

HOW TO MAKE A POETRY SUITCASE



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**Pick through the clutter,
closets, basement, garage.
Find an old toy, something
that brings you joy,
an odd gift, things you loved
way back when.**

**Then take a suitcase
and fill it up. An old shoe
that your dog chewed through,
an antique package of ramen,
your one-eyed lion:
cram them in there tight.**

**There's a poem in each one.
When you open the suitcase
you'll remember:
once upon a time,
when people could not fly,
we lifted ourselves up with poems.**

More JOY

Poet JANET WONG, the recipient of the 2021 NCTE Excellence in Poetry for Children Award, wants us to think of poems as things we can't be without, "that help us on our journey."

In December 2021, US Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy warned the nation of an emerging youth mental health crisis, taking the unusual step of issuing a 53-page public health advisory and call to action describing symptoms of depression and anxiety in children and teens. When I read this, I thought: clearly we need more JOY. Joy at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Joy at school, joy at home, and everywhere in between. Random and regular moments of joy all throughout the day. How? With poetry. With our Poetry Suitcases!

WHAT IS A POETRY SUITCASE?

I have been using my Poetry Suitcase with children and teens for more than twenty-five years. I have a rotating

selection of items that basically is a bunch of stuff I never use in everyday life but don't want to throw away: my son's old stuffed animals, odd gifts from friends, vacation souvenirs. Things my grandchildren might want (if I ever have grandchildren).

The idea behind it is simple: when a student chooses something out of the suitcase of props, you share a poem that goes with it. No analysis, no picking the poem apart—just take a minute to read aloud. Smile, laugh, clap, and move on. Your students will think about the poem, even without you prompting them. You can read it at the beginning of your class, while students are eating a snack, after lunch, or whenever you feel sleepy and in need of a pick-me-up. Make sure to read the

poem more than once; hearing our favorite songs again and again (“extreme re-listening” —See <https://bit.ly/3sq91pe>) makes us happy, and the same goes with poems.

WHY A SUITCASE?

Why not a box? You could use a box. But think of the boxes at your house. Most of us have boxes in closets—or the attic, or basement, or garage—that are full of neglected things. We put things away in boxes to get them out of sight for a while, and then we (conveniently) forget about them.

What do we put in a suitcase? Things we need. Things we care about so much that we can’t be without them for even a few days. Things that help us on our journeys. Things that reveal our truest values, our most personal culture. This is how I want us to think about poems.

COMMON PROPS + JOYFUL POEMS

Here’s a list of common items, along with the titles of joyful poems that go with them. Not every joyful poem will bring beaming smiles and laughter; we might just feel a sense of quiet joy when we feel seen or heard and understood. Each of these poems can be found online and downloaded for free.

Pair with poems at Poets.org

- old cell phone (or powdered sugar): “Gate A-4” by Naomi Shihab Nye from *Honeybee*
- fingernail file: “Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)” by Nikki Giovanni in *Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People*
- ice cream scoop: “Bleezer’s Ice Cream” by Jack Prelutsky from *The New Kid on the Block*

Pair with poems at PoetryFoundation.org

- drum: “Drum Dream Girl” by Margarita Engle from *Drum Dream Girl*
- blank white paper: “Spring Break” by April Halprin Wayland from *Girl Coming in for a Landing: A Novel in Poems*
- lemon: “My Lemonade Stand” by Rebecca Kai Dotlich

Pair with poems at Pinterest.com/PomeloBooks

- flip-flops: “On a Beach” by Suzy Levinson from *Hop to It: Poems to Get You Moving*
- rocks: “All Kinds of Kids” by Elizabeth Steinglass from *GREAT MORNING: Poems for School Leaders to Read Aloud*
- binoculars or history book: “Look for Birds” by Janet Wong from *Hop to It: Poems to Get You Moving*

THERE ISN’T JUST ONE WAY TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING

In my writing workshops, I emphasize that there is never just one “right way” to write about a topic. You can use your Poetry



Hearing our favorite songs over and over makes us happy, and the same goes with poems.

—Janet Wong

Suitcase to share this message with your students. After you’ve finished sharing the whole suitcase of poems and props, give kids some large index cards and have them write poems about any of the items that interest them. Soon you’ll have several index cards tied to each prop, a wide variety of poems that go with each item and show how easy it is to take different approaches.

If there are students who don’t want to write about one of the props in your suitcase, give them some extra choices; hand them a beach ball or an old cookie sheet, a stub of sidewalk chalk or a broken video game controller. Then have them tie the object to their poem.

After you’re finished with your Poetry Suitcase, give it to another teacher at your school, or trade it with another school, or send it to the mayor of your town.

Spread the joy. It’s easy, with poetry.

JANET WONG IS A FORMER LAWYER WHO SWITCHED CAREERS TO BECOME A CHILDREN’S AUTHOR. THE AUTHOR OF MORE THAN THIRTY BOOKS FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS, SHE IS ALSO A POPULAR CONFERENCE SPEAKER, A PAST MEMBER OF THE NCTE POETRY COMMITTEE, AND THE PUBLISHER OF POETRY ANTHOLOGIES WITH HER COLLEAGUE SYLVIA VARDELL, WITH WHOM SHE FOUNDED POMELO BOOKS. WONG IS ALSO THE WINNER OF THE 2021 NCTE EXCELLENCE IN CHILDREN’S POETRY AWARD. LEARN MORE AT JANETWONG.COM.