

# TEACHING STRUGGLING READERS WITH POETRY

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Engaging Poems With Mini-Lessons That Target &  
Teach Phonics, Sight Words, Fluency & More—  
Laying the Foundation for Reading Success

Maria P. Walther & Carol J. Fuhler

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## DEDICATION:

To Lenny, you add poetry and laughter to my life. Happy twentieth anniversary!

— M. P. W.

With love to Dick, who continually supports my efforts to be a writer, and a heartfelt thanks to my sister-in-law, Eunice Fuhler, who welcomed Dick and me into her home as temporary guests and let me adopt her screened porch and inspiring lake views as I worked to complete this book.

— C. J. F.

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## WHO NEEDS POETRY?

by Carole Boston Weatherford

Who needs poetry?  
Kids who like rhythm,  
Kids who like rhyme,  
Kids on the fast track,  
Kids who take their time,  
Kids who keep journals,  
Kids who love to write,  
Kids who curl up with a book  
on warm and cozy nights.

Who needs poetry?  
Kids who watch too much TV  
and think reading's a bore,  
Kids who hate writing  
and find that math's a chore,  
Kids who are laid back,  
Kids who won't sit still,  
Kids who are motor-mouths,  
Kids who want to chill.

Who needs poetry?  
Kids who like to sing,  
Kids who feel the beat,  
Kids who like motion,  
Kids with dancing feet,  
Kids who like word play,  
Kids who like to rap,  
Kids who crave a little treat  
to savor in a snap!

Source: *Everyday Poetry* (Vardell, 2009)

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# THE PROMISE OF POETRY

**W**e are enthusiastic and excited about the promise of poetry for all young readers, and we especially endorse its possibilities for children struggling to read. We want to pay our excitement forward, hoping that you will catch it and pass it on to your students. For those battling to make sense of the printed word, a short, silly, repetitive poem might offer a glimmer of success. Reassuring as a steady heartbeat, the rhythm of a poem could focus another child helping her memorize it, bouncing a bit to the underlying beat. Before long, the familiar words will be recognized in other texts, too. When you read poems to and with your students, laughing at those that are outrageous or puzzling out an intriguing new word together, you will be building a warm and accepting learning environment. That's a reassuring place to be when you're having difficulty learning to read, isn't it?

Is poetry magic? Well, maybe a little. It becomes more so when you love it. Share it with a twinkle in your eye. Interpret it with your voice, reading quietly when describing snowflakes and raising the volume when introducing demanding bulldozers. Draw from it to teach a quick, essential reading strategy. Turn to it for an impetus for writing. Let it help children build fluency as they read, read, read it together and alone. We believe that poetry can't be beat for sharing the joys hidden within the printed word.

As you delve into the upcoming chapters, you will find a cross-section of fabulous poetry to share with your students. Many poems are reproducible so that you and the children will have them at your fingertips. We found others with great teaching possibilities, and for these we give you the sources where you can locate them and accompanying mini-lessons. We paired poems with related picture books, offering more opportunities for reading and discussion, so the learning goes on. Slipped between some chapters are slices of key research accompanied by additional teaching ideas. We hope these materials will whet your appetite, sending you to colleagues, the librarian, and your favorite bookstores to augment this sampling. In the meantime, welcome to *Teaching Struggling Readers With Poetry*. We couldn't be more pleased that you're here!

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## CHAPTER 1

# USING POETRY TO TEACH STRUGGLING READERS

### “Verse Play” by Eve Merriam

The poem’s a ball  
cupped in your hand,  
open your fingers  
and let it drop—

wait,  
stop,

bounce it back  
and catch the rhyme  
just in time  
in time, in time.

Source: *The Singing Green* (Merriam, 1992)

## Poetry: Serve It Up Daily

Poetry. It can be outrageous or somber, nonsense or a serious reflection on life. It is written about mundane things like pencils and safety pins or vast things like fathomless oceans and the endless universe. It might pinpoint the delicacy of a snowflake or marvel at the bulk of the hippopotamus. It comes in shapes, rhymes, free verse, haiku, and more. It blossoms when read aloud, but soothes when savored in solitude. Poetry is many things to many people. Some people are drawn to it; others back away, a little unsure. Poetry will

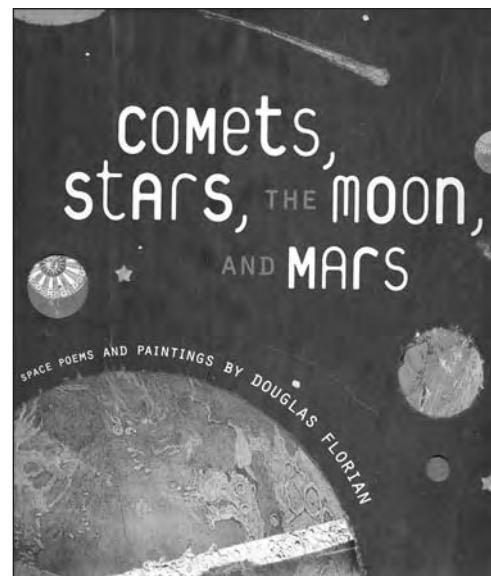
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enrich your lessons and become an enjoyable change of pace for you and your students. It has a bounty to offer. Serve it up daily, especially to those who are struggling to master reading. We're here to tell you why. But first . . .

