

## **THE POETRY SUITCASE: Sharing Poems Five Minutes a Day**

by Janet Wong ([www.janetwong.com](http://www.janetwong.com))

Ten years ago I started bringing a suitcase full of odd props to schools and libraries all over the world. When a child chose the turtle, I would read my poem “Dad” from *Good Luck Gold*; when she chose the noodles, I would read “Noodles.” Pearls, ginger, a teapot, a snake, a baby’s shoe: different children were intrigued by different items, and all were eager to hear the poem that went with the prop. I hope you’ll read this and want to build a poetry suitcase of your own!

### **1. Why a Poetry Suitcase?**

A suitcase takes you places—new, exciting, vacation places; friendly, familiar places; places you need to go. You could use a box, but a box is for hidden storage. How many times have you put things in a box, and forgotten about them?

What do you take in your suitcase? The things you need most. Favorite things.

**We want children to think of poems as necessary, favorite things.**

### **2. Creating a Poetry Suitcase**

1. spread out poetry books (or poems), enough so each child can choose one book (or poem) and there will still be leftovers
2. ask each child to choose one poem to copy on an index card; you can have them do it in class, or give it as a homework assignment
3. give each child one week to bring in a prop tied to their poem. The prop can be as simple as a leaf, an old toy, a photo or a drawing.
4. soon you will have a Poetry Suitcase full of poems and intriguing props!

**When a child chooses a poem to copy:**

- a. the child sees firsthand how varied poems can be
- b. the child develops a better sense of what she likes in poetry
- c. the child comes to own that poem by copying it

### **3. Sharing Your Poetry Suitcase**

Several times a day, ask a child to choose a prop from the suitcase. Let the child read the accompanying poem aloud if she wants, but offer to read it for her: reading an unfamiliar poem aloud in front of an audience can be embarrassing.

Read each poem twice. If a child is the first reader, you should be the second reader. Even if you are the first reader, please repeat yourself. Repeating the poem (regardless of the reader) takes away a child's worry that she didn't read it correctly. It also allows children to hear the poem clearly at least once.

Reading a poem will take less than 30 seconds, on average. Don't analyze the poems, though it is fine to talk about them briefly.

**Props make a child curious and eager to hear the poems. Having poems tied to props gives immediate gratification; children can browse through the suitcase in a meaningful way.**

#### **4. Keeping Your Suitcase Fresh**

When your suitcase is "used up," you can ask children to write poems of their own to go with different props.

After a child reads her own poem, let her talk about why she chose that prop (or subject). In her two-minute tale, a few words or details might emerge that can be used for a second draft. Point out some simple ways that she can revise, and then ask her to copy her favorite draft onto an index card, to tie to the prop.

When the suitcase is really used up—or really full of treasures—you can trade it with another classroom!

*Wishing you many poetry adventures—*