

Poetry Prompts

Childhood Poem
Dialogue or Two-Voice Poems
Ending Poem
Family Photo or Snapshot Poem
Found Poem
Just Because... Poem
Letter or Epistle Poem
List Poem

Metaphor Poem
Poetry of Place
Pop Lyrics Poem
Random Autobiography Poem
Timely Advice Poem
Where I'm From Poem
Limericks

Childhood Poem

This poem prompt could be a way to focus on a specific event in your own life. You could also write about an event in the life of your novel's main character. Perhaps your character only just mentions something from her/his past; therefore, you might have to use your imagination and make up some details to add richness to your poem. Some possible subjects could be:

- An early apartment or house you lived in
- A relationship with a grandparent (aunt, uncle, cousin)
- A favorite toy broken
- Some kind of lessons (piano, dance, sports)
- Your best friend
- An old picture book
- An early photograph
- An early sports activity
- Running away from home
- A family gathering
- A scary event

Begin by writing down everything that's even remotely about the subject. Try to put yourself physically in that place. Think of the details perceived through the senses — the smell of the movie house, the voice of the coach, the feel of the broken toy. Write a poem and make the memory so authentic that any reader will be able to experience it.

Example:

Grandmother's Visit

by Beth Frost

You walked out of the plane
 Into my room
 And made it your own
 Filled it with yourself —
 The scent of powder,
 The small leather prayer book
 Wrapped in plastic to hold the aging
 Skin, worn and wrinkled.
 I would wake early
 Before the rest were awake
 And know you would be reading.
 I skirted over the cold wood floors
 Held my breath against the stairs' creaks
 And saw the light under the door.
 I climbed under your warm blankets
 And listened.

Dialogue or Two-Voice Poems

From your reading identify dyads of characters, settings or ideas that might argue, discuss or dialogue. Create a discussion between the pair. Let them speak in authentic voices.

Pair with a partner and work together to **create a two-voice poem**. Choose two characters (or concepts) from your book. Improvise a dialogue/argument between these characters. After you get the idea about what the dialogue sounds like, write it in draft form. Without using names, lay it out so that it's clear when the voices change.

Examples:

The Vicar and The Teacher

from *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*
 by Maxx Nanson, student

The clouds are a light gray
 the normal but beautiful color of Kingcome sky.

The clouds are ominous and dreary,
 I grow tired of this place.

Rain starts to fall,
 as much a part of me as my own arm;

Rain starts to fall,
 reflecting my somber mood.

The air is cold,
 feeling clean, fresh, and new.

The air is cold
 and I put on my jacket longing for the warm summer days of my old home

Soon the children will visit me,
 so innocent and curious.

Soon the children will visit me,
 I grow tired of their blank, expressionless faces.

I respect the culture,
 and don't force my beliefs.

I am a teacher,
 and they will learn English.

Life in Kingcome is simple,
 it makes a man realize what his place in life is all about.

Life in Kingcome is boring,
 no man should ever have to come here.

I am an outsider, for I can never truly be a part of the
 I am an outsider, for I will never be one of them

Ending Poem

by Rosario Morales
and
Aurora Levins Morales

I am what I am.
A child of the Americas.
A light-skinned mestiza of the Caribbean.
A child of many diaspora, born into this continent at a crossroads.
I am Puerto Rican. I am U.S. American.
I am New York Manhattan and the Bronx,
A mountain-born, county-bred, homegrown jibara child,
up from the street, a California Puerto Rican Jew.
A product of the New York ghettos I have never known.
I am an immigrant.
and the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants.
We didn't know our forebears' names with a certainty.
They aren't written anywhere.
First names only or *mila*, *negra*, *ne*, *honey*, *sugar*, *dear*.

I come from the dirt where the cane was grown.
My people didn't go to dinner parties. They weren't invited.
I am caribena, island grown.
Spanish is in my flesh, ripples from my tongue, lodges in my hips,
the language of garlic and mangoes.
Boricua. As Boricuas come from the isle of Manhattan.
I am latinoamerica, rooted in the history of my continent.
I speak from that body. Just brown and pink and full of drums inside.

