

A Letter to Teachers

Dear teachers,


The goal of the My Town Mississippi Poetry Project is to help students experience the joy and accomplishment that can come from writing poetry, and from amplifying their own voices, words, and experiences. Students from grades K-12 across the state will write poems about their hometowns. We hope to receive poems from the Delta and the Gulf, the Red Clay Hills and the Black Prairie, small towns, cities, and everywhere in between, representing the many individual experiences of students across our state.

Along with this letter, we're sending the poem prompt and tips for you to share with your students. We know that days are tightly scheduled, and our hope is that this project can be done in whatever way best fits your class: in as little as 30 minutes on one day or, if time allows, spread out over multiple days; as a standalone activity or as part of an existing lesson plan. Most importantly, we hope that this project will provide a joyful and creative outlet for students and teachers alike.

As you work on this project with your students, please feel free to share updates on social media with the hashtag #mspoetryproject, and to look for creative ways to celebrate the work your students are doing! Poetry displays, in-class writing "parties," and readings where everyone shares their work are just a few possible ways to have fun and build community around poetry (we've included some more ideas, too).

Poetry is for everyone. There's no wrong way to write a poem, and words can be a tremendous source of delight, play, and comfort. Thank you so much for your help in making this initiative a success, and for all you do in helping to bring the joy of writing to your students.

With deep thanks,



CATHERINE PIERCE

Poet Laureate of Mississippi



Poem Prompt

A poem is like a window—even a small one
can show us the world.

Where do you live? What details could you give a stranger to help them picture your town and understand what it's like to live there? For this project, Mississippi students across the state will write “list poems” about their towns. A list poem is just what it sounds like—by listing details about where you live, you’ll create a vivid picture of that place. Start off with the line “My town is” or “[Town name] is,” and go from there.

Here’s a short example:

My town is the traffic light at 3rd and Hogan Street
that takes forever to turn.
My town is the sound of cicadas and crickets on August nights.
It’s the fried catfish platter at Rosie’s,
pink skies at sunrise over the lake.
My town is smoky bonfires in October.

Some Poetry-Writing Tips:

Be specific! Specific details pull a reader in and make a poem come alive. For example: instead of tree, try magnolia or pine; instead of street, try Hickory Drive or Industrial Park Road.

Use as many of the five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch) as you can. This helps immerse a reader in whatever you’re describing. What buildings or animals do you see in your town? Do you smell the barbecue place down the street, or the farm across the way, or wet leaves in fall? What sounds do you hear in your town? What foods do you eat there? What does the weather feel like?

A poem is a chance to write from your own perspective, in your own voice. How do you experience your town?

Poems don’t have to rhyme! Feel free to use rhyme if you like, but free verse (unrhymed) poems “count” just as much as rhymed ones.



Timeline

Overview:

The My Town Mississippi Poetry Project is a **statewide poetry initiative for students in grades K-12**. All students across Mississippi are invited to participate. Each participating school will select three winning poems per grade, which will be sent on to the statewide competition. All schoolwide winners will be invited to attend the Mississippi Young Writers Poetry Festival, to be held in April 2023 on the Mississippi State campus in Starkville, and will have their winning poems published in the festival anthology.

1. During the fall, students will write poems using the following prompt:

Poems are like windows—even a small one can show us the world. Where do you live? What details could you give a stranger to help them picture your town and understand what it's like to live there? For this project, Mississippi students across the state will write “list poems” about their towns. A list poem is just what it sounds like—by listing details about where you live, you’ll create a vivid picture of that place. Start off with the line “My town is” or “[Town name] is,” and go from there.

There is no minimum line length; poems should not be more than two pages.

2. By December 1, schools will select three winning poems per each grade. There is no official contest rubric, but judges (selected by each school) should consider the poem’s use of specific detail, attention to the senses, and overall creativity/originality. Each of these schoolwide winners will be invited to the Mississippi Young Writers Poetry Festival in April 2023.

Winning poems should be emailed to mspoetryproject@gmail.com by December 1.

3. The winning poems from each school will be entered into the statewide poetry contest. **Statewide winners will be announced by February 1, 2023**, and, in addition to being published in the festival anthology, will be invited to give a reading of their work at the festival in April.



Some ways to share and celebrate students' creative work:

Poetry Display

A poetry display is a great way to help students feel pride in the work they've done. Choose a section of the classroom or the hallway and hang your class's poems up for all to read and enjoy.

Poetry Readings

Listening to poetry really helps it come alive. Invite students to share their work out loud (and encourage the rest of the class to clap when each poet is done reading).

In-class Poetry Parties

There's something wonderful about writing in a community with others. Turn this project into a community-building exercise by making writing a festive experience—depending on students' ages, anything from snacks to colorful markers to the opportunity to sit in groups or outside can help students experience writing as something exciting.

School-Wide Sharing

Invite students to share their poems during morning announcements—a way to start the day by celebrating student creativity!

Social Media

If your school or class has a social media profile, share the work you and your students are doing with the hashtag #mspoetryproject.

Have other ideas for ways to celebrate your students' poems? Let us know at mspoetryproject@gmail.com!

