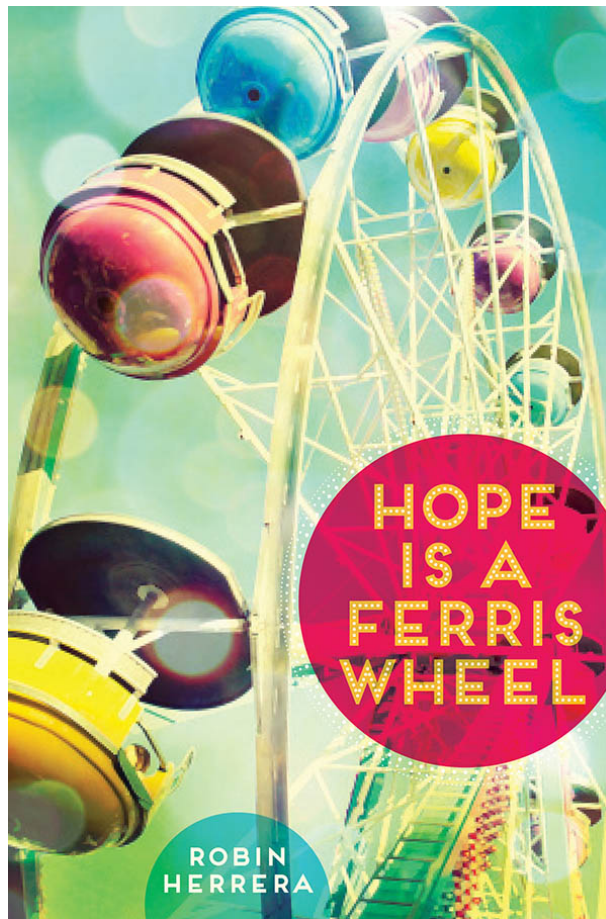


Student/Teacher Guide: How to Start a Poetry Club at your School

Inspired by the middle-grade debut...
HOPE IS A FERRIS WHEEL



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Introduction

Hope Is a Ferris Wheel is the story of so many things, I often have trouble describing it to people. “It’s about a girl who lives in a trailer park” is all I usually say, but when their eyebrows raise in expectation, I quickly add, “—who tries to start a club at her new school so she can make friends.” Then I get a quick nod of acknowledgement and we both leave it at that.

There’s a lot more going on in the book than Star Mackie, the main character, starting what will eventually become a poetry club, but those things are too nuanced and spoiler-heavy to describe. The club is safe, and important, and a way for Star to figure out her feelings on things like her moody older sister, Winter, or a father she’s never met but might visit soon. Through all the ups and downs and emotions and revelations, Star’s club (the Trailer Park Club to start, which then morphs into the Emily Dickinson Club) is an anchor, for both Star and the reader.

So when the fine folks at Amulet Books suggested I write a guide to starting a poetry club, I jumped at the chance. Because maybe starting a club could be a much-needed anchor for some other fifth-grader out there with a life like a soap opera. After all, some of my fondest memories of fifth grade involve the stamp club that I was a part of. (Yes, really.) In fact, I’m a little mad at myself for not starting a club back in elementary school. I could have been part of a club about something I really cared about, like drawing or writing. (Not to say stamps aren’t important! But, you know, they’re stamps. I did not grow up to be a stamp collector.)

Anyway, here is that aforementioned guide. There are two sections, one for students (written by Star) and one for teachers (written by me). Because teachers have one of the hardest jobs in the world, the guide is written for students to do most of the work. Besides, Star has to do most of the work for her club, so it’s only fair. If you’re an after-school teacher, though, leading your own clubs, I won’t blame you for reading both sections. Honestly, I wish I’d had this guide when I was teaching after-school. I never ran a poetry club, and I totally should have. (Although I’ll tell you right now that it’s not quite as fun as running a Dance Dance Revolution club. But the start-up costs are considerably lower!)

Here’s hoping that you’ll get something out of this guide, whether you’re a teacher, a student, or a lonely person with too many bookshelves. In which case, let’s maybe start a club together.

Robin Herrera
Portland, OR

How to Start a Poetry Club

by Star Mackie, 5th grade

Starting a club is extremely difficult, and my sister, Winter, doesn't recommend it to amateurs.

(AMATEUR was in our vocabulary sentences this week. Here was my sentence for it: Winter used to be an amateur pretzel maker, but now that she's been working at Pretzel Twistz for a few months, she can make about five hundred pretzels an hour! But she hasn't yet, because Pretzel Twistz doesn't sell five hundred pretzels even in one day.)

But Winter had to admit that *I* was an amateur when I started my first club, the Trailer Park Club. She says by the time I started my second club, the Emily Dickinson Club, I was like a novice, and when I finally decided to turn it into the Poetry Club, I became an expert.

I'm guessing you must be an amateur if you're reading this, which is okay. Everyone starts out as an amateur. Amateurs need to read books about starting clubs, but I can already tell you that if you live in northern California and go to Pepperwood Elementary, you will not find any books that tell you how to start a club. But you will find a book that tells you about pregnant women giving birth. (Don't check out that book.)