I am not African.
Africa waters the roots of my tree, but I cannot return.

I am not Taina.
I am a late leaf of that ancient tree,
and my roots reach into the soil of two Americas.
Taino is in me, but there is no way back.

I am not European, though I have dreamt of those cities.
Each plate is different.
wood, clay, papier mâché, metals basketry, a leaf, a coconut shell.
Europe lives in me but I have no home there.

Family Photo or Snapshot Poem

On a sheet of paper list 5 to 7 vivid images from the book you are reading.

- Choose one and circle it.
- Describe everything you see, hear, smell in the image.
Include color, texture, time of day or night, season and place.
- Notice something that is in the background. Notice what stands out in the foreground.
- Look for items, actions or expressions that suggest more than surface appearance.

What you have just done is like looking at a photograph. Using the idea of a photograph, recreate a "snapshot" that conveys information about a character. Imagine that you are one of the characters looking at this old photograph. Try to reveal changes between *the then* when the image was taken and *the now* when it is being viewed.

Examples:

Family Album

by Diane Stevenson

¹
A child with only the sun
in her eyes, my sister shields her face,
hand palm out, as if to say no.

²
Alone, the garden behind her fragments
of color, my mother seems to listen.
July, 1947: I am here, too, inside,
as yet invisible, though the sun
must filter through, like blood, to me.
I must be hearing her heart.

³
At two, I sit in the grass,
legs forward, facing the sun.
On the lawn in front of me,
a dark figure approaches,
almost touching my feet.
I look up, blink, and my father
records himself, a shadow,
just out of range.

⁴
Florida, 1960. My sister and I kneel,
behind us three generations of women.
No sort's been born for a hundred years.
Even the palms are graceful women,
and hibiscus opens its wide, red mouth.

Photograph, 1969

by Kay Barber, student

This is my mother
lifting her hair long
like a low whistle
off her neck
These are her fingers
caught in the tangles
of brown and gold caught in
silver earrings
This is my father
reaching through the lens
to touch the edge of a new family
to touch her opening belly
under her full dress

This is existing
before I exist
This is me growing up
against their lives
him watching for a sharp
breath from her
her looking out
onto the boarder of birth
this is bumping us into three

Found Poem

As you read a story or a portion of a story, select words or phrases that stand out to you. They could be sensory words (taste, touch, smell, sound, sight), or they could be words that catch your eye ("dazzling," "grumbling," "deadly," "gossamer," "humming," etc.). Write a **LIST** of these words, collecting as many as you can.

From the list of words you have selected, use as many of those words as needed to create a poem that expresses one of the following choices —

- How you felt about what you read
- How a character may feel about who s/he is or what happened to him/her
- How you responded to an important issue brought out in what you read

Put your list of words and phrases apart. Arrange them in any order and spatial pattern desired to create a poem that comes out of what you just read. Remember that in poetry a line may be repeated several times for emphasis and may be as short as one word. This "found poem" creates an overall impression of the reading selection and may bring out a theme, motif or symbol of a particular work as well as the beauty of the language.

Example, brainstormed by a class after reading an article about poverty.

A house, luxuries, laughter,
money and happiness,
understanding.

Children and pride.
Clean clothes and
a good job.

Is it only a dream?

No dishes. No money.
Flies, worms and poor
diet. Worn out, tired . . .
no hope.

Help us.

A red cloud of shame,
despair, everything destroyed,
a black future.

Death.

Just Because... Poem

After reading these example poems, you might write your own "Just Because..." poem, or you might write a "Just Because..." poem using the voice of a character in your reading.

"Just Because..." poems ask you to describe yourself, or your chosen character. Start line one of each stanza, or verse, with the words "Just because I..." and finish with a short statement of something true about you, or the character. The next three lines tell what you (or the character) are NOT or how you would or would not like your readers to respond to who you are. The last line of the poem repeats the first line but ends with a tag directing the reader to do something for you. Try to write at least two or three stanzas.

