A Poetry Curriculum Guide for

Outside the Box
by Karma Wilson

Here's a toolbox of fifteen activities for National Poetry Month in April or for any time. You can use them all in a two-week unit, spread them out across the month, or pick and choose as fits your curriculum. [Relevant Common Core State Standards are listed under each section of the guide.]

About *Outside the Box*

In this anthology of humorous poetry, Karma Wilson uses poetry to celebrate the everyday experiences of children, from boys who want to celebrate Brother's Day, to sledding in winter, to hilarious Halloween shenanigans. She encourages readers and listeners to use both their imaginations and their funny bones to "think outside the box."

Prereading: Setting the Stage

The prereading activities below align with the following Common Core Standards: (SL.1–2.1a) (SL.3–6.1b) (W.1–6.5)

If possible, hide this book, *Outside the Box*, in a box before you begin. Then open the box and remove the book with a flourish. Introduce the title and author of the book. Point out that poet and author Karma Wilson dedicates her book, *Outside the Box*, to Shel S— the much loved and popular poet, Shel Silverstein. Invite students to share their responses to Silverstein's poetry if it is familiar to them. (For example: It's humorous; it is accompanied by pen-and-ink illustrations.) Then encourage them to consider why Wilson chose to dedicate her book to him. (*Outside the Box* is filled with humorous poetry and is illustrated with pen-and-ink sketches by Diane Goode.)

What makes a poem funny? The topic of the poem? The words? The point of view? The surprises? Sometimes, all of these! Invite students to talk about what they think is funny or humorous. Their opinions may vary, of course. As you share the poems from *Outside the Box,* talk about what's funny about each poem and start a "Funny Poem Hall of Fame," listing favorite poems and posting student responses to their favorites. As you move along, challenge students to try writing different kinds of funny poems on their own or with a partner. Conclude by voting on their favorite funny poem—original or published. Karma Wilson invites students to "take a favorite poem and rewrite it sillier" and send it to her. She might post it on her website: http://www.karmawilson.com/.

Activities

The activities below align with the following Common Core Standards: (L.1–6.5) (L.2– 6.3) (L.4–5.5b) (SL.1–2.1a) (SL.2–4.5) (SL.3–6.1b) (SL.3–4.1d) (RF.1–5.4b) (RL.1–6.4,

6) (RL.3.4) (RL.5–6.4) (RL.4–6.1, 2) (RL.2–6.5) (RL.6.9) (W.1–2.6) (W.3–6.2a) (W.3–5.8)

1. The Title Poem: "Outside the Box"
"Outside the box" is the theme poem for the book that gives the book its title and its unifying concept. Read the poem aloud to your students and show them the text after you do so. See if the students notice that the poem is a concrete or shape poem, which means that it takes the structure of its subject—a box. Talk about the idiom or expression, "out of the box." What does that mean to the poem? Challenge them to point out which words or phrases in the poem help explain the phrase, "out of the box."

2. Choral Reading
Poetry is meant to be read aloud, and whenever possible, include audience participation, too. The following poems, in particular, lend themselves to choral reading, with students reading some of the lines while the teacher (or a leader) reads the rest.
- "Sand!" (Students chime in on the repeated exclamation, "Sand!")
- "Monkey Business" (Students can say the emphatic last line, "So there.")
- "The Thing About Puppies" (The teacher reads the first two lines and students read the rest of the poem)

Use VoiceThread or a recording app to tape the choral reading of the poem. Share your recording during morning announcements, just for fun.

3. Poem Themes: Lying
Learning to tell the truth is an important part of growing up, and the distinction between telling deliberate mistruths and enjoying make-believe can be confusing for young children. In this book, the poet looks at the topic of lying in several poems. Read each poem aloud and talk about each of these poems:
- "The Great, Big, Fat, Disgusting Lie" (about how a small fib can turn into a big lie)
- "Professional Liar" (about how writing fiction is somewhat like lying)
- "Jonathon Allen Baker the Liar" (about how storytelling is somewhat like lying)

Discuss: When is lying a bad thing? When is making up stories a good thing?

4. Poem Themes: Fears
Sometimes funny poems can make a serious point. They can make you laugh, but they can make you think, too. Share Karma Wilson's
- "Boogie Man"
- "Sheet!"
- "Alien Under My Bed"

Talk about these poems and how it can help to make fun of our fears.

5. Poetry and Halloween (for April Fools' Day)
Celebrate Halloween in April, on April Fools' Day, if possible. Create a Halloween atmosphere with dim lighting and spooky music or sound effects as you read any of these poems aloud together:
- "Werewolves"

- "Vampires"
- "Thieves"
- "A Halloween Secret"
- "For Pete's Sake!"

Be prepared with a variation on "trick or treat" by offering students the choice of "pick or read"—to choose the next poem or to read it aloud.

6. Poetic Forms: Narrative Poems

A poem that tells a story is one of children's favorite forms of poetry. Share Karma Wilson's fun and silly poem, "Inside, Outside, Upside, Down" (about a brother who wears his coat, walks, sits, and eats all in very unusual ways). Talk about how this kind of poem has a beginning, middle, and end, like a fictional story. Collaborate with students to create a quick glog, or digital interactive poster (using Glogster.com), pulling together images and key words from the poem in a new, visual representation of the poem's story. Show the students the choices of text, fonts, color, graphics, and even animation, if possible, while you input those items and create the finished product. For more examples of narrative poems, look for "Buried Treasure" in Douglas Florian's *Shiver Me Timbers!: Pirate Poems & Paintings* or "God Wrote a Fan Letter" by Cynthia Rylant in *God Got a Dog.*

7. Poetic Forms: Concrete and Shape Poetry

Poets play with the arrangement of words on the page, just as they experiment with the words they choose. We call these poems "concrete" or "shape" poems because the visual arrangement of words helps suggest the subject of the poem. This popular format obviously needs to be displayed or projected while you read the poem(s) aloud. There are several concrete poems in *Outside the Box* to read and share:
- "Outside the Box"
- "Inside Joke"
- "Rain"
- "Gravity"
- "T.P."