So I am here instead of a book, which doesn't exist anyway.

The first thing you need is an idea for a club. Don't make it too specific, like I did. The Trailer Park Club wasn't only open to people who lived in trailer parks, but I think that's what everyone thought, and that's why it only had three members including me. (Winter says it's because no one wants to join a club about trailer parks, and I think she's partially right.) The Emily Dickinson Club was also too specific, and it turns out everyone in that club got bored of Emily Dickinson after three meetings. Now that we have the Poetry Club, if we get bored of a poet, we just pick a new one. (Although Eddie already told us we can't do Robert Frost, ever.)

The second thing you need is a club leader. Apparently it can't be you, which is too bad, because that would save time, effort, and possible club-canceling when your leader finds out you haven't been turning in homework. The leader has to be an adult. Hopefully you can find a nice one who knows about poetry and metaphors. Our club leader is Miss Fergusson, who is very nice and monitors our club on Mondays after school. (Miss Fergusson says that as a monitor, she doesn't actually have to do much

work except occasionally print out poems for us.) She also has a couch in her room, and that is a big advantage. Look for a nice teacher with a couch and a printer.

After you have a *nice* leader (and definitely not a *mean* one), you have to recruit club members. This is harder than it sounds, especially if you are new to your school and accidentally let it slip that you live in a trailer park. That is something you want to let slip after people get to know you and not before. Anyway, a great way to get club members is to advertise your club. Posters are the best way to do this if your school doesn't have a newspaper or a loudspeaker. A good poster will include all of these things:

1. The name of the club. It doesn't have to be the Poetry Club, either! It could be the Poetry Organization, or the Poetry Support Group, or the Poetry Admiration Society. (Winter came up with all of those.) Whatever you name your club, it should be in huge letters on your poster. And Miss Fergusson says to make sure the acronym doesn't spell out something bad. Like if you have the Poetry Unification Society, then the acronym is P.U.S. Which is not something you want to think about during your club.

2. When and where the club meets. It's good to choose a time when people aren't busy. Winter says it would be great to hold a poetry club at two-thirty in the morning in an abandoned hospital building, but I don't think anyone would show up. And if anyone did show up, you might not want them in your club anyway. (Think about it.) Also, you have to pick a place people can get to easily. I chose Miss Fergusson's room because Mr. Savage kicked me out of his room, but also because it's right next to Mr. Savage's room, so there was very little walking distance. (And she has a couch. I just want to say that this is important. You're an amateur and you probably don't think it is, but I'm the expert and I'm telling you that a couch is an important thing to have.)

3. What the club is about. I wasn't specific enough when I made my Emily Dickinson Club posters, because some people joined who didn't even like Emily Dickinson. Winter also wants me to tell you that if you aren't specific on your poster, you might attract people who only want to write poetry. And Genny says it would be a shame if someone came to your club expecting to write poetry when your "poetry club" is actually a club about pottery and you spelled it wrong.

4. Pictures! Although this can backfire if you're trying to start a trailer park club. For a poetry club, though, you can put in lots of pictures of poets. Except that Eddie would like

to point out that a lot of poets look like fools or chumps. And there is only the one picture of Emily Dickinson, where she looks very depressed. I would suggest including happy poets if you can find any.

Now that you have posters, *great!* You need to hang them in what Gloria calls “eye-grabbing real estate”—places where lots of people can see them. I asked my poetry club members for suggestions:

1. Your neighborhood
2. Your classroom (unless you are hiding the club from a teacher who doesn’t like you)
3. The cafeteria (Langston says that when he’s standing in line for hot lunch he gets so bored he’ll read anything, even a poster for a stupid poetry club)
4. The library (unless, Eddie wants to point out, you’ve been kicked out of there)
5. That place in the mall with all the bouncy houses (ignore if your mall has no bouncy house)
6. A bookstore (in the poetry section!)
7. Schools you don’t go to (it’s good to branch out)
8. A billboard (this was Denny’s suggestion, but billboards are expensive)
9. NASA (Genny says you might as well aim high)
10. Your principal’s car (Don’t do this. I don’t even know why I wrote it down.

Langston said it, and he’s always in trouble, so don’t listen to him)

When people see your posters, you’ll have members! Sometimes only five. But I have learned that five people are almost too many people to handle, so that could be good.

Now comes the hardest part, which is: *doing interesting things.*

Luckily, with a poetry club (unlike with a trailer park club), there are a lot of different fun things you can do every week. And if your club already has a poetry expert, then you’re ahead of the game. Eddie is our poetry expert, and if we ever forget to bring poems, he has a bunch of them memorized. But for nonexperts, it’s a good idea to check out some poetry books from the library, or from your teacher-leader.

The easiest thing to do is give every week a different theme. A theme is like a topic, and it shouldn’t be too specific. So if one of your themes is “poems about daisies,” it might be better to change

that to “poems about flowers” or “poems about nature” so that you can include more poems. And how much do people really know about daisies, anyway?