Student Examples:

Just because I'm scared
Don't laugh and giggle behind my head
Don't kid and play when I'm not there
Still ask me because I might play

Just because I'm scared
It doesn't mean I can't do it
It doesn't give you the right to talk about me
It doesn't stop me from having fun

Just because I'm scared
Still tell me everything you did
Can't wait until I get big

Just because I'm scared — please try to be my friend
— Brandon Womack (Grade 10)

Just because I'm an only child
I'm not a freak
I'm not shy

Just because I'm an only child
I'm not lonely
I'm not selfish
I'm not spoiled

Just because I'm an only child
I know I'm not perfect
I can't always be the best friend
I'm not a nerd

Just because I'm an only child — let me be me.
— Liz Webster (Grade 9)

Letter or Epistle Poem

A poem of address may name someone or imply a listener. It may address someone not present. It resembles the conversations we sometimes carry on in our heads, but it is crafted to clearly make a point. It is both intimate and instant — the feeling genuine, but the true audience not necessarily the person addressed since we read the letter-poem. In a way it is like a soliloquy in a play, a monologue.

Examples:

This Is Just to Say
by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox
and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

#5
by Dan Gerber

Another winter morning
I'm expecting your call
I stand close to the window and watch
my breath form a rose on the glass
I scratch your name on it
then wipe it away with my sleeve
listening for your tires
to crunch through the ice on the drive
I notice how snow glistens on the pine boughs
that there's no wind at all
it's too cold for my walk
Nothing dares disturb this stillness
I know you aren't coming
I press my cheek to the window
The telephone rings
My breath forms a rose on the glass

Write **two letter poems** from different characters in the materials you are reading.
Prewrite:

- List 3 or 4 times in the story that your character might construct a letter.
- Decide audience. Which character is receiving this letter?

Write:

- Have the letter writer draft a note to the addressee. The letter-writer's voice should be true to that character.
- Then begin to work this note into poetry form. Focus on imagery and line breaks.

Repeat this process for the second letter from a different character.
Some ideas for either poem:

- Write a poem in answer to a question you imagine a character asking.
- Write a poem telling the addressee something you (the character) want to say but would have a hard time telling directly.
- Write a poem suggesting some secret connection in a mysterious way.

List Poem

A list or catalogue poem is **simply an itemization of things or events**. The catalogue may be embellished, selected or arranged for rhythm and sound. Poet Walt Whitman used lists in many of his poems, as did Allen Ginsburg in *Howl*. Gary Snyder has a set of poems including "Things to Do in Portland." Ted Berrigan uses everyday items in his poems such as "10 Things I Do Every Day."

Using details from the novel you are reading, choose a character (persona) and try a list poem to catalogue "Things to Do in _____." Fill in the blank with the place where some or most of your novel occurs. Or, try a list poem entitled "Things I Love about _____" (again the place name) or "Things I Did When I Was _____" (age of the character whose point of view you're using).

Example:

Things to Do around Portland
by Gary Snyder

Go walk along the Sandy when the smelt run
Drink Buttermilk at the Buttermilk Corner.
Walking over Hawthorne Bridge the car tires sing
Take the trolley out to Sellwood when cherries are in bloom.
Hiking the woods below Council Crest, a treehouse high in a Douglas
fir near the medical school.
Bird watching and plant hunting on Sauvie Island in May.
Vine maple leaves in the slopes above St. John's Bridge in autumn.
Wading the Columbia out to sandbars
Himalayan blackberries tangle at the base of steel high-tension Bonneville
transmission tower

your fingers stained —

Get married in Vancouver, without the three-day wait.
Cash paychecks at the Pastime
Beer in Ericson's, hamburgers at
Tic Tock.
Led down narrow corridors of Court House, City Hall, the newspapers,
the radios, the jail
Parking in the Park blocks
Sunburned skiing
Shivering at the ocean
Standing in the rain.

Metaphor Poem

Create a metaphor / simile that describes / explains one of the main characters in your book. Remember that a metaphor is a comparison between two **unlike** things in which **no** word of comparison is used. Remember that a simile is a comparison of two **unlike** things in which a word of comparison (like or as) is used. To create your metaphor,

- Draw the metaphor first.
- Next write a poem, based on your metaphor.

Examples, based on students reading The Color Purple.

