# The PSSA and Poetry

## A Survivor's Guide

*by*

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**Facts**: Poetry is a Reading PSSA target passage type for all grade levels, and it appears on the test at most grade levels.

The PA Academic Standards require the teaching of poetry to all students of all grade levels.

A few words about

# The PA Reading Assessment Anchors and Poetry

Since the PA Academic Standards classify poetry as narrative writing, any Reading Assessment Anchors that apply to narrative apply to poetry, and that includes most of them. There are two reporting categories for the Anchors: "Comprehension and Reading Skills" and "Interpretation and Analysis of Fictional and Nonfictional Text." These reporting categories are the same for grades 3 thru 8 and 11. The Assessment Anchors are also the same. Essentially, the difference is in the Eligible Content on each anchor. Although the required teaching concepts are still basically the same, the level of difficulty increases with each grade level increase. Most of the basic concepts follow:

- multiple meanings
- synonyms/antonyms
- affixes
- context clues
- inferences/conclusions
- main ideas/supporting details
- summarizing
- author's purpose
- identifying, explaining, interpreting, comparing, describing:
  - literary components: character, setting, plot
  - connections between texts
  - literary devices: personification, hyperbole, simile, metaphor, etc.
  - text organization
  - etc.

All of the above concepts can apply to poetry, but please keep in mind that the Assessment Anchors are not the same as the Standards. The Assessment Anchors are simply what might be tested on the PSSA. The Standards contain everything students are expected to learn and everything teachers are expected to teach.

Included on the Assessment Anchors page of the PDE website is a Reading Assessment Anchor Glossary of terms used in the Anchors and the Standards. Although I find some of the definitions lacking in clarity and scope—and some simply not there—the glossary is useful for getting an idea of what many literary terms mean.

The preceding information, it seems to me, begs the question: if everything that applies to narrative also applies to poetry, why be concerned about approaching poetry as a separate concept?

One valid answer, I believe, lies in the idea that poetry often attempts to get at the essence of a thing in a short and focused way that makes it much more necessary for the reader to infer meaning. For example, one of the sixth grade poems from the 2008 PSSA Reading Sampler ("Explorer" by Alan Brownjohn) starts with the lines:

> Two o'clock:
> Let out of the back door of the house, our cat
> practices the snow.

The poet uses the word "practices" in an unusual way, but using words in unusual ways is one of the things poets are more likely to do than other writers. "Practices" in this context contains meaning that must be inferred by the sixth grade reader, and the sixth grade reader needs practice reading poetry in order to do so.

Therefore to help students do well on the poetry aspect of the Reading PSSA, read one poem each day of the school year, taking about a minute to do so, or several if you have the time. That's it. It's that simple. Almost.

**PA Academic Standards and Poetry**

**Standard 1.1 Learning to Read Independently**
This Standard applies to all genres

**Standard1.2 Reading Critically in All Content Areas**
This Standard applies to all genres

**Standard 1.3. Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature**
This Standard applies to all genres. Following are items specifically associated with poetry.

**1.3.3.C.** Identify literary devices in stories. (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, personification).
**1.3.5 C.** Describe how the author uses literary devices to convey meaning.
• Sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliteration)
• Figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole).
**1.3.8.C.** Analyze the effect of various literary devices.
• Sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliteration)
• Figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, allusion).
**1.3.11.C.** Analyze the effectiveness, in terms of literary quality, of the author's use of literary devices.
• Sound techniques (e.g., rhyme, rhythm, meter, alliteration)
• Figurative language (e.g., personification, simile, metaphor, hyperbole, irony, satire)
• Literary structures (e.g., foreshadowing, flashbacks, progressive and digressive time).

**1.3.3.D.** Identify the structures in poetry (e.g., pattern books, predictable books, nursery rhymes).
**1.3.5.D.** Identify and respond to the effects of sound and structure in poetry (e.g., alliteration, rhyme, verse form).
**1.3.8.D.** Identify poetic forms (e.g., ballad, sonnet, couplet).
**1.3.11.D.** Analyze and evaluate in poetry the appropriateness of diction and figurative language (e.g., irony, understatement, overstatement, paradox).

**1.3..3.F.** Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.
**1.3.5.F.** Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.
**1.3.8.F.** Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

**1.3.11.F.** Read and respond to nonfiction and fiction including poetry and drama.

**Standard 1.4. Types of Writing**
Please note that while poetry is classified as narrative, it can also be informational or persuasive.

