

## Tips from 2019 Teacher Trailblazer Gagandeep Chaggar

1. **Draw on your students' real life experiences** – use their own experiences and memories as a springboard for detailed imagery and emotions. They may think they don't have an exciting life but poetry can be about little moments that create strong emotions and they have all definitely felt strong emotions at some point. I always include a lesson where students write an autobiographical poem using the sentence stem 'I am...' and model this with a poem I have written myself in that style about my own self and life.
2. **Pick a theme for the lesson** – this will help the students who tend to get carried away with their ideas. It will ground them and allow them to concentrate on concrete details and ideas in their poems. Depending on the theme, use as many visuals as possible to inspire students.
3. **'Close your eyes'** – I used to write with an author in a First Story workshop and he used to tell us to close our eyes when we were recalling memories or conjuring ideas for imagery and poems. It ended up being the name of our anthology when we published our work and has always stuck with me. The calm and individual space this simple instruction can create is invaluable when teaching poetry.
4. **Teach students the importance of a drafting process** – I usually write a poem which is an acceptable (but not exceptional) standard but then spend some time getting students to work together to improve it. You could even explain how students should improve it. For example, one group vary the punctuation for effect, one group upgrade the vocabulary, one group extend the imagery and so on. This will hopefully give them ideas of what to look out for when trying to redraft and improve their poems. See below for how to use free writing in the drafting process.
5. **Free writing** – allow students opportunities to just write and not think too much. Use the 'Close your eyes' method, a theme and/or visuals to build ideas and vocabulary then challenge them not to take their pen off the page for longer than a few seconds and just write for a set time. Even if they are just writing reams of nonsense, this approach can help convey pure emotions and images which they can then pick out to develop in the redrafting process.
6. **Model poetry writing using some of your favourite as well as least favourite poems** – it is really important to expose students to different voices, themes, styles and vocabulary with the hope that they will be inspired by at least one of them. I always try and ground the poems in experience. For example, I start the unit with a poem called 'Rainbow' by John Agard and before reading, I explain where I was when I first read it and why it is so important to me. This helps students realise that poems can be about the experience of reading as well as writing them. You could ask them what kind of experience they want their reader to have.
7. **Enjoy it!** Get students to experiment with ways of expressing themselves. Use smells as stimuli. Use videos of experiences as stimuli. Use detailed pictures as stimuli. Use the space of the room and get students moving around. Use musical instruments to create rhythm. Use different forms of poetry to write. Use different poets to model poetry writing.

## Tips from 2018 Teacher Trailblazer Lyndsey Chand

1. **Set time limits – and stick to them** – I tend to give students no more than eight minutes per task. This forces them to write SOMETHING and, in a strange way,

removes the pressure – after all, no one can write a masterpiece in eight minutes. It's amazing what students can come up with in this time, though

2. **Set a warm up exercise**– No P.E. teacher would expect students to play a match without warming up, and minds need warm up time too! I often set an automatic writing exercise, giving students a prompt phrase or word and three minutes to write about it. It doesn't matter what they write, and if they run out of ideas, they can just write the prompt word over and over – the only rule is that they can't stop writing. I like to then ask each student to read out a word or phrase they have written, to build up their confidence in sharing their work.
3. **Write with your students**– If you set them a task, complete it yourself at the same time. If you expect them to read their work at the end, read yours as well – and talk them through it, pointing out the bits that you found difficult or still aren't happy with. It's also great to visually show them your writing so that they can see where you have messily scribbled ideas, or edited as you were writing.
4. **Teach students to draft and redraft**– If possible, arrange one-to-one or small group tutorials to give specific feedback on their work. Model the drafting progress (using your own writing, if you feel brave!)
5. **Expose students to great poetry**– Use this to inspire and stimulate their writing. Show them a range of poems, including those you think are 'too hard' for them. Include a variety of forms, genres and poets. This will encourage students to raise their game and broaden their poetry toolkit (as well as being enjoyable!!)
6. **Celebrate students' work**–This might take the form of praise after a reading, or a school poetry anthology. Perhaps students could read their work at a school event, or have some published in a school magazine. Show them that poetry is important and worthwhile within your school community!

### **Tips from 2018 Teacher Trailblazer Fran Pridham**

1. **Research isn't cheating** – If you want to include a snake in your poem use the internet to find pictures and facts on snakes. Find a snake in a local zoo and take notes. All these things will improve the specific detail in your poem.
2. **Ask a friend to read your poem aloud** – so you can hear what it sounds like. If it doesn't sound right, change it.
3. **A poem evolves** – After writing put your poem away for a time and then review it later with fresh eyes.
4. **Join a writers' group** – If you'd like other people to read your work, whether this means being published or winning a competition, ask others for honest feedback.

### **Tips from 2017 Teacher Trailblazer Joanne Bowles**

1. **Don't keep poetry in the classroom.** Use everyday spaces such as corridors, toilet doors and even outside spaces. Keep it fresh and relevant by updating the poems on display. Use a variety of poems past and present. Engaging students with witty, short poems is just as relevant as exposing them to Sassoon and Keats. Display poems written by your students in eye-catching attractive displays. Think outside the box in how the poems are displayed. Use props to engage all the senses.
2. **Create poetry bookmarks which you can give out during poetry week.** Every time someone borrows a book from the library give them a poem – link this to the theme of National Poetry Day, or some of your 'school themes'.