Celle
by Lila Johnson, student

I am a record
on your shelf
the one
dressed
in dust and age
I'll
of cracked songs
you play
when you are blue
the one
pushed
behind the others
cool black jackets
smooth golden sounds
the one
your liquor-heavy fingers
finds
on days
your red water eyes
don't know the difference
just an old record
you play me
when you are blue.

Celle
by Donald Pendleton, student

I am Celle
I am the cold hard black floor
everyone walked on
People stained me
but I stayed solid under them
and did not squeak
I am the floor now but once you go downstairs
I become the ceiling

Olinka
by Omar Hanson, student

I was the rooftop plant you killed,
replaced with rubber.
I was the village you plowed over,
replaced with asphalt.
I was the quiet you destroyed,
replaced with smoldering bulldozers.
I was the children playing in the sun,
chased away, replaced with apathetic workers.
I was the land stolen, for which you gave nothing,
replaced with nothing.
I was the Olinka people.

Poetry of Place

Place can be a physical landscape, the sweep of the land, the vegetation, waterways, or buildings. It can inform your state of mind, create or reflect feelings, identify your background, ethnicity and even social class. Certain places may hold memories of specific events.

Choose a place that is **important to one of the characters** and create a poem using images and details from the text that **show** the place and that **reveal** the character's **feeling** for that place.

Examples:

Home
by Robert Winner

My heart and my bones wince,
it's so damn sad-looking
and ugly, the Bronx —
driving past those small hills
blighted for miles with bleak
six-story desert-like apartment
buildings—the landscape I come from.
It's so damn ugly in its torment
of knifings and fires, I forget
I was happy there sometimes
in its damp and dingy streets, living my life
with the five continents of the world
in my mind's eye.

Maybe it was beautiful before us:
the coast with no landfill
a bluffed peninsula of swamps and forests,
a wilderness that became another wilderness
—beds and linoleum, school books,
musty hallways, laughter, despondency—
unremembering earth, a riverbed
millions flowed on, clinging briefly
to some masonry, then gone . . .

The 1st
by Lucille Clifton

What I remember about that day
is boxes stacked across the walk
and couch springs curling through the air
and drawers and tables balanced on the curb
and us, hollering,
leaping up and around
happy to have a playground;

nothing about the emptied rooms
nothing about the emptied family

The Tropics in New York
by Claude McKay

Bananas ripe and green, and gingerroot
Cocoa in pods and alligator pears,
And tangerines and mangoes and grapefruit,
Fit for the highest prize at parish fairs.
Set in the window, bringing memories
Of fruit trees laden by low-singing rills
And dewy dawns, and mystical blue skies
In benediction over nun-like hills.

My eyes grew dim, and I could no more gaze;
A wave of longing through my body swept,
And, hungry for the old, familiar ways,
I turned aside and bowed my head and wept.

Pop* Lyrics Poem

Imagine you are one of the characters in the story you read, perhaps even one of the "supporting" characters — someone whose opinions, thoughts and feelings might not have come out very often or clearly.

Transport your chosen character into modern times and imagine that s/he is riding in a car, or walking in a store, or listening to the radio somewhere. A song comes on . . . The character picks up the words of the song and starts to think, to remember. The character's thoughts drift away to . . . memories, images — strong images. Write down those thoughts of the character. The character would let them weave and dip, listening to the verses of the song, then remembering again, reflecting, seeing, feeling.

After you've written down the character's reflections, create a poem with them. Put part of the song lyrics on the left side of your paper and the character's poem on the right.

Example:

In *Ricochet River*, a novel by Oregon writer Robin Cody, the 18-year-old son leaves home at the end of high school for college. This is what came up for his mother as the radio played a Whitney Houston song.

I Will Always Love You by Dolly Parton

If I should stay,
I would only be in your way.
So I'll go, but I know
I'll think of you
Every step of the way.

...memories
That is all I'm taking with me.

I hope life treats you kind,
And I hope you have all you dreamed of,
And I wish you joy and happiness.
But above all this,
I wish you love.

And I will always love you . . .
I will always love you . . .
I will always love you . . .