**1.4.3.A.** Write narrative pieces (e.g., stories, poems, plays).
• Include detailed descriptions of people, places and things.
• Use relevant illustrations.
• Include literary elements (Standard 1.3.3.B.).
**1.4.5.A.** Write poems, plays and multi-paragraph stories.
• Include detailed descriptions of people, places and things.
• Use relevant illustrations.
• Utilize dialogue.
• Apply literary conflict.
• Include literary elements (Standard 1.3.5.B).
• Use literary devices (Standard 1.3.5.C.).
**1.4.8.A.** Write short stories, poems and plays.
• Apply varying organizational methods.
• Use relevant illustrations.
• Utilize dialogue.
• Apply literary conflict.
• Include literary elements (Standard 1.3.8.B.).
• Use literary devices (Standard 1.3.8.C.).
**1.4.11.A.** Write short stories, poems and plays.
• Apply varying organizational methods.
• Use relevant illustrations.
• Utilize dialogue.
• Apply literary conflict.
• Include varying characteristics (e.g., from limerick to epic, from whimsical to dramatic).
• Include literary elements (Standard 1.3.11.B.).
• Use literary devices (Standard 1.3.11.C.).

**Standard 1.5. Quality of Writing:**
All of this Standard applies to poetry

**Standard 1.6. Speaking and Listening:**
All of this Standard applies to poetry.

**A**. Listen to others
**B.** Listen to a selection of literature.
**C.** Speak using skills appropriate to formal speech situations.
**D.** Contribute to discussions.
**E.** Participate in small and large group discussions and presentations.

On Reading Poetry:

"Poetry is meant to be read aloud. Students who hear it as a natural part of every day incorporate it into their language and their lives."

Bernice Cullinan
from *Three Voices: An Invitation to Poetry Across the Curriculum*

On Reading and Writing Poetry:

"Teach your students to read and write poetry, and they will become better readers and writers in all genres."

Me
from experience

On Writing Poetry:

"I worked in public relations for many years, both as a writer of press releases, brochures, reports, and speeches and as a supervisor of other such writers. On the side, I was writing my poetry. A hobby, of course. But the most amazing thing started to happen. The more sand-kicking, arms-crossed, boo-boo lip poems I wrote, the better my speeches became, the better my press releases became, and the more promotions I received. In reflection more than a decade later, I can attribute my business success directly to—of all things—poetry."

Sara Holbrook
from *Practical Poetry: A Nonstandard Approach to Meeting Content-Area Standards*

# How to Read/Perform a Poem

There are no rules, only possibilities. Here's one to get you started:

1) Pick a poem.
2) Practice reading it out loud, if there is time. As you do …
3) Find the rhythm of the poem, or find one of the possible rhythms.
4) Practice some more.
5) Read the poem to your students, keeping the rhythm.
6) Tell them why you read it.
7) Pick another poem, and do the same thing all over again on another day, or when the opportunity arises on the same day.
8) Do the whole thing some other way, but please do it. Daily.

Some thoughts you might keep in mind:

1) You are a model for your students, whether you like it or not. What you do has more of an impact than what you say.
2) It isn't important to be good at performing, it's only important to do it and thus demonstrate to your students that it's worth doing.
3) Students are very forgiving of our shortcomings, unless we try to hide the fact that we have them.
4) Reading is one kind of performance, but performance can be many things.
5) It's usually a good idea to let the poem speak for itself, particularly since the poems on the PSSA will be doing exactly that.
6) Sometimes, ignore what I just said, and go crazy with your performance.
7) Stay flexible.
8) Use your imagination.
9) Learn as you go.
10) Maintain a sense of humor.

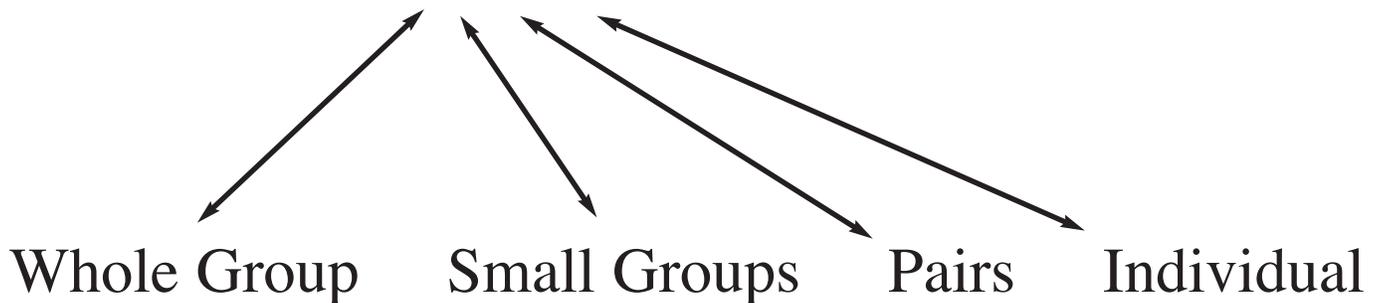# Possible Groupings for Daily Poetry Reading
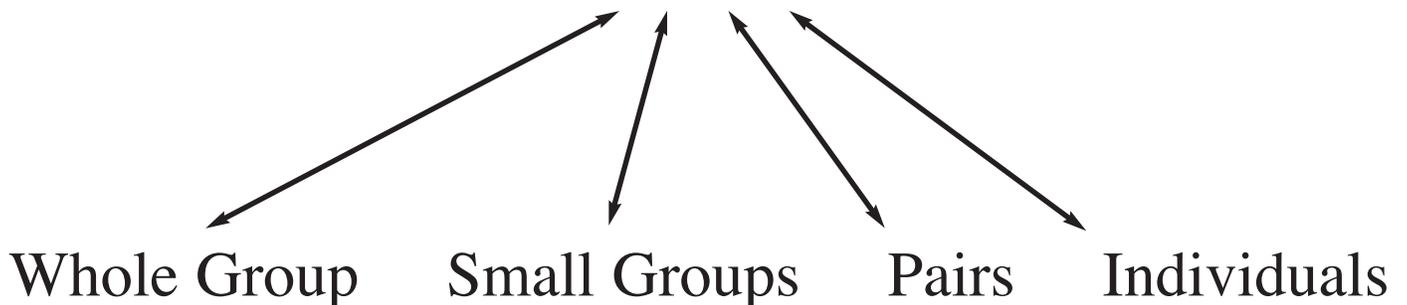## (To-With-By: Paratore Model)