You are holding this book in your hands because, like us, you're continually searching for effective, research-proven ways to boost the reading skills of your young learners. Perhaps you have a handful of students (or maybe the majority of your class) who are struggling to learn to read. Some children may be lacking rich background experiences in literacy, while others are learning a second language. Still others simply can't seem to unlock the letter-sound code. Sadly, for many of them, motivation may be waning as they attempt to keep pace with their peers. Whatever the case may be, you need practical, research-based strategies to teach them in joyful and motivating ways. Rest assured—you've come to the right place. We can think of no better way to engage even the most reluctant reader than with an enticing poem.

Pause for a minute and think of these possibilities. You might reach for anthologies like *The Random House Book of Poetry for Children* for a myriad of poems on child-appealing topics selected by former Children's Poet Laureate Jack Prelutsky (1983). Then, mix in a selection of books that focus on one topic, such as *Sports! Sports! Sports!* by Lee Bennett Hopkins (1999) or Douglas Florian's *Comets, Stars, the Moon, and Mars* (2007). Round these out with poems written by children in your classroom. Armed with a motivating collection of poems, from anthologies to rhythmic storybooks, you're sure to catch the interest and build the necessary skills for learners whose ability to read remains elusive.

In this book, you will find poetry-based mini-lessons designed to help readers with the essential aspects of literacy. Each lesson will model how you can use the reproducible focus poem to teach key reading skills, including phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as well as writing, which we view as an essential component of effective reading instruction. The focus poem is followed by additional poetry suggestions and mini-lesson ideas to reinforce and extend the learning with poems that are easily located in your school or local library. To further supplement the mini-lessons found in each chapter, we've included five inserts entitled *Reading Research + Poetry: Ready-to-Use Ideas* that contain additional research-proven teaching ideas. We've created this book as a jumping-off point to get you and your learners started on a road to success. You are the best person to identify the lessons that will meet your students' specific learning needs and to select the poems that will kindle their interest. We hope that these lessons, coupled with your creativity, will strengthen literacy skills while adding smiles to the faces of your young readers.



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Before we start on the lessons, let's take a moment to look to the experts in the field and then identify what our research-guided experience tells us struggling readers need.

## What Do Struggling Readers Need? Research-Guided Principles

Why do some students struggle, while others seem to learn to read so effortlessly? The answer to this question is as individual as each child you greet at your classroom door. Thus, our interactions with children are paramount. Every learner benefits from thoughtful, responsive literacy instruction. Whether a child is a proficient reader or a beginner, his needs are the same. When you apply the following principles to your teaching, all students will benefit from motivating and focused instruction.



Stimulate students' interest and you create readers!

### **KNOWLEDGEABLE TEACHERS**

First and foremost, struggling readers need YOU! Study after study (Allington, 2002; National Education Association Task Force on Reading, 2000; Reutzel & Cooter, 2008) shows that teachers are the most important factor in improving students' reading achievement. Literacy expert Richard Allington states that "Effective teachers manage to produce better achievement regardless of which curriculum materials, pedagogical approach, or reading programs they use" (2002, p. 742). Literacy researcher Jane Braunger and literacy professor Jan Lewis (2006) underscore this premise when they write that it is excellent teachers and not published programs that create independent, thoughtful, and engaged readers. You know these researchers are right. So do we. Here are some important points for you to consider as you fine-tune your reading instruction.

First, young students need an enthusiastic role model when it comes to reading and writing. That's you. Second, in terms of content, they need material that is worth teaching and learning, which you select with an eye to curriculum standards and tailor to each student. Third, to keep anxiety at bay, they need a class-



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room home that is a welcoming, comfortable, and accepting learning environment (Hadaway, Vardell, & Young, 2001). Then, because these learners are not sure of themselves, they will profit from your immediate, descriptive feedback on their efforts. Not only is this motivating, but it also boosts their meager levels of confidence. Descriptive feedback includes more than saying the oft-repeated but vague “Good job!” Specific feedback helps readers build a sense of agency and independence (Johnston, 2004). For example, when a reader makes a miscue, you might say something like:

“Something didn’t make sense, did it? What can you do?”

“As a reader, what should you do?”

