Analyze Poetic Structure: Stanza and Rhyme

Poetic structure refers to the given pattern of organization in a poem. This may include, among other things, the number of lines in a stanza, the pattern of rhymes, or rhyme scheme, and the number of accents in each line. It also refers to the way a poem develops the central theme—some poems build in a straightforward fashion while others may shift in direction. Because poetry often employs figurative language and unusual syntax, and tends to be organized in a much less predictable way than narrative, readers often dismiss it as too difficult to understand. However, with plenty of practice and support, students will recognize that poetic structure has its own familiar patterns. Establish these patterns with basic four- to six-line stanzas, and provide modeling and practice in connecting the meaning of poems with their overall structures.

Step by Step 30–45 minutes

1. **Introduce and explain poetic structure.**
   - To introduce poetic structure, read aloud and informally discuss a selection of on-level poems. You may wish to invite students to share poems they enjoy.
   - Use the poems from the selection to illustrate that poetry does not follow a traditional narrative structure. Say, *There are many kinds of poems, and while sometimes it can seem like they are free-form and do not follow rules, each poem does have a structure. We call this poetic structure. We look for poetic structure in the way the lines are organized. Today we are going to focus on two devices that make up poetic structure: stanza and rhyme.*
   - Display the term *poetic structure,* and beneath it write *stanza* and *rhyme.*
   - Say, *Stanza is one device that we can look for when we read poems. A stanza is a group of two or more related lines. Stanzas are a lot like paragraphs—they group similar ideas together.*
   - Revisit one of the poems that you read aloud, and draw attention to a stanza to illustrate its meaning. Briefly emphasize how the structure functions to group related ideas or to isolate a concept or event.
   - Then say, *Rhyme is another device that we can look for. When a poem has lines that rhyme, we pay closer attention to the relationship between those lines. Also, when we read the poem aloud, rhyme can make the poem sound musical and quite pleasing to the ear.*
   - Emphasize that learning to recognize stanza, rhyme, and other devices that make up poetic structure will help students to unlock the meaning of poems they read.

2. **Teach and model poetic structure.**
   - Distribute and display an on-level poem that features stanza and rhyme. Choose a poem that has accessible language and concepts that students are likely to understand. Pre-teach vocabulary, figures of speech, and background knowledge as necessary.
   - Read the poem aloud, and then read it again chorally with students. Lead a brief discussion about the poem’s meaning. Ask, *What do you think this poem is about? Why do you think that? Which words seem important? Why? How is the poem like a story? How is it different?*
• Use the first stanza of the poem to model connecting the meaning of the poem with the overall structure. Demonstrate for students how to annotate their copies of the poem as you discuss stanza and rhyme. The following example is based on “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” by William Wordsworth.

The first thing I notice is the stanza structure. I know that a stanza is like a paragraph—it is a group of lines connected by the same idea. Thinking about the meaning in each stanza will help me build an understanding of the whole poem. How can I summarize this stanza? The speaker is wandering and feels lonely and separated from everything else. I can tell this from the simile lonely as a cloud and the description of floating high over the land. The speaker then sees a large group of daffodils swaying in the breeze. This stanza helps to set the stage for the poem. It gives me a mental picture of how the speaker is feeling and what he is seeing.

• Continue to think aloud as you analyze the pattern of rhyme in the poem. Point out how it helps to clarify meaning, and guide students to annotate their poems.

I also notice the pattern of rhyme. Authors use rhyme to draw attention to important words and ideas, and to make the poem sound pleasant when it is read aloud. In this stanza, rhyme helps me see the contrast the author creates, first with cloud and crowd in lines 1 and 3, then with hills and daffodils in lines 2 and 4. I can picture a cloud floating alone in the sky, and contrast that with an image of a crowd—the opposite of alone. Then I can picture big, sprawling hills like what you would see out the window of an airplane. That contrasts with the detail of a small, golden flower “dancing in the breeze”—something you have to be close by to see. The last two lines, called a couplet because they are a rhyming pair, draw special attention to the daffodils.

3 Provide guided practice with poetic structure.

• Reread the second stanza, and continue to analyze the poem. Use questions such as these to guide students’ understanding of the functions of stanza and rhyme. Encourage them to use the language of poetic structure in their answers.

What is a good summary of this stanza?
Which lines are connected by rhyme?
How do the rhyming words bring out the meaning of this stanza?
How do the last two lines, a couplet, draw attention to a particular detail?
How does this stanza build on the first to continue the “story”?

• Discuss students’ answers and have them point to details in the poem that support their ideas.
4 Provide independent practice with poetic structure.

- Have students work in small groups to analyze the remaining stanzas, using the questions from the guided practice.
- Then lead a class discussion to complete the analysis of the poem. Ask the following questions, and encourage students to repeat the language of poetic structure in their responses.

  - Like stories, poems can have a beginning, middle, and end. How does the poet use stanzas to build a kind of story in a similar way?
  - How did noticing the rhyme pattern help you pay closer attention to the poem?
  - How did noticing the rhyme pattern make reading and hearing the poem more enjoyable?
  - Did someone in the poem (such as the speaker) make a decision or discovery? In which stanza does this change take place?
  - What changes occur from the first stanza to the last? Where are the clues?

- Help students understand how the structure contributes to the overall meaning.

Connect to Writing To reinforce the connection between poetic structure and meaning, have students write paraphrased versions of poems. Distribute copies of Poetic Structure T-Chart (page 4) with an accessible poem of six to eight stanzas written in the left column. Read the poem with students. Then model paraphrasing a unit of meaning in the first stanza. Write the paraphrased version on the right side of the chart. Have students continue to paraphrase the poem, working independently or with partners.

5 Continue to teach poetic structure.

- Use a similar approach with varied poems to teach other poetic structures, such as meter (patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables) and repetition.

Check for Understanding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you observe…</th>
<th>Then try…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>difficulty interpreting a poem’s meaning</td>
<td>focusing on mental images the author communicates. Use prompts such as these to focus attention on two or three important images, and then discuss how they contribute to the meaning of the stanza or poem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Listen for the sound of _______. What does _______ look like when _______?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you picture when _______?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>How does _______ feel?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Can you taste the _______? What does it taste like?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Poetic Structure T-Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem: _____________________________</th>
<th>Paraphrase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>by ________________________________</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name: ___________________________________________