

Excerpt from *Conversations with a Poet: Inviting Poetry into K-12 Classrooms* □  
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## 20 LIST POEM

Recommended for Grades K-12

### BACKGROUND

The list poem or catalog poem consists of a list or inventory of things. Poets started writing list poems thousands of years ago. They appear in lists of family lineage in the *Bible* and in the lists of heroes in the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad*. About 250 years ago, Christopher Smart wrote a famous list poem about what his cat Geoffrey did each morning. It starts with the cat inspecting his front paws and ends with the cat going in search of breakfast. "Cat Bath" on page 132 is a very simple version of the poem about Geoffrey. The famous American poet Walt Whitman is known for the extensive lists in his poetry.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A LIST POEM

- A list poem can be a list or inventory of items, people, places, or ideas.
- It often involves repetition.
- It can include rhyme or not.
- The list poem is usually not a random list. It is well thought out.
- The last entry in the list is usually a strong, funny, or important item or event.

### EVERYDAY PARALLELS

Throughout history, people have kept an inventory of things, from ancestors to possessions. Most everyone is familiar with a grocery list, a homework list, a holiday wish list, and a list of chores. David Letterman is famous for his lists of 10 items on topical subjects. Some popular songs are lists—of positive attributes of a lover, of trials and tribulations, of ways to lose a lover, and more.

### WHAT THIS FORM OFFERS

- The list poem introduces a conventional poetry form.
- It is a very accessible form that is easy and natural for students of all ages to write.
- It lends itself to students' interests or passions, so they can use it to tell their stories.
- It presents a repetitive, sometimes patterned format, in some poems more extensively than others.
- It offers an opportunity to think and talk about sequencing, in the context of a list that is meaningful to a student.

## LIST POEM

### Cat Bath

She licks her neck.  
She licks her nose.  
She licks her legs.  
She licks her toes.  
She licks her tummy,  
She licks her back.

Then she rubs my leg  
to ask for a snack.

### On the Way to School

I find a dark brown penny.  
I pat a friendly cat.  
I slosh through murky puddles.  
I stomp a berry flat.

I tap tap tap with a pointy stick  
on a fence along the block.  
I move a roly poly bug  
and kick a bright white rock.

And when I hear the first bell ring  
I know I might be late.  
I sprint like a racer, full-speed ahead  
and whizz through the school gate!

## LIST POEM

### Signs of Fall

When summer is departing  
and fall is arriving,  
the wind whips through the trees  
and spooks the cat.  
The leaves consider  
wearing bold new colors.  
In the corner of my room  
my mother builds a pile  
of new notebooks and pencils and paper.  
And when I bike past the school,  
I start hoping my new teacher  
isn't too strict  
and that my friends and I  
are all assigned to the same class.

## LIST POEM

### Home

Home is where you  
can shrug off your  
backpack and your  
worries, sling around  
your complaints about  
impossible questions on the science  
test, and supposedly  
best

friends, fling your smelly  
clothes and your towel on  
the floor after a stinging hot

shower, splay on the  
couch and flick off  
your mind with the

remote, brag  
like a hyena about  
the goal that just  
nipped the

goal post, and just be  
yourself (but eventually, you have to explain your test grade, lose the  
argument that TV enhances your homework skills, and especially  
pick up “those filthy clothes and that wet towel that’s ruining the  
carpet. This minute—you heard me!” I do, anyway.)

## *Think-through: My thoughts while writing "Home"*

### **First Thoughts**

In my idea files, I had a list of ideas of things that parents nag their kids about:

- loud music
- homework
- curfew
- too much time playing video games
- being late in the morning to get to school

Some of these topics will appear in other poems, I'm sure.

### **Getting Started**

I think I'll write about the dichotomy between what you wished home was like and what it was really like when you were a teenager.

You wanted to relax. In some ways you could and in some ways you couldn't. I'll write about what I nagged my sons about.

### **First Draft**

#### **Home Is Where**

Home is the place  
where you drop  
your backpack  
and your stories  
and your dirty clothes  
and your troubles  
and your used towels  
and just be yourself

(but mom always makes you put away  
the backpack, clothes, and towels.  
At least my mom does.)

### **Revisions/Experimentation**

I like this poem and I might use it for a younger collection, but this is way too young and not complex enough poetry-wise for middle/high school so I'll change the verbs and play with the line breaks.

I'll make the lines break so that the stanzas run into each other—so that a thought from one stanza is completed in the next stanza. That will force the reader to read on. I'll also end every line in the poem at a place that makes the reader go to the next line.

## Home Is Where

Home is where you  
can shrug off your  
backpack and your

worries, sling around  
your complaints about  
impossible questions on the math test, big  
brothers, and supposedly  
best

friends, fling your dirty  
clothes and your towel on  
the floor after a stinging hot  
shower, splay on the  
couch and flick off  
your mind with the

remote control, dismiss  
the glare that Jimmy zapped  
your way when  
you blamed him in front of

Pam, brag like a hyena about  
the goal that just  
nipped the

goal post, and just be  
yourself (but inevitably you have to explain why the math test was  
so impossible, flick off the TV until all homework is in the can. And  
especially pick up those dirty clothes and that wet towel.)

I'm going to take out the references to the older brother and to Jimmy, the friend, because I'm starting to see a story line where the kid is coming home following an after-school soccer game and the other references are superfluous.

I need to work on the ending to make it feel like an ending. I want it to be more funny than depressing. I'll change "inevitably" to "eventually." I'll put it in quotes so it sounds like the mom is telling the kid to pick things up in a nagging tone. I'll add, "At least I do." to lighten the mood and make it feel like an ending.

New last stanza:

. . . and just be  
yourself (but eventually you have to explain why the math test was  
so impossible, flick off the TV until all homework is done, and espe-  
cially, pick up "those dirty clothes and that wet towel that's ruining  
the wood floor. Right now!" At least I do.)

The ending seems too young, so I'll heighten the attitude a little.

. . . and just be  
yourself (but eventually, you have to explain your test grade, lose  
the argument that TV enhances your homework skills, and especial-  
ly pick up "those filthy clothes and that wet towel that's ruining the  
carpet. This minute—you heard me!" I do, anyway.)

## Final Draft

See page 134.

## Notes about Poems

**Cat Bath:** This is a classic list poem because there is repetition. I hope students don't think they have to rhyme. It would be better if they didn't. I wrote at least a dozen drafts to get this right.

**On the Way to School:** I tried to bring in lots of senses: textures (of a cat), sounds (*slosh, stomp, tap, ring, whizz*). The sounds are all onomatopoeic, or words that mean what they sound like.

**Signs of Fall:** I purposely didn't rhyme this poem. I tried to build strong images that are signs of fall. I changed the verbs to "whips," "spooks" and "builds" to make them more intriguing.

**Home:** See the Think-through on page 135.

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