

## Jack Wilde’s Lesson on Distinguishing Poetry and Prose

Like many other middle level students, the children in New Hampshire teacher Jack Wilde’s fifth-grade class have had limited experience with poetry. So Jack’s first priority—starting at the beginning of the school year—is to immerse his students in the genre.

One day each week, Jack has the children choose their reading from a poetry cart—a selection of 75 to 80 books Jack keeps in his classroom. The students also collect personal anthologies, selecting poems they want to own, and, occasionally, memorize. By the time they start writing poems, they know that poetry is more than rhyming words. They’ve begun to think about what’s possible in poetry that’s not possible in prose.

Jack begins his formal unit on writing poetry late in the school year. The first activity—a class discussion on what makes a poem a poem—requires the students to draw upon the experiences they’ve had reading poetry over the past eight months.

For *Write in the Middle*, Jack shares a mini-lesson on the differences between poetry and prose based on the model “The Truth About Why I Love Potatoes” by Mekeel McBride.

### Instructional Goals

Jack’s lesson helps students to:

- Distinguish between poetry and prose
- Analyze pattern in poetry
- Apply a poetic model to their own writing

### Materials

#### Featured Poem

- “The Truth About Why I Love Potatoes” by Mekeel McBride (from *Deepest Part of the River*, Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 2001. ISBN: 0887483410)

#### Additional Models

- “Ode to Pablo’s Tennis Shoes” by Gary Soto (from *Neighborhood Odes*, New York: Harcourt, 1992. ISBN: 0152568794)
- “Child on Top of a Greenhouse” by Theodore Roethke (from *Reflections on the Gift of a Watermelon Pickle... and Other Modern Verse*, Stephen Dunning, Editor, New York: HarperCollins, 1967. ISBN: 0688412319)
- “The Base Stealer” by Robert Francis (from *Reflections on the Gift of a Watermelon Pickle*)
- Numerous poems by previous fifth-grade students

Jack also makes books from his poetry cart available to his students during the lesson.

### **Description of the Lesson**

Jack begins his lesson by having his students read Mekeel McBride's poem "The Truth About Why I Love Potatoes" silently. Then he asks for volunteers to take turns reading each of the poem's stanzas.

After they have read "Why I Love Potatoes," Jack leads the students in a discussion of the poem. Specifically, he asks them to consider what features make it different than a prose piece about potatoes. As the children talk, Jack puts their ideas up on the board.

Next Jack gives the students a similar subject—chicken—and asks them each to write a stanza about it. The children share their quick writes, which will eventually be compiled into a class poem. In subsequent classes, the students choose their own subjects for poems based on the model.

Jack usually teaches a related lesson geared toward helping his students understand the differences between poetry and prose. He begins by using the overhead projector to model several poems written by previous fifth-graders. The poems demonstrate a layering technique Jack's students use during the drafting stage of writing poetry. After the students write the first draft of a poem, they write a second one without looking at the first. Then they write a third without looking at the first two, and so on. Students discover that the first draft or two are often prose, but by the fourth or fifth draft, their writing is approaching poetry.