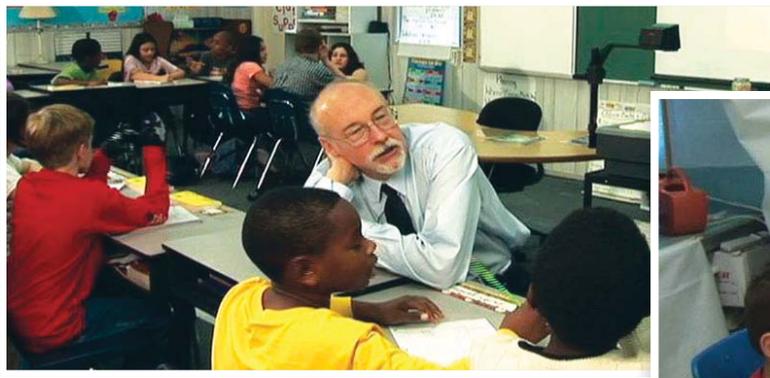
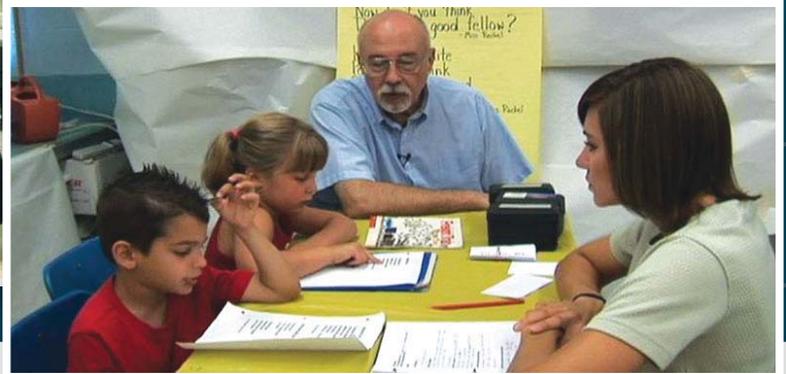


# What's The Perfect Text for Struggling Readers? Try Poetry!

by Timothy Rasinski and Belinda Zimmerman



Rasinski and Zimmerman with students



Belinda Zimmerman was walking down the school hallway when second grader Zach popped out of his classroom. He went directly up to her and asked, “Mrs. Z, want to hear me read my new poem that Mr. Rasinski wrote?”

“Absolutely,” replied Belinda with a broad smile. She walked Zach to a quiet area in the hall and asked Zach to perform. After a brief cough to clear his throat, Zach held out the paper containing his poem and in his best expressive voice read:

There’s a long sunny season called summer.  
When it’s over kids say, “What a bummer!”  
It’s soon time for school  
Which can be awfully cool  
If you don’t want to get any dummer!

Belinda chuckled, put her arm around Zach, and told him how well she thought he read his poem. She asked if she could see the written poem and smiled when she saw the last word. She asked Zach if that word was spelled correctly. Blushing just a little, he indicated that it wasn’t spelled correctly, but that the poet wanted that last word to rhyme with summer and bummer. Belinda then walked Zach to an adjoining waiting room and asked him to perform the poem again for some parents who were waiting for their children. Again, Zach’s reading was greeted with smiles, applause, and even a few hugs. Zach returned to his classroom beaming with the pride that comes from doing a task well.

A half hour earlier Zach and his classmates were introduced to this poem at the Kent State University summer reading clinic. The students’ initial readings of the poem were halting, robotic, and monotone. However, through teacher modeling

followed by supported practice with feedback, Zach and his classmates were eventually able to read the poem with good expression and confidence.

Each day in our reading clinic, students master one or two poems and perform them for classmates, teachers, and other adults. We have come to view the practice and performance of poetry as key to our students’ growth in reading.

All of the students who come to our summer program, which we call Camp Read-a-Lot, exhibit reading difficulties, primarily in comprehension. However, a closer examination of most students’ reading indicates that difficulties in word recognition and fluency (Foundational Reading Skills according to the Common Core State Standards) are a primary cause of their comprehension problems.

