

**Lessons in a Poetry Unit:
Touchstone Texts
Punctuation in Poetry
Characteristics of Poems**

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Background

Early in their poetry genre study, Latosha asked her third-graders to compare poetry and prose. The students also brainstormed independently and as a class about the different types of poems and the characteristics of poetry (rhythm, shape, repetition, rhyme, etc.). Their ideas were recorded on chart paper.

Now Latosha is ready to introduce the poems that she will use as “touchstone texts.” (A touchstone text is chosen by the teacher to use for multiple lessons and reasons throughout one or many units of study. Students don’t have to be able to read touchstone texts independently because the text is shared among all the students and the teacher.)

Latosha selects “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes and *Meet Danitra Brown*, a collection of poetry by Nikki Grimes. She chooses these for several reasons: She wants her students exposed to poems written by both men and women, the poems have many teachable features, and they are especially meaningful to her. Latosha will use these touchstone texts for different purposes throughout the poetry unit; in this lesson, she is pointing out how poets use punctuation to affect the way a poem is read.

Instruction and Activities

Mini-Lesson on Using Punctuation Marks in Poetry

Before Latosha reads “Mother to Son” to the class, she provides some brief background information about Langston Hughes. After the students listen to “Mother to Son,” Latosha shows them the following lines, written on a large sentence strip with the colon in red ink:

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Latosha rereads the lines on the sentence strip aloud, modeling how the reader pauses at certain punctuation marks. She points to the colon and asks the students to identify what it is and what it does. Then she reads the sentence aloud again — with the students — pausing again at the colon.

Next, after giving the students background information about Nikki Grimes, Latosha reads the poem “Purple” to them. She shows them a second sentence strip to highlight Grimes’s use of the colon and the exclamation point:

There’s just no mistake about it: Purple’s what Danitra loves!

She reads the line aloud with the appropriate pacing and expression, points out the punctuation marks, and then repeats it with the students reading along.

After the whole-class lesson, Latosha has the students look at two or three poems from baskets she has filled with poems and poetry books and note how the poets use punctuation marks.

Mini-Lesson on Feeling Poems and Seeing Poems

On the following day, Latosha begins her poetry study by reviewing the characteristics of poetry and the different types of poems. Then she introduces two categories of poetry: “feeling” poems (poems that deal primarily with emotions) and “seeing” poems (poems that use words to paint a picture in the reader’s mind).

The third-graders sort the poems in the baskets into two piles: feeling and seeing. Next, Latosha asks them to work in small groups to discuss whether “Mother to Son” is a feeling or a seeing poem and why. The groups report back what they have discovered to the whole class.

What’s Next

The poetry unit unfolds over a period of more than two weeks. Further lessons in the unit include “surprising” words, poetry and shape, rhythm, “finding” poems in stories, illustrating poems, introducing metaphors and similes, and close observation of objects and the larger environment as fuel for poetry. The unit culminates with a poetry celebration in which students choose to share at least one poem and create a picture to go with it. The students present their poems to an audience of their parents, the principal, and other classes.