

Poetry Tournament—Examples

Here's what I did:

1. Brought in a ton of poetry books and let my 16 8th graders look through them.
2. Elect 4 team captains—they drafted "players" and "equipment" (books).
3. Each kid received a number and selected four poems.
4. I painted the brackets in tempera paint on my blackboard complete with the numerical rankings: 1 vs. 16, etc.
5. Each kid wrote the name of their poems on their numbered lines, one in each "region."
6. We did mini lessons on oral poetry reading and practiced using a tape recorder.
7. Kids were given a rubric with the criteria "laureate" top, "pro" and "beginner." Grading is based on selecting two easy-to-medium poems, two medium-to-hard poems, speaking with expression, pronouncing words correctly, making eye contact, and offering a reason for selecting that particular poem.
8. Matches began in numerical order with a coin toss to determine in what "region" the poems would be played.
9. Students come to the front of the room, read their poems twice, then step out of the room for the group to vote on the winner—that one moves ahead into the second round, then the "sweet sixteen," "elite eight," and the "final four." Winners will be getting basketballs from Wal-Mart (\$4) and a book of poetry.

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Here's how I do the Poetry Tournament: (Or at least, this is how I did it last year, my first year, thanks to the creative people on this list!)

Like another poster, I bring in a cartload of poetry books, and have the kids take turns reading them, and passing them around. Since I have 21 kids, and I do it only with one class, I'll have them each select three poems, and I'll select one, making 64. Each of us is given a number, and we write the name of the poem on the bracket next to our numbers in each region. We focus on oral reading, and practice. (Last year, I showed a clip from My Fair Lady first)

This year I'll have them write a response in their journals also. Anyway, each day, two poems from each region "play": one student reads, then another reads. They take a moment before they begin or when they finish and talk about why they selected it, what it means to them, etc. The names of both poems are written on the board, and when the students are both finished reading, they go out into the hallway, and the class votes on the poem that they liked best. One thing I did was have a student moderator (an MC) who recorded the votes, and that worked well. We all stressed that we were voting for the poem, not the person.

The winning poem moves on to the next level, and so on. We did about 4 a day, and while that brought us late into April, the kids really loved it. The results, too, were fantastic. The final four winning poems included "Do Not Go Gentle into that Good Night," "The Ballad of Birmingham," a "Paintbrush," a poem from the Chicken Soup books, and the winner—a poem about the Holocaust that had been written by a local high school student! The newspaper had a field day with the contest, and interviewed both kids, as well as the members of my class, none of whom had ever really spent much time reading poetry before.

For those of you thinking of trying it, I'd encourage you to let the kids choose poems that appeal to them, and move them. The junk gets weeded out really fast, and it's absolutely not the most popular kids who

win! (One of the winners was the teacher I had teamed with last year!) When the kids were interviewed by the reporter, they all talked about the challenge—and the joy—in choosing their own poetry, the ones that moved them.

I originally had bought a couple of basketballs as an incentive, but the kids really didn't care about them. In fact, when our school held its curriculum fair in mid-April, a big group came back and performed with a karaoke machine, etc. An even larger group of former students—and these are tough kids—think "Dangerous Mind"—came to watch! It's was amazing to see, and I can't wait to do it again.

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Last year, I was turned on to this lesson. I ran out of time to do it then, but this year, I have made it the ending piece of my poetry unit. Here's how I run mine...

The basic idea is the same... I pick (maybe next year, I will let the students pick) 50 poems. I try to include as many different genres as possible. I choose 50 poems because the brackets can be set up with a number of byes—I have 14 poems that are not even read in the first round. This eliminates some of the repetition. I also post the brackets all over the school. Cafeteria, office, middle school hall, elementary hall (I teach in a K-8 school), anywhere I can put them. I already have had a number of people ask me about it.

As for judging the poems. I have a variety of ways I am planning to do this. Today was the first day, and we just did, "which one do you like better?" It created a good amount of discussion. Other ways I am planning on judging the poems is by having the Kindergarteners judge a dramatic reading. My math class is going to vote on a few of the math poems. Which team can "act" out the poem the best, oral votes, silent votes, a spokesperson will persuade the class to vote a certain way...

