

National Poetry Day 2024

Counting



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ACTIVITY 1

Lots of children’s poems, songs and nursery rhymes are based on counting. Small children love the patterns, listening out for the next number and learning to count 1-10 as they hear the songs.

Poets writing for older children, or for other adults, quite often play with these to create something new and different, turning a simple rhyme into something more sophisticated.

In [Brian Patten’s poem](#) there’s a dark side to the number song. It may sound as if it’s a children’s rhyme but it’s saying some serious things about deeper themes.

- [Listen](#) to the poem being read aloud and read the words.
- Talk about whether any of the lines seem to have a slightly darker message, or whether the poem is just a bit of fun.
- Talk about the title of the poem, ‘Eight Brand New Angels’ and whether that gives you any more ideas about what you think the poem is trying to say and do.
- Could you do the same? Here are some children’s rhymes that you might recognise from when you were little. Could you adapt one of them as a more ‘grown-up’ poem?

For example:, ‘Ten green bottles’ as...

| ‘Ten sad children’

or

| ‘One two, turn on the screen’

or

| ‘Five little endangered frogs’.

Ten green bottles

One two buckle my shoe

Five Little Ducks

This Old Man

There were 10 in a bed

One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive

Five fat sausages frying in a pan

Five little speckled frogs

ACTIVITY 2

How Do I Love Thee – Let Me Count the Ways

- Watch the poet Patience Agbabi [reading this love poem by Elizabeth Barrett-Browning](#).
- Read the poem or listen to it again, this time deciding which line or phrase you like best as an expression of love.
- Share your favourite lines.

‘How Do I Love Thee – Let Me Count the Ways’ is a list poem. The list is a great way of structuring your thoughts.

- Have a go at writing a list poem of your own, inspired by this one. Here are some possibilities to choose from.
 - What Do I Like About You – Let Me Count The Things
(a parent, friend, teacher, pet dog or cat, a favourite singer, a favourite food)
 - What Worries Me? – Let Me Count the Things
 - How Do I Delay Doing Things I Don’t Want to Do – Let Me Count the Ways

How Do I Love Thee? Let Me Count the Ways

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of being and ideal grace.
I love thee to the level of every day’s
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for right.
I love thee purely, as they turn from praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood’s faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints. I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life; and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

ACTIVITY 3

The first line of a very famous Shakespeare sonnet is

| ‘When I do count the clock that tells the time’

■ Predict what you think the poem may be about, drawing on these suggestions:

- Being late for something
- Growing old and losing your looks
- Growing old and dying
- Amazement at the invention of a clock
- A love poem.

■ Choose one of these and, using ‘When I do count the clocks that tell the time’ carry on to write the second and third lines of the poem.

When I do count the clock that tells the time....

■ Share your lines, then read Shakespeare’s sonnet (see page 6).

■ Which of the possible themes above do you think the poem is about? Just one, or more than one?

■ Use the idea of a clock, counting the hours and time passing to write a poem of your own. Here are a few suggestions:

- A poem in which each line is dedicated to the hours of the day from waking to going to bed e.g.

| 7am The alarm buzzes, my brain is fuzzy, my eyes are blurry.

- A poem about time passing that traces changes in you, not using a clock but rather other ways of counting time, for example, Nursery, Reception, Year 1, Year 4 and so on. You can pick the years where you have a memory or thought worth including rather than having to do every year.

Sonnet 12: When I do count the clock that tells the time

When I do count the clock that tells the time,
And see the brave day sunk in hideous night;
When I behold the violet past prime,
And sable curls all silver'd o'er with white;
When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard,
Then of thy beauty do I question make,
That thou among the wastes of time must go,
Since sweets and beauties do themselves forsake
And die as fast as they see others grow;
And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence
Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence.

William Shakespeare

ACTIVITY 4 – AN UNUSUAL POEM

Looking for poems for National Poetry Day, we came across a poem written in Uganda, for the day when the census is taken. The census is the record of everyone living in the country. It allows the government to get important statistics about the population.

The work of getting people to fill in the census form is not easy, especially in rural areas and, perhaps some people might be suspicious. It's lovely to think that a poem might help persuade people to fill it in. The poem was written by the government's Principal Statistician.

- Read the poem on page 8. Talk about what the idea of 'counting' means here, in all its senses.
- Think of other ways in which people or things are counted, that matter. Write your own poem about that. Here are some possible examples:
 - Counting children on a school trip
 - Counting in a game or sport
 - Counting birds or animals for a national survey of wildlife
 - Counting beats in music
 - Counting minutes, hours, days, weeks till something happens.

Big or small, short, or tall, young or elderly.
Uganda Bureau of Statistics counts them all.
You and I count;
Your siblings and parents count;
Relatives, friends, and in-law's count;
The house help and gardener count;
Your neighbours count;
The homeless and sick count;
Persons living with disabilities count;
The needy, poor, rich, and powerful count;
Political, religious, and cultural leaders count;
Those in transit, hotels, and on duty count;
The availability of basic amenities count;
Housing units and conditions count;
Those in institutions count;
It matters to be counted.
Being counted in a Census means that your
individual information is included in the data
collected during the census process

Nawoova Betty | Principal statistician, Uganda Bureau of Statistics

ACTIVITY 5 – A LEVEL

The divide between the Arts and Humanities and all things mathematical or scientific is a false one. Many scientists and mathematicians love poetry, and lots of poets love numbers.

Here are two examples of poets writing about numbers.

- Read or watch one or both of them.

Mary Cornish's poem is all about numbers, interpreting them in her very own, clever and entertaining way, counting things in the world around her and in her life and thinking about how concepts like addition and subtraction, multiplication and division can apply to life.

[Read the poem here.](#)

Harry Baker is a Maths graduate and Poetry Slam World Cup winner. His performance poem 'A Love Poem for Lonely Prime Numbers' is a brilliant rap about a love sick prime number 59, searching for a mate. Watch him perform it as part of a TED talk, and then read the words to take a closer look at his clever play with the idea.

[Watch Harry Baker perform the poem here.](#)

[Read the poem here.](#)

- In one or both of these poems, talk about what you find most
 - Interesting
 - Enjoyable
 - Clever
 - Funny
 - Surprising.
- Try writing your own poem about numbers, inspired by one or both of these poems.