

WRITING POETRY OUTDOORS

Preparation and Engagement Guidance

“Poetry offers a way to be closer to who you are.” –Ada Limón, Poet Laureate of the United States

Writing observational poetry is one way to slow down and notice our surroundings. Inviting learners to write poems while at your site can be an opportunity for them to reflect on and remember their experience and encourage them to potentially see things outdoors in new ways. This activity includes a set of steps that learners can use to write poems based on their observations, connections, and memories. While some learners may initially shy away from writing poetry, showing example poems from other learners, particularly youth, may encourage them to try it out. To increase interest and use, this activity could be offered on a day advertised to the public for writing poetry outdoors.

Target audience: This activity is best for learners 8-years-old and older, or younger learners with adult support.

Materials

- a printed copy of this document to refer to during the activity
- appropriate number of *Writing Poetry Outdoors* flip card decks for your organization (depending on how many learners you expect to use them)
- 4 samples of nature poetry (see Prep Step 1)
- (optional) 2–3 magnifiers
- (optional) 1 printed activity sign
- (optional) 1 clear plexiglass menu stand to display the activity sign

Preparation

If this is your first time using Flip Cards, review *Flip Card Activities: Background Information* for more information on preparation, materials to support learners, and engagement guidance. The following steps are our recommendations and should be customized for your site and program.

1. Print nature poetry samples. You can use the poems on Cards 1, 11, 14, 15, and 16, or you can choose poems by local poets, poems learners at your organization have shared, or poems from this list:
 - a. “Instructions on Not Giving Up” by Ada Limón: <https://poets.org/poem/instructions-not-giving>
 - b. “Sparrow Envy” by J. Drew Lanham: <https://www.neil.blog/full-speech-transcript/sparrow-envy-poem-j-drew-lanham>.
 - c. “For the Lobaria, Usnea, Witches Hair, Map Lichen, Beard Lichen, Ground Lichen, Shield Lichen” by Jane Hirshfield: <https://poets.org/poem/lobaria-usnea-witches-hair-map-lichen-beard-lichen-ground-lichen-shield-lichen>.
 - d. “Remember” by Joy Harjo: <https://poets.org/poem/remember-0>.
2. Print sets of the Flip Card activity.
 - a. We recommend printing on cardstock and/or laminating for ongoing use.
 - b. Print each card in color, single-sided, actual size.
 - c. Cut each individual card to the 4” x 6” trim size. (Use the inner set of crop marks as your guide.)
 - d. Hole punch the circle in the top-left corner of each card.
 - e. Use a book binder ring (½” to 1”) to collate each card deck.
3. Try out this activity yourself! Your experience using this flip card deck in the space in which learners will use them will help you share specific examples and point learners to interesting things to look at.
4. Review and customize the Engagement Guidance (on the next page). Think about your space, your audience, the time you will have with learners, and how you might want to best engage them.
5. On the day you will be sharing this flip card deck with learners:
 - a. (optional) Place the large activity sign on the menu stand on the table. (The activity sign is a large version of the first card in the deck.)
 - b. Place sets of the Flip Card activity on the table. If you’re not using the large activity sign, place the first card of each set facing up. If you are using the large activity sign, place the second card of each set facing up.
 - c. Place the poetry samples (and the optional magnifiers) on the table near the flip card decks.

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Preparation and Engagement Guidance (continued)

Engagement Guidance

Here is an example of how you might engage learners at the beginning of their experience when they first show interest in an activity, as well as after they complete the activity. The first time you use the *Writing Poetry Outdoors* activity, we recommend trying out some of the suggested language (in italics, below) and then customizing it.

At the beginning:

- *Check out these sample nature poems.*
 - Give learners a few minutes to look over the poems.
- *Have you ever written poems?*
- Offer:
 - *Nature poems and nature science observations have a lot in common.*
 - *If you'd like to try out a way to write nature poems based on nature observations, take this set of cards with you as you explore. The cards will offer ideas on ways to write nature poems based on your observations, feelings, and experiences.*
 - (if applicable) *Feel free to take a magnifier with you, if you want.*

At the end:

- *What did you discover?*
- *Can I see or hear your poem?* If learners share their poems with you, say, *"Thanks so much for sharing and being vulnerable!"*
 - Avoid making general evaluative statements such as, "Great poem!" Instead, make specific statements about details of the poem, such as, *"I could really picture a bee wiggling when you read that line."* Or, *"I liked how you compared the tree's roots to elephant legs."* Or, *"I feel calm and happy after hearing you read your poem."*
- Ask some reflective questions, such as:
 - *What was it like writing a nature-observation poem?*
 - *Is it something you'd like to do again?*

Tips from other users:

"I waved passersby over to a small clearing beside our setup and had them look at a millipede under a magnifying glass. I then challenged the willing participants to find something cool (a rock, stick, bug, etc.) and bring it back to the table to magnify it. After they brought their cool object back, they were encouraged to write a nature poem about it (or any other topic they wanted) and introduced them to the card deck. This strategy seemed to help engagement. The more I engaged . . . the guests at first, the more engaged they seemed in a self-guided activity after." —2023 Activity Field Tester

Additional Resources

Leaning Toward the Light: Poems for Gardens & the Hands That Tend Them, edited by Tess Taylor

You Are Here: Poetry in the Natural World, edited by Ada Limón

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Photograph, Illustration, and Poetry Credits

Card

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Card

Poetry Credit

Thank you to the students, poets, and families who graciously offered permission to use their writing in this project.

- 1 “Leaf” by Kyla Zinn
- 11 “First Rain” by Arthur Dawson
- 14 “Tree Circle” by Alex P.
- 15 “My Leaf” by Max Sinton
- 16 “My Backyard in the Spring” by Brooke Maren-Yokell