
Using poetry to teach pronunciation and to promote linguistic diversity

Webinar handout

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Identifying syllables in poems in English is a good way to integrate pronunciation skills into our classroom activities. This may help students with sound awareness and word/sentence stress, which are both characteristics of intelligible speaking. Let's check how syllables are structured in English and how to use them in pronunciation classes.

Counting syllables

There are some rules that may help us in identifying the syllables in words in English. The main idea is to consider vowels as the centre of syllables, so we will always identify syllables by identifying vowels in a word. Take the words below as examples:

- *Bird* - This word has one vowel, <i>, and therefore has only one syllable;
- *Head* - This word has one vowel cluster, <ea>, and therefore has only one syllable;
- *Plane* - This word has two vowels, <a> and <e>, however the last <e> shall not be counted towards syllable numbers as this sound is not considered in syllable counting. Exceptions are, of course, when a word only has one <e> as a vowel (such as in 'the' and 'me'), and also when other sounds follow this <e> (e.g. the word 'people'). This is a tricky rule, but may be explored with students step by step as new vocabulary emerges in the classroom;
- *Homework* - This word is the junction of 'home' and 'work' together. Because of that, the previous rule applies to the last <e> in 'home', leaving the syllable count for 'homework' as two syllables.

Of course there are some exceptions to the rules above, but they are a nice start to identifying syllables. Next, we may use these rules to create specific types of poems.

Poems with syllable counting

Among the types of poems that have a specific number of syllables in each line, students may work with Cinquains and Haikus:

Type of poem	Characteristics	Examples
Cinquain	Poems about nature or feelings; 5 lines; Number of syllables in each line: 1 st line: 2 syllables 2 nd line: 4 syllables 3 rd line: 6 syllables 4 th line: 8 syllables 5 th line: 2 syllables	<p style="text-align: center;">Family</p> <p style="text-align: center;">H<u>i</u> t<u>h</u>ere P<u>a</u>re<u>n</u>ts a<u>r</u>e n<u>i</u>ce M<u>y</u> p<u>a</u>re<u>n</u>ts i<u>n</u>cl<u>u</u>d<u>e</u>d I l<u>o</u>ve t<u>h</u>e<u>m</u> s<u>o</u> m<u>u</u>ch, m<u>y</u> d<u>o</u>g t<u>o</u> G<u>o</u>od b<u>y</u>e!</p>
Haiku	Poems about nature or feelings; 3 lines; Number of syllables in each line: 1 st line: 5 syllables 2 nd line: 7 syllables 3 rd line: 5 syllables	<p style="text-align: center;">Snow</p> <p style="text-align: center;">S<u>n</u>ow i<u>s</u> f<u>a</u>ll<u>i</u>ng d<u>o</u>wn I c<u>a</u>n o<u>n</u>ly s<u>e</u>e t<u>h</u>e w<u>h</u>ite T<u>h</u>e s<u>t</u>re<u>e</u>t i<u>s</u> e<u>m</u>pt<u>y</u></p>

Students may create their own poems with words that are familiar to them, or using short sentences. They may read them aloud in pairs, or in bigger groups, and reflect on the pronunciation of each word they have written down.

 A recording of Victor's webinar can be watched here: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/news-and-events/webinars/webinars-teachers/multilingual-matters-mini-event>