

THE POET'S CORNER

Let's Get Moving!



Janet Wong

IF YOU'RE LIKE ME, you grew up with the idea that sitting still for long periods of time was ideal behavior—something that good children did for at least eight hours a day, hunched over a school desk or doing homework at the kitchen table. Nowadays, most of us know that we need to give our eyes, necks, shoulders, wrists, arms, and backs regular and frequent breaks, especially when we're sitting in front of a computer screen.

Poetry provides an ideal way to incorporate movement into a school day because most children's poems are short. You can easily start or end your school day with a poem. You can read one out loud during snack time, while the children munch away, or have a few class volunteers read a poem out loud as everyone settles in after lunch. A poem can even give us an impromptu 30-second indoor recess at random times during the day, when you feel the energy in the room starting to dip; you don't even have to get up from your chair. Here's a poem that will give your students a break—while they soak up some rhyme, repetition, rhythm, alliteration, and wordplay.

Deskercise

by Juli Mayer

Raise your hands up in the air.
Twist your body in your chair.
Touch your nose and blink your eyes.
This is how we deskercise!

Move your feet and march in place.
Pose a sad, then happy face.
Flap your arms, it's time to fly.
This is how we deskercise!

Roll your head and finger snap.
Shrug your shoulders, clap, clap, clap.
Drum your fingers, look surprised.
This is how we deskercise!

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Poems that invite movement and also reflect current events can be found among the hundred poems in *HOP TO IT: Poems to Get You Moving*, the latest anthology compiled by Sylvia Vardell and me. Many of the poems in this anthology were selected because they are particularly well suited to children's lives today. Consider, for instance, how "Ways to Say Hello" promotes touchless greetings:

Ways to Say Hello

by Janet Wong

Foot wave
air bump
jazz hands
heart thump
thumbs up

clap hello
 chicken wing elbow
 rabbit ears
 fish face

I bring you greetings
 from inner space

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Poems Can Provide Curricular Connections

Many of you are using poems across the curriculum to introduce vocabulary and concepts. With this in mind, each of the poems in *HOP TO IT* is accompanied by five “bubbles” that present the following:

- suggestions for how to read the poem aloud with movements;
- a fun factoid, often with a science or social studies connection;
- a spot illustration;
- a poetry skill; and
- a recommended picturebook on the same topic.

The factoid presented with “Ways to Say Hello” says: “Rabbits have a complex language—ears forward, ears back, or one ear forward and one ear back can mean different things!” The poetry skill points out: “People talk about greetings from *outer* space, but maybe not greetings from *inner* space. Poets love wordplay!” Sharing this poem and its bubbles, you can help students stretch their muscles and their imaginations, while reinforcing the idea that language can be a source of joy.

Many poems in *HOP TO IT* can provide a bridge to a quick lesson in science or social studies, even without the factoid provided in the bubble. “What’s Behind My Head?” by Kristy Dempsey, a poem that will resonate with many children now (though it would have baffled them in 2019), can spark a 15-second geography lesson.

What’s Behind My Head?

by Kristy Dempsey

Today I’m in Tahiti,
 lounging on the sand.
 Tomorrow I’ll be up on stage,

rocking with my band.
 On Friday, back behind me
 there’ll be lions on my screen.
 Next week, my background vid
 will bounce me on a trampoline.
 I’ve got a plan for every day—
 my classmates think it’s cool.
 Each day I’m in a brand new place
 when we have online school.

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Find Poems on Your Bookshelves

Many of the poems on your bookshelves right now will allow you to easily incorporate some type of movement into your readings of them. The poems need not have anything to do with movement, sports, or dance; just find a word in the poem that inspires some sort of movement and perform it while you read the poem out loud a first time, and then invite students to join in on the motions during a second reading. Here is a recommended list of a handful of poems from some favorite poetry books:

- “Amplify” by Lindsay H. Metcalf (in *No Voice Too Small*; Metcalf et al., 2020): Read the poem aloud and have students use their hands to make a sparking motion when they hear the word “spark” and a rippling motion when they hear the words “ripple forward.”
- “An Open Book” by Amy Ludwig VanDerwater (in *Read, Read, Read!*; VanDerwater, 2017): Each time you read the word “open,” signal students to spread their arms wide.
- “Far, Far Away” (for Palestine) by Naomi Shihab Nye (in *I Remember: Poems and Pictures of Heritage*; Hopkins, 2019): Have volunteers take turns reading lines. Each time students hear the word “peace” (three times) or “peaceful” (once), have them pause and close their eyes.
- “Inuit Song,” translated by Edward Field, after Nakasuk (in *National Geographic Book of Animal Poetry*; Lewis, 2012): Each time students hear the word “air,” have them stretch their wings like a gull.
- “Passing” by Elizabeth Steinglass (in *Soccerverse: Poems About Soccer*; Steinglass, 2019): Have students run while you read the poem, until you get to the last line (when they’ll wave and try to catch your attention).

Pandemic Poems and Social Justice

At the end of February 2020, Sylvia Vardell and I had received hundreds of movement poems—plenty for our anthology. Then we found ourselves mired in the pandemic, wondering whether we should expand the theme of the book. By the end of March, we decided to include poems about topics such as COVID-19, mask-wearing, staycations, keeping connected with friends, and Zoom—but soon after, social justice protests began to fill the news. So we expanded our theme once more to include poems about exercising your voice, standing up for what you believe in, marching, raising your arm in unity, and more. Here is one of those poems, “Everyday Use” by Zetta Elliott, which you can share with students in a video reading by the poet (the link is included in the references).

Everyday Use by Zetta Elliott

our muscles
grow strong with
everyday use
strong arms can offer
a tender embrace
a heart that is brave
can soften with compassion
a clever mind can
find time to daydream
sharp eyes can see
both sides of a problem
and the fastest feet
can slow to march
the long road
to justice

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Bit by Bit

As we jump into a new year of hopes and dreams, let's do what we can to help children dream, too. Read this poem out loud once, and then, before a second reading, invite students to choose a favorite activity from the poem and to chime in on those words.

Now's Your Chance by Karen G. Jordan

Alone and bored? Friends can't play?
Now's your chance to break away
from what you were to who you'll be:
stronger, smarter, easily.
Create a task toward one good goal.
Complete it, repeat it. You're in control!
Grow new muscles. Write some skits.
Finish puzzles. Practice splits.
Learn to juggle. Bake a pie.
Knit a scarf. Give chess a try.
Coding, backbends, violin
are yours to master. You can win
a brand new you, bit by bit.
Small steps work, so stay with it!

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Small steps; it's a long road. Poetry will help us get there. •

Janet Wong is the author of 34 books for children. Her most recent book (with Sylvia Vardell) is *HOP TO IT: Poems to Get You Moving*, where you can find many poems to inspire discussion. Email: janet@janetwong.com

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