Empty Nest by a mother

My journey slows.
Son,
Yours begins.
I drive north.
You stay south.
Sun flashes on metal
like thousands of electronic explosions
album after album
of you —

You throw a stone into the water —
Your candles blown out, another birthday —
You hitting, kicking, throwing, dribbling balls —
You and a beach chair and a book —
There, we huddle near the tree lights —
There, hand in hand, we walk into kindergarten —
I walk out, a tissue for solace.

Years later I still move away.
Now you will come to visit.
I'll wash the sheets and towels.
Yellow stripe speeds beside me
and I warn to my companion,
Memory.

Random Autobiography Poem

Today we're making lists of things we've done in our lives. Lists are the building blocks of poetry, and from these lists, we will write autobiographical poems.

- List the names of towns and states you've visited or lived in. Put a note about what you saw or did there.
- List animals you've touched or petted. When? Where? What did it feel like?
- List the historic events you've witnessed. These can be neighborhood, city, state, national or world events.
- List things you've lost — including people, animals and "baby bracelets."
- List some odd things you've experienced — like eating a spider or kissing a frog.
- List places where you shopped and things that you bought.
- List just a few favorites — a piece of music, a color, a smell, a specific flower, whatever comes to mind.

Combining some of the opening lines below as "starter dough" with ideas in your lists, write and shape a poem about yourself.

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|------------------|
| • I was the expected (or unexpected) | • I learned |
| • I've held | • I've heard |
| • I lost | • I've had some |
| • I tell you sincerely | • I saw |
| • I once screamed | • I once |
| • Twice | • And only one |
| • And twice | • I have |
| • I bought | • I will testify |
| • I've been scared | • I have stories |
| • The smell of | • I have shopped |
| • I love | • Now I |
| • I'm | • I found |

And naturally, we will read these out loud.

* Any recent song in any form of music is fine as long as the language is **appropriate** to the classroom, especially the classroom walls where your writing will be displayed. Pop does not mean Top 40. Pop means popular with your character.

Examples:

Random Autobiography by Greg Birnbaum, student

I have been to India
where I saw wild monkeys
climb big trees.
I have been to Yellowstone
where I saw buffalo follow
my footsteps.
I have touched dogs that bite
and snakes that kill.

I have lost trust and respect.
I have lost friends and family.
I have found hope and dreams.
I have found knowledge and wisdom.

I have seen the sun set from
Bull Mountain in Montana.
I was the expected killer
in the game of Clue.

I've held a first born baby
in my hands,
then I gave her back to my sister.

I've heard rock and rap,
oldies and new age.
I've been mean to my friends,
and then said, "I'm sorry."

I saw myself with a gun,
but didn't like the control,
and put it down.

I once gave advice to a friend
but got yelled at because
it wasn't what she wanted to hear.

I've driven through a rain storm
with my mother,
sick
in the passenger seat.

Twice I lost my house keys,
only I found them hours later.

And only once have I been in love,
but now it's over,
and I'm not sure if I even was.

Timely Advice Poem

Read the example of an advice poem below. Then chose an important character from the book you are reading and give that character several pieces of advice about how to live his or her life. If you have trouble getting started, then try using the first two words of McBride's poem.

A Little Bit of Timely Advice by Mekeel McBride

Time you
put on blue shoes, high-
heeled, sequined, took
yourself out
dancing.

You been
spending too
much time crying
salty dead-fish
lakes into
soup spoons.

holding
look-alike
contests with doom. Baby,
you need to be moving. Ruin
ruins itself, no
use unplanning

your garden.
Crank up the old
radio into lion-looking-
for-food music; or harmonica
all indigo fanning
up sunrise.

you say
you got no
makings for a song?
Sing anyway. Best
music's the stuff comes
rising out of nothing.