This does not have to be the same thing every day. Fifty poems might be a bit much, but I am hoping the variety in judging will prevent the "tuning out" that happens whenever I try to do the same thing for a week or longer.

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Here's how I did it . . . I have two sections of Language Arts/Social Studies, so I did 32 poems in each class. I would read 2 or 4 each day, and they would vote. I did my usual poetry unit right along with this, and then by the time we got to the final four, they were well-versed in being able to analyze poetry and write about their favorites, and why they should be voted for.

Oops . . . forgot the ending . . . when we got to the final two poems, I had both classes vote. So both groups heard different poems. I also put all the poems on overheads so they can read along as I read. I think that really helps them with understanding line breaks, and how to read aloud poetry.

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I have four classes so it just works out nicely to do 16 poems from each class. Every person in every class starts by performing a poem and we vote on the top 16 from each class. We end up with one finalist from each class, then my team of teachers allow some flexibility and we get our whole team together to watch the semi-finals and finals as the four finalists perform for the whole team (102 kids). This really intimidates the four at first, but when they realize how much their classmates enjoy the performances, they lose that nervousness pretty quickly. This year I took 20 of the best performers around to the 6th grade classes to perform for them and that was a terrific experience.

This was my first year doing the poetry tournament and it was a huge success—one of those things kids are really excited about. I am going to work on finding a better variety of poems for next year though. Our library could really use some new resources when it comes to poems that middle school students enjoy. I saw way too much Silverstein and Pruletsky.

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I too have pondered how to rearrange the poems within the brackets next year. I tried to be "fair" this year in balancing each side with exposure for all classes to major poets from the "serious"—Frost, Shakespeare, Teasdale, Dickenson—to "funny"—Morris Bishop, Prelutsky, Silverstein, and yes Jim Hall. In other words, I tried to put a Frost poem on each side or at least two poems of similar style and mood. (Everyone loves the Jim Hall "Maybe Dat's Yowr Pwoblem"—so much so that I even thought about not even entering it or any Silverstein next year at all!!!! How's that for unstuffing the ballot box???? 7th graders definitely tilt toward the zany.)

So yeah, I thought about weighing all the humorous poets in against each other in the same bracket next year to knock some of them out, though then everyone won't get the broad exposure. To their credit with each vote, kids entered into serious discussion on poems like "Dog's Death" by John Updike, arguing "just because it's sad doesn't mean it's a BAD poem. It's really well written. Just sad." Hall DID beat out "Dog's Death."

HOWEVER, at the same time as the poetry tournament, I had kids writing poems of their own, researching a poet (I did nix Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss from the research list) and memorizing one of the poet's poems, and this definitely helped offset the defeat of one poet or poem. I'm embarrassed that I can't give credit to a specific individual on this listserv because in haste I deleted the address, but I used and revised a GREAT unit called "Poets are People Too" which hooked kids onto good online poetry sites. Many chose a poet who had been ousted out of the original "64" in the first round or so—and the online access helped kids find poets they had not read before, just because they were searching for poems they liked and thought they could recite!

One of the high points in the research came when two boys (both usually reluctant and habitually late when turning in most assignments) tracked Edgar Allen Poe's life and shared their new, daily findings with all within hearing—marriage to a first cousin who was 13, addiction to alcohol, death from a brain tumor which they figured was the cause of his hallucinations and nightmares . . . kind of a daily soap opera. One of the last research days, they reported breathlessly at the end of class, "Edgar Allen Poe's last words were 'God have mercy on my soul.'" When the following period entered from the hallway, new kids from the next class asked me, "Do you know what Edgar Allen Poe's dying words were?" Hot news!

So—the writing and research and memorization helped offset the selection of the poetry tournament champion, but I'm still not sure how I'm going to revise the whole shebang for next year. However, I'm sure this conversation will re-emerge.