3. **Open their eyes to what poetry actually is.** Many students will recognise rap and grime and find this accessible. The same applies to song lyrics. Give them the current number one with the title missing and read it aloud as a poem. Once you have got students listening to this and beginning to break it down and analyse it, then you have them hooked and more willing to tackle 'heavier' works.
4. **Be honest yourself and be prepared to share your tastes with the students.** Hold a poetry reading during lunchtime and invite staff members and students to read aloud their favourite poems. Get them to say why this poem is their favourite.

### **Tips from 2017 Teacher Trailblazer Kate Brackley**

1. **Write with the students.** Teachers always say how easy it is to write a poem, so complete the task with your students and be the first to share.
2. **Use poetry to get to know your students.** The first thing I ask my Year 7 class to do is write a Furniture Poem about themselves. It gives you a real insight into the new students in front of you and allows them to see more than one side of you if you take part too.
3. **Use poetry in every scheme of work.** Haikus are great for focusing descriptions, and a villanelle in the voice of Ophelia, for example, develops an insightful understanding of the character.

### **Tips from 2015 & 2016 Teacher Trailblazer Donna Kedward**

1. **Read poetry for pleasure.** Don't always introduce poetry into the classroom as a form of 'work'. Start or finish the lesson with a poem that has recently caught your attention and explain to the students why. I always find that standing at the front and performing poetry engages the students and they see it as fun and entertaining.
2. **Create displays.** Always display a variety of students' poetry around the classroom and in corridors. Use vibrant images to put alongside them and soon enough, you will find people reading them and commenting on them. You could create a space for comments; naming the poems they like and why. When students see people praising their work, they will enjoy the success and it will encourage them.
3. **Use visual stimuli.** This is particularly helpful if your students find it hard to think creatively. Often, I display an image on the board. Encourage students to mind-map words, feelings and emotions the images create and when they have a page of effective vocabulary, the thought of writing poetry becomes less daunting. Additionally, use objects that the students can touch and smell and encourage them to focus on the senses.
4. **Create a certain atmosphere.** Try playing music and soft sounds in the classroom. I often play music when the students enter and they immediately engage with their surroundings. When writing poems with themes of nature, play sounds from forests, the sea etc. Get the students to close their eyes and put their head on the desk and allow them to listen carefully. They become more involved and often, effective phrases and vocabulary come to their minds and they become excited by this.
5. **Be passionate at all times!** Students thrive off your passion. If you are keen and excited by the words that you read – they will too!
6. **Experiment with structure.** This is important as it seems to be what students find more challenging. Introduce poems that have interesting structures and explore the reasons behind enjambment, caesura and the forms they are written in. I use a bell that students ring for every punctuation mark when I read the poem out loud. Link this to

pace and speed and how it can represent certain things in the poem. Students can then experiment with structure in their own poems.

### **Tips from 2015 & 2016 Teacher Trailblazer Ben Bransfield**

1. **Poetry now.** Expose your students to what is being published at the moment and give them, and yourself, syllabus pit-stops: get your department or library to order in a leading magazine such as *The North* or *The Rialto*, copies of the latest [Foyle Young Poets or Forward anthologies](#), or find competition winning poems online that you like. Read them out loud, lots of them. Pause for students' responses but don't get bogged in dissection – read multiple new poems for pleasure in the precious time you have with them. Try shadowing the TS Eliot Prize with one of your sets or with just a few students.
2. **Written feedback.** Isn't it a delight to collect in a batch of poems rather than a stack of essays? We perhaps owe it to our students to be more concrete in our annotations, though, and to take their poems as seriously as their coursework: don't be afraid to suggest line breaks, the removal of words that aren't earning their keep, to challenge abstract nouns, lazy adverbs, where you think a poem might better start or end. Keep suggestions in service of the students' own voice, pinpoint and praise imaginative leaps in sound and imagery. Not only will they appreciate your attention, but suddenly creative writing just got important: in fact, isn't it as necessary to their toolkit as anything else? Deliver your feedback on a post-it, a postcard; suggest another poem to a student that he alone might enjoy – or attach it with a paperclip. Whatever you can make time for.
3. **Next draft.** As students increasingly move through syllabuses at breakneck speed, returning to edit old 'completed' poems can be a fascinating reflective exercise that might initially be met with grumbles. As poets, we might leave first drafts alone for a month or more and yet as teachers we might unhelpfully be suggesting to students that all can be polished in one homework because-we-need-to-move-on; using a lesson to model the redrafting process on last term's long-forgotten poem can help students to learn patience, to practise creative development, and to manage perfectionism.
4. **Marketplace.** If you make students read out their own poems one by one – are they always actively listening to each other or just waiting in boredom or terror for their turn? Abandon pens, chairs, and let your students move freely around the space for at least twenty minutes to read peers' poetry left on tables; participate alongside them, insist on silence, and you can effectively turn your lesson into an exhibition, an event. Open a discussion afterwards about what the students enjoyed; send them out of the room on that positive high.
5. **Share with your team.** In department meetings, share poems that you have discovered, and poetry writing lessons that have gone well. Forward plan and dedicate some departmental time, perhaps even whole school INSET, to sharing best practice with your colleagues. If you champion creative writing at your school then other teachers might be inspired to follow your lead and ultimately more students will benefit. Ask your maths department to demonstrate the possible permutations of a sonnet as a starter, align your poetry stimuli for a week with the science syllabus: forge completely unexpected cross-curricular links to show students and to remind parents that poetry permeates everything.