(Genny just told me that perfect daisies have thirteen petals. So I guess Genny knows about daisies.)

It’s also a good idea to only do four to five poems per club, *maximum*. More than that, and Langston says most people will just go to sleep.

Along with the poems, you’ll want to do a discussion, which means you should have questions ready to ask. Like, “why do poets think roses are beautiful?” That’s a great question. I just came up with that! And then you can talk about how different poets describe roses. I’m writing this on another piece of paper for myself because this is going to be the theme for next week.

Sometimes even discussions can get boring, though, so Miss Fergusson has been making me plan activities to do just in case. Poetry activities are actually really easy:

1. You can have someone read a poem while the other club members act it out.
2. You can read a poem backward and then vote on whether everyone liked it better frontward or backward.
3. Make everyone draw a picture of what they think the author of the poem looks like. This is no good for Eddie, who already knows what some poets look like and can’t draw anyway, but it works for most people.
4. Sit in a circle and play a rhyming game. This is Langston’s favorite game even though he always loses. Basically you say a word from one of the poems of the day and then go around the circle saying words that rhyme with that word. If someone can’t think of a rhyme in ten seconds, they’re out. And if someone repeats a rhyme, they’re out. The last person left wins (and it’s always Genny).
5. Miss Fergusson and I came up with a really good activity for the end of the year. We’re going to cut out a big tree, and everyone’s going to write their favorite poems on cut-out paper leaves. Then we’ll stick the leaves on the tree and we’ll have a poetree, and Miss Fergusson will hang it up in her classroom!

Finally, you have to have snacks. Sometimes our poetry club runs for over an hour and we all get hungry. So everyone started taking turns bringing in snacks. Genny and Denny always bring in organic stuff, and Eddie brings in bean dip his mom made. Langston brought soda one time, but Miss Fergusson

said no more soda. I used to bring crackers and cheese, but Miss Fergusson is lactose intolerant and can't eat cheese, so I started bringing apple slices instead. I think Mom likes that option because she can get cheap apples if they're bruised just a tiny bit, and then she just cuts out the bruise.

Okay, that is everything I know about starting a club. Oh, except that make sure you do all your homework, because if you don't, your teachers or parents might not let you have your club anymore. Which is what happened to me. I mean, it's not like I didn't turn in *any* homework, so Mr. Savage was obviously just being a—

Miss Fergusson says I should stop writing and just wish you luck. Good luck!

How to Lead a Student Poetry Club

by Robin Herrera, author

Though I never started clubs as a child, I led quite a few of them as an after-school teacher. For teachers who have a student interested in holding a poetry club in their classroom, here's how to ensure it doesn't fizzle out.

SUPPORT

The child or children leading the club should always have some idea of what they're doing, but there will be times when they'll come asking for help—maybe they need to bounce an idea off of you, or they just need an idea *from* you. Be supportive, but make sure to set boundaries. If you give too much help, the child isn't going to get used to planning club activities on her own. A push in the right direction is better than doing the work for the child (even though sometimes it feels like it will be easier if you just do it).

RULES

As the adult in the group, it's your job to set the rules and boundaries of the club, and to make sure others follow them. A good way to set rules is to let the children come up with them—the children will be more likely to follow rules they think are fair, and they're more likely to think rules are fair if they're the ones coming up with them!

SUPPLIES

You're a teacher, so you likely have access to a printer. This will come in handy for printing out poems, activity sheets, articles, and whatever else might be needed for each club meeting. Standard school supplies, like pencils, paper, markers, etc., should also be provided if students aren't normally expected to bring their own. (And if they are, it's every child for herself!)

INFORMATION

It will happen at least once during the course of the club. Someone will give false information, like claiming that Emily Dickinson owned a coyote. All you really need to do when these misinformations happen is pull up a reliable source on your computer (if you have one in your classroom) or bring reliable information to the next club meeting showing the truth. Don't judge the student who said the false information—children will often believe something they've heard until given proof that it isn't true.

(Proof is important. Just telling them the truth without backing it up might prompt something like “Well, my mom said so!”)

SPACE

One of the most important things you will be providing is space. Not just space to sit, but space to think. Some children may come from homes where they feel they cannot speak up, or simply do not wish to speak up. Make sure the atmosphere in your classroom is one in which everyone feels comfortable sitting and speaking. Do this by showing students respect for their ideas and their personal space.

It’s important to respect everyone’s opinion. There may be a student (or two, or three) in the club who doesn’t seem interested, who talks out of turn, or who laughs at what others say. Doing any of these things back to this student, while they are talking, is not the way to curb their behavior. (I learned this the hard way.) Sometimes all it takes is doling out a little responsibility. Having the student read a poem, for example, gives them something to do without feeling like they’re trying too hard. And they’ll try to do it well, in most cases.

If any of your students decide to start a poetry club (or an Emily Dickinson club, or a Langston Hughes club, or a Shel Silverstein club, even), I’d love to hear about it! Drop me a line through Amulet Books (115 West 18th St, Floor 6, New York, NY 10011) or through my website, www.robinherrera.com.