When students decode a word, say, “You figured out that tricky word by yourself. How did you figure that out?”

Next, children blossom when they have choices. Perhaps you let them select among books, poems, activities, or writing opportunities, when appropriate. Having that element of choice is motivating in and of itself (Pressley, Dolezal, Raphael, Mohan, Bogner & Roehrig, 2003; Rasinski & Padak, 2004). Most important, you are there to cheer your learners on and to celebrate their successes, large and small. You believe that they can and will succeed.



Create an inviting classroom environment brimming with books.

In addition, take the time to get to know your learners, ask them about their interests, and find out what matters most to them—what makes them tick. Bolster that information with formal and informal assessments to uncover their reading strengths and difficulties. Naturally, the more you know about your students, the easier it will be to scaffold instruction to meet their needs. Think about setting different goals for individual students (Tomlinson, 1999; Wood, 2002). This is a year-long effort as you monitor student growth and adjust materials and expectations accordingly, always with student success uppermost in your mind.

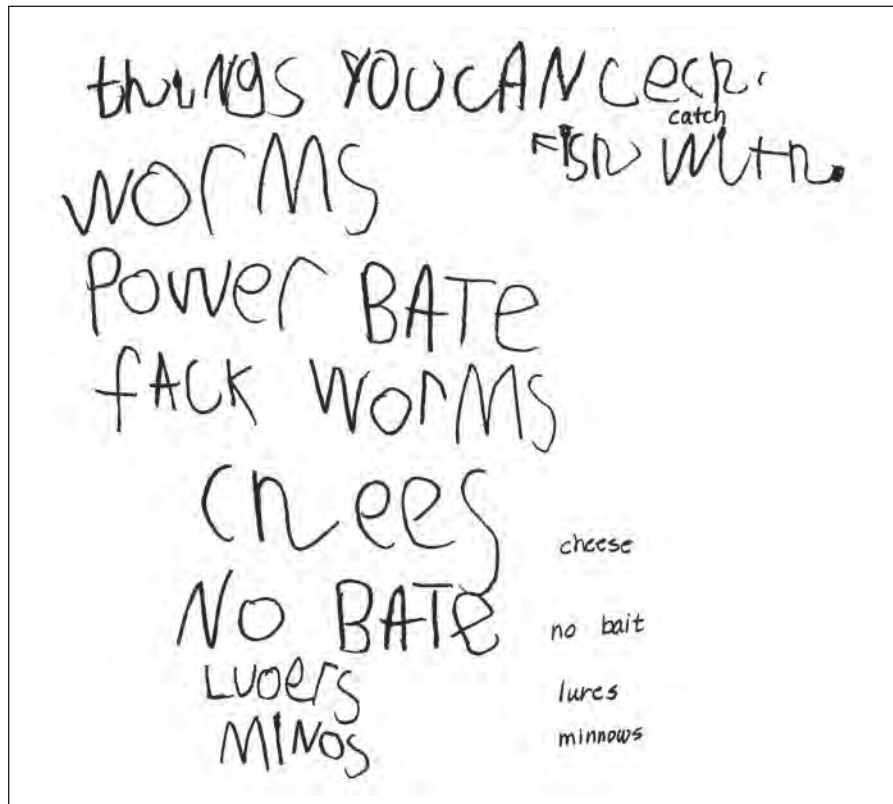
### Struggling Readers Need . . .

- Enthusiastic role models
- Engaging learning materials
- Inviting classroom environments
- Immediate, descriptive feedback
- Frequent opportunities for choice within structure
- Focused instruction tailored to their interests and learning needs

## MOTIVATING INSTRUCTION

One key to designing motivating instruction builds on your knowledge of each student (Brophy & Good, 1986). In the rush to teach everything that is expected, we sometimes forget that we are teaching readers, not a reading program. We are guiding readers, not teaching guided reading lessons. The first step in motivating our students is to use what we know about them to carefully select materials and learning opportunities that capitalize on their background knowledge and curiosities (Gambrell, 2001). For instance, if you have a child like Austin, who loves to go fishing, locate reading materials about fishing and encourage him to write his own list of supplies (right) needed to catch a fish.

How do you create a motivating classroom environment? If you walked into Maria's energy-filled



Provide opportunities for children to read and write about things they enjoy.

Struggling readers are a passion of mine. I've tutored and taught many of them, from K through 5th grades, and have seen them become confident and capable readers (who actually enjoy reading). Part of why I love working with them is that I used to be one. I can remember being in the lowest reading group, mispronouncing words while other students giggled, and hating (and I mean HATING) to read out loud, even in high school! The sweaty palms, my heart beating out of my chest, the butterflies raging war in my stomach, serious doubts in my head—the emotional scars of a struggling reader. I can so