To:

Teacher

With:

Teacher and Student(s)

Whole Group     Small Groups     Pairs     Individual

By:

Students

Whole Group     Small Groups     Pairs     Individuals

To quote an apropos cliche: "Variety is the spice of life,"i.e., mix it up.

**Read Poetry Aloud Daily** (1-5 minutes) **using a To-With-By Approach with an Ongoing Increase in Student Responsibility**

**A Few Suggestions for How to Proceed**:

1) Read your favorites, both rhyming and non-rhyming. At first, read only for enjoyment.

2) Over time, revisit poems that students request or that you choose for a particular reason, e.g., simile, personification, alliteration, rhyme, etc.

3) Over time, start using poetic terms as examples come up in the poems, e.g., here's an example of a simile, this is an example of personification, etc. Discuss what makes them what they are. As they are ready, prompt students before reading by saying things such as: listen for the simile in this poem, tell me where the poet uses alliteration, etc. The point is to make poetic terms a regular part of classroom language not just for poetry but for all genres. Remember that all good writing contains poetic language.

4) Read your own poetry. Sing it , dance it, shout it, whisper it, snap your fingers to it, etc. as seems appropriate. Encourage your students to do the same.

5) Choral read with students: poems they select, poems you select, poems they've written (ask permission first), poems you've written. Allow time for practice if you can.

6) Over time, ask them to practice and read in small groups to the rest of the class.

7) Over time, ask them to practice and read as individuals to a partner or small group.

8) Build up to reading in pairs to the whole class.

9) When you think they're ready, ask them to read as individuals to the class. Allow for individual differences and needs. A circle can make these solo efforts less intimidating with the reader/performer remaining part of the circle.

10) When they're ready, ask them to stand in front of an audience (their class, another class) in small groups, in pairs or as individuals and read/perform their poem(s).

11) Sometimes, lead a discussion on the poem after it is read using questions such as follow:

   a)  Did anything jump out at you in this poem?
   b)  Were there any lines that you particularly liked/disliked?
   c)  Did the poem create/suggest any vivid images/emotions for you?
   d)  Was their anything that confused you?

Try to lead any discussion beyond the questions themselves.  Encourage diversity of thought, and please always ask students to justify/support what they have to say.

12) Occasionally, ask for a written response, a quick write, in which students can write in their writers' notebooks for one to three minutes on any of the questions above or a similar or general prompt. Allow them to share their quickwrites in some way.

13) When you get into the meaning of a poem, please keep in mind that there can be more than one valid interpretation of any piece of writing.  Different students might infer different things. Again, the question is can the individual student justify her point of view with valid support, something she will have to be able to do on the PSSA?

# Bibliography of Trade Books

This list is intentionally short. I recommend that you go to your school library and see what's available there. Variety is what you'll need, and free verse is a vital part of the mix. You'll find lots of rhyming poetry. If you can't find any free verse, scream bloody murder or stomp your feet or some such thing to get the attention of whoever buys the books. Tell them you have to have it for the PSSA and they'll be in big trouble if they don't cooperate and deliver the goods.

The titles listed below are two of my favorites and are mostly free verse. You might have your own. If you're new to the genre, welcome aboard. You're surrounded by a deep pool, and you can swim at any level—and breathe underwater. Jump in.

Dunning, Stephen, Edward Lueders and Hugh Smith, eds. *Reflections on a Gift of Watermelon Pickle… and other modern verse*. New York, NY: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books, 1966.

Lyne, Sanford, ed. *Ten-Second Rainshowers: Poems by Young People*. New York: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 1996.