## Why Poetry?

Although poetry has been a mainstay in elementary classrooms for decades, it appears to be on the decline (Gill, 2007) in favor of informational texts and stories. We feel that poetry (and other rhythmical texts) offers unique advantages for students who struggle in mastering the foundational reading skills:

- **Poems for children are relatively short in length.** This means that they can be mastered in a short period of time, and struggling readers who often lack confidence in their reading ability can achieve a level of reading success that is more difficult with information and narrative texts.
- **Poems are fun to read.** The rhythm and rhyme (and sometimes the silly nature) of poems often bring smiles to faces of children.

## Our Teachers' and Students' Favorite Poets

We recommend the poetical works of the following authors for use with struggling readers:

- Arnold Adoff
- Brod Bagert
- Douglas Florian
- Kristine O'Connell George
- Eloise Greenfield
- Nikki Grimes
- David Harrison
- Mary Ann Hoberman
- Lee Bennett Hopkins
- Karla Kuskin
- Bruce Lansky
- Myra Cohn Livingston
- Eve Merriam
- A.A.Milne
- Kenn Nesbitt
- Robb Pottle
- Jack Prelutsky
- Shel Silverstein
- Robert Louis Stevenson
- Anastasia Suen
- Jane Yolen

- **The rhythmical (predictable) and rhyming nature of most children's poems adds to their ease of learning.** Many of you reading this article can still fluently recite a poem, rhyme, or song that you first learned as a child years ago.
- **Because most poems for children rhyme, they contain multiple instances of rimes (word families) that are a productive way of teaching phonics.** The -ay rime appears several times in the nursery rhyme "Rain rain go away..." and provides students the opportunity to practice and explore this element of phonics in an authentic text.
- **Poetry can be found in all areas of the curriculum.** It enables children to boost thinking skills while fostering personal connections to text.
- **Poems are meant to be performed for an audience.** As such, poems need to be rehearsed. Rehearsal of a poem is an authentic form of repeated reading, an excellent approach to building reading fluency.
- **Poems for children are meant to be shared.** They can be read with the teacher or other students chorally. Choral reading is yet another approach for building reading fluency.

### A Poem a Day...

Because of these characteristic of poems, teachers in our reading clinic teach children a new poem (or two) every day. Our teachers tend to find weekly themes around which to group their poems. One week students may be reading baseball poems, the next week summer time poems, the week after patriotic poems. We don't worry too much about the difficulty of the poem. The brevity of the poem and the practice our students engage in to learn a poem means that even challenging poems can be mastered in a short time period.

Each day our teachers introduce a new poem to the students and read the poem to the students one or more times. After a short discussion about the meaning of the poem, the teacher invites the students to join her in reading it one or more times (changing their voices or pacing with every new reading). Then the teacher has students pair up and practice the poem with a partner a few more times. All this practice is for a purpose, as students are then asked to

perform their poem for their classmates or other available lucky listeners.

Students and teachers then choose interesting words for word study and display them on the classroom word wall. Students take the poem home for more performances with their families and friends. As new poems are added to the students' repertoire, poems from previous days continue to be read and enjoyed daily.

Our poetry lesson does not take long—at most 20–25 minutes—yet the progress we see students make is remarkable. We have been using poetry in this way in our reading clinic for the past dozen years. In the five weeks that we work with students, they regularly make significant and substantial progress in word recognition and reading fluency, greater than they had been previously making during the school year (Zimmerman & Rasinski, 2012). The improvements made in the foundational skills in reading lead to gains in reading comprehension, the ultimate goal of reading. Perhaps the most satisfying response to our use of poetry in reading instruction comes from students who tell us at the end of the clinical program, "I'm a better reader now!"

### References

1. Gill, S. (2007). The forgotten genre of children's poetry. *The Reading Teacher*, 60(7), 622–625.
2. Zimmerman, B., & Rasinski, T. (2012). The fluency development lesson: A model of authentic and effective fluency instruction. In T. Rasinski, C. Blachowicz, & K. Lems (Eds.) *Fluency Instruction* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford.



**Timothy Rasinski** is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University, [trasinsk@kent.edu](mailto:trasinsk@kent.edu).



**Belinda Zimmerman** is an assistant professor of literacy and early childhood education at Kent State University. ■