Pokeberries by Ruth Stone

I started out in the Virginia mountains
with my grandmother's pansy bed
and my Aunt Maud's dandelion wine.
We lived on greens and back-fat and biscuits.
My Aunt Maud scrubbed right through the linoleum.
My daddy was a northerner who played drums
and chewed tobacco and gambled.
He married my mama on the rebound.
Who would want an ignorant girl with red hair?
They took a Pullman up to Indianapolis
and someone stole my daddy's wallet.
My whole life has been stained with pokeberries.
No man seemed right for me. I was awkward
until I found a good wood-burning stove.
There is no use asking what it means.
With my first piece of ready cash I bought my own
place in Vermont; kerosene lamps, dirt road.
I'm slicking here like a porcupine up a tree.
Like the one our neighbor shot. Its bones and skin
hung there for three years in the orchard.
No amount of knowledge can shake my grandma out of
or my Aunt Maud; or my mama, who didn't just bite an apple
with her big white teeth. She split it in two.

Where I'm From Poem

This poem prompt could be a way to reveal your own history, but in this case you are going to use it to **reveal information about a character in the novel you are reading**. If you do not know much about the character's past, you could write the poem using what you **do know** and then adding details and information that you **create**. Whatever you create, however, needs to be "true" to the character we see in the novel.

Read the following "Where I'm From" poem by George Ella Lyon.

- Analyze the device to "link the poem forward," i.e. a repeating line or phrase.
- Analyze the details, images and figures of speech

I am from clothespins,
from Clorox and carbon-tetrachloride,
I am from the dirt under the back porch.
(Black, glistening
it tasted like beets.)
I am from the forsythia bush,
the Dutch elm
whose long gone limbs I remember
as if they were my own.

I am from fudge and eyeglasses,
from Imogene and Alafair.
I'm from the know-it-alls
and the pass-it-ons,
from perk up and pipe down,
I'm from the restorath my soul
with a cottonball tambo
and ten verses I can say myself.

I'm from Artemus and Billie's Branch,
fried corn and strong coffee.
From the finger my grandfather lost
to the auger
the eye my father shut to keep his sight.
Under my bed was a dress box
spilling old pictures,
a sift of lost faces
do drift beneath my dreams.
I am from those moments —
snapped before I budded —
leaf-fall from the family tree.

Based on a character from the novel you are reading, create lists of

- items found around the character's home
- items found in the yard
- items found in the neighborhood
- sayings
- names of relatives, especially ones that link to the character's past
- names of foods/dishes/games/drinks from family gatherings
- names of places from your character's childhood memories

Write a draft which uses some kind of link or phrase like "I am from" to weave the poem together. End the poem with a line or two that ties the present to the past.

LIMERICKS

A *limerick* is a five-line poem written with one *couplet* and one *triplet*. If a couplet is a two-line rhymed poem, then a triplet would be a three-line rhymed poem. The rhyme pattern is a a b b a with lines 1, 2 and 5 containing three beats and rhyming, and lines 3 and 4 having two beats and rhyming. Some people say that the limerick was invented by soldiers returning from France to the Irish town of Limerick in the 1700's.

Limericks are meant to be funny. They often contain *hyperbole*, *onomatopoeia*, *idioms*, *puns*, and other figurative devices. The last line of a good limerick contains the PUNCH LINE or "heart of the joke." As you work with limericks, remember to have pun, I mean FUN! Say the following limericks out loud and clap to the rhythm.

A flea and a fly in a *flue*
Were caught, so what could they *do*?
Said the fly, "Let us *flee*."
"Let us fly," said the flea.
So they flew through a flaw in the *flue*.

-Anonymous

You will soon hear the distinctive beat pattern of all limericks. The rhythm is just as important in a limerick as the rhyme. Try completing this limerick.

There once was a pauper named Meg
Who accidentally broke her _____,
She slipped on the _____,
Not once, but thrice
Take no pity on her, I _____.

Creating Limericks

1. Practice the rhythm of limericks by clapping you hands or snapping your fingers.
2. Think of some funny names, places, or situations.
3. Using the a a b b a 5-line form, write an original limerick.
4. How would you illustrate the page if your poem were published in a book of limericks? What types of art would you use?

- **Hyperbole:** an exaggeration or overstatement for emphasis. ("My brother had a cow when I...")
- **Onomatopoeia:** use of words whose sound makes you think of its meaning (buzz)
- **Idioms:** a phrase or expression that means something different from what the words actually say. ("A horse of a different color.")
- **Puns:** a play on words. The words used in a pun may sound the same, but they have different meanings. ("...we all scream for ice cream.")