pool, noise, guide dog, Disneyland, explorer, pen, athlete, teacher, lawyer, rock singer.

Phrases

Students compile a list of associated phrases for a given place. For example, for the place, 'Countryside at Night', the phrases might be:

A flame red moon
Fields of stiff wheat
Rolling, melting hills
Black shapes moving
Breeze-blown leaves

Suggested topics:

- City block at noon
- Zoo cage
- Rainy suburban street
- Country river
- Beach in early morning
- Outback during drought
- Carnival at night
- School playground at lunchtime
- Artist's studio
- Service station on Saturday morning

Poem Starter

Students are given a single line of a poem. They must complete a four (or more) line poem using this line as the first line.

Suggested first lines:

- I'm nine and I'm bored
- Beneath the moon there is a hill
- Mondays I feel sick
- This is the way I have to go
- Good evening and welcome
- I've been writing till my fingers ache
- Tennis is a jolly game
- The clock on the wall
- Only three more hours
- Silly dilly, Gertie Lou

Prose into Poetry

Students are given a prose version of an incident and asked to shape a poem out of that incident. The incident can be something from a daily newspaper or from real life. For example: A little boy is begging a large group of children to let him play with them. The others tell him to go away, he's too small. The boy turns, wipes his eyes and walks away.

Note: A variation of this game is to write a prose piece, based on a poem. A photograph or piece of music could also be used to stimulate the writing of a poem or prose piece.

Quatrain

Students write a four-line stanza with the second and fourth line end-words rhyming. For example:

*I eat my peas with honey,
I've done it all my life:
It makes the peas taste funny,
But it keeps them on the knife.*

Suggested topics: Snakes, at the movies, boasting, news, row boats, at the rubbish dump, fishing, walking in the rain, dandruff, wishes.

RHYMING STRUCTURE

Students are given a rhyming structure of up to ten lines, for example, ABABCCABCC. They write a list of words that conform to that structure. For example:

A fruit
B might
A suit
B fright
C jelly
C Nelly
A loot
B delight
C Kelly
C telly

Rhyming Words

Students are given a word for which they must find as many full rhymes as they can. For example, for sport, the list could include taught, caught, report, extort, fort, fraught, rort, sort, fought, port, retort, wart, bought, brought, nought.

Extension: Students use as many full rhyme words as possible in a poem, either as internal rhyme or as line-end rhymes.

Suggested words: Read, night, rumble, brick, car, mine, sing, fun, mood, day.

Seasons Poems

Students write a four-line blank verse poem about the seasons. Each line begins with a different season. For example:

Summer is the whine of air-conditioners
Autumn is back-breaking hours of leaf-raking
Winter is chilblains and electric blankets
Spring is fresh-born buds beckoning the sun.

Senses Poems

Students are given the name of a food and must describe it by writing one phrase for each of the senses: sight, smell, touch, taste, sound. For 'Green Apple' the phrases could be

SIGHT *Tight deep-sea green coat*
SMELL *Clean sharp tangy*
TOUCH *Glass smooth, dimpled ends*
TASTE *Squirt of juice, tongue-tickling*
SOUND *Crunch, munch, gobble*

Suggested foods: Strawberries, lemon jelly, roast beef, vanilla ice-cream, baked potato, ripe banana, pizza, spaghetti, potato crisps, toffee on a stick, banana split, watermelon, grilled sausages.

Shopping List

Students write a shopping list appropriate to a particular person. The list must be written in full rhyme. For example, a plumber's shopping list might read:

A rubber plug
A metal lug

A very small spanner
A daily planner

A pair of pliers
A selection of wires

Suggested subjects: A teacher, a new mother, a gardener, a teenager, an artist, a footballer, a witch, a bride-to-be, a child starting school for the first time.

Single Words Poem

Students are given a topic and a time limit in which to complete a list of single words on the topic. For example, on the topic 'My Pet', the list could be:

Charlie
greyhound
puppy
friendly
spotted
tail-wagger
lean
fast
watch-dog

Note: Hyphenated words are acceptable, but phrases do not count.

Suggested topics: Television, romance, cricket, neighbours, pests, the beach, aeroplanes, jelly, the moon, valued possessions, a rag doll.

Terse Verse

Students write poems of just two rhyming words that make a meaning. Some examples:

Hot *Runny* *Snack* *Wild*
Shot *Honey* *Pack* *Child*

Triplets – M, U

Students write a poem of three rhymed lines; the teacher supplies three rhyming words. For example:

Sun today is shining bright
I'm glad it's day, not night
Think I'll go and fly a kite!

Suggested words:

- day, say, May
- need, feed, speed
- away, play, day
- town, down, clown
- party, hearty, smarty

Two-Word Line Poem

Students are given a subject and must write a poem of just words on each line. No rhyming is required, but it can be used, if the player wishes. The poem can be any length, or the teacher might like to specify a length (for more able writers).

For example, on the subject 'Indoor Game' the poem could be:

*Tumbler, shaking
Throwing dice
Number nine
That's mine!
Moving counters
'I'm winning!'*

Suggested topics: Gardening, cooking, noise, having fun, nightmares, spending money, new shoes, hiccups, being alone, nasty habits, Scrabble, cleaning one's bedroom, cooling off on a hot day.

Warning Poem

Students are issued with a warning and must make a poem of four lines about the potential dangers of disobeying that warning. For example, if the warning is 'Don't smoke', the poem could be:

*If you ever smoke
Your lungs will fill with goo
Smoking shortens your life
What a dumb thing to do!*

Suggested topics:

- Don't drink alcohol
- Don't stick objects in your ears
- Don't cross a road without checking for traffic
- Don't attempt to feed a wild animal
- Don't play with matches
- Don't talk to strangers
- Don't drink ink
- Don't be a busybody

Word Association Poem

Students write down a word suggested by the teacher. Underneath that word they write the first word or phrase that the topic word suggests. Subsequent lines of the poem are linked to one another in the same way. Here is an example of a word association poem:

Worm
long and slimy
a half-set jelly
wobble wobble
slippery surface
sliding
slithering
slipping
down down down
into a deep dark hole
a musty tube
smelly wet
Worm

Note: The poem does not necessarily have to finish with the topic word.

Suggested topics: Black, sunlight, smoke, laughter, elephant, bushfire, memories, thunder, feather, magician, music.