Challenge students to create a concrete or shape poem of their own (or with a partner). They can begin by tearing a piece of construction paper in the shape of their subject (e.g., an animal, plant, or classroom object). Then they can write the poem around the perimeter of that torn paper. Display their concrete creations.

8. Poetic Forms: Parody

Older students will enjoy exploring the twist of the poem parody. Karma Wilson includes "Alan Had a Little Frog," a parody of "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in *Outside the Box.* Read it out loud without telling students the poem it parodies and see if the students can guess the original source. Next, students can work with a partner to create their own parodies of favorite nursery rhymes. Post them alongside versions of the originals. Wilson has even more poem parodies in another poetry collection, *What's the Weather Inside?,* including: "Miss Muffet's Revenge," "The Beast and the Beauty," "Golden Eggs," "Mary Had an Appetite," and "Rapunzel, Rapunzel."

9. Poem Devices: The Surprise Ending
Sometimes poets use the element of surprise to add some fun to a poem. Read any of these poems from *Out of the Box* out loud and tell students to listen for a twist at the end:
- "The Gymnast" (the gymnast is not the typical acrobat, he is an acro-bat)
- "Master Wrapper" (a beautifully wrapped gift contains an empty box)
- "The Last Gift" (a beautifully wrapped, much anticipated gift contains a disappointing present)
- "Gamer" (the person monopolizing a new video game is Dad)

Talk about how the poet leads us to expect one thing by listing the details and attributes that typically describe something but then surprises us by turning the tables with a "big reveal" of a different subject. For more examples of surprise endings, seek out "Pirate Punishment" and "Blackbeard" and "Me Pirate Weapons" in Douglas Florian's *Shiver Me Timbers!: Pirate Poems & Paintings*.

10. Poetry and Point of View
A poem can reflect how our point of view shapes how we feel about something—positively or negatively. Read one of these two poems and talk about how the poet communicates a viewpoint:
- "Brother's Day" (brother's vs. sister's point of view)
- "Sledding (Downhill)" and "Sledding (Uphill)" (the pros and cons of sledding)

Encourage students to fold a sheet of paper in half and list the pros presented in the poem(s) on the left side and the cons on the right side. Do they agree with the poet? Why or why not? For another unusual example of point of view in poetry, seek out "God Went to India" in Cynthia Rylant's *God Got a Dog*.

11. Poem Devices: Idioms and Expressions
Poets can use idioms and expressions that are part of conversational speech in unexpected ways. Sometimes these idioms and expressions need explaining to children who are not yet familiar with some of these phrases. Here Karma Wilson provides several poems that provide fun opportunities to do just that.
- "Outside the Box" (thinking "outside the box" is thinking creatively)
- "Inside Joke" (an "inside joke" is only understood among a select group with a shared experience)
- "Greekwich" ("It's all Greek to me" refers to something that is completely unfamiliar, as the Greek language might be for non-Greek speakers)

Challenge students to work with a partner to sketch a cartoon of the literal interpretation of one of these poem idioms or expressions. Then compare their various visual interpretations and post their drawings alongside a copy of their chosen poems.

12. Poetry, Words, and Wordplay
Many poets enjoy using their poetic license to make up new words or to use words in clever puns in their poems. Read aloud any of these poems and encourage students to listen for the "weird" words.
- "Oh, Deer!" (contrasting "reindeer" with "rain-deer")
- "Pigasus" (suggesting a flying pig can be a "pigasus" similar to the winged horse, Pegasus)

- "Definition of a Unicorn" (contrasting the word "unicorn" with the roots "uni and corn")
- "Horaceopotamus" (blending the name "Horace" with the word "hippopotamus" and adding "otamus" to the ends of other words too)

Create a Weird Word Wall to highlight these and any other unusual poem words that students notice and enjoy. Discuss the double meaning or word derivation behind the pun or word coining so that everyone is clear where the humor comes from. Younger children and students learning English as a new language may need a bit of guidance in understanding wordplay and puns. Douglas Florian's poetry is also full of wordplay. For two recent examples, look for "Pyrates" and "Arrr!" in his pirate poetry collection, *Shiver Me Timbers!: Pirate Poems & Paintings*.

13. Poetry and Nonfiction
Pairing nonfiction or informational books and poetry may seem to be an unlikely partnership at first, but these two different genres can complement one another by showing children how writers approach the same topic in very different and distinctive ways. In addition, children will see that they can learn a lot of information from both a poem and a work of nonfiction. Start by reading aloud any of these three examples by Karma Wilson:
- "Dorks and Geeks" (inventors and scientists who make history)
- "You're No Lady" (ladybugs can be either female or male)
- "The Law of Gravity" (gravity)

Use library time to locate nonfiction books on the poem topic. Students can create poem bookmarks by choosing one of these poems to retype, recopy, or photocopy and illustrate. They can then insert their finished bookmarks into related nonfiction books as a poetry surprise for future readers.

14. Poetry: Fun with Fonts
How the poem looks on the page is something poets think about too. In these examples, the poet uses unusual or oversize fonts for presenting the poems. Be sure to show the poem while you read it aloud.
- "Outside the Box" (Sideways poem with text in an oversize "O" ending with text in a box shape)
- "Rain" (Sideways poem with all letters and words presented vertically)
- "Laugh It Up" (Sideways poem with large white text on a black background)
- "Voices in My Head" (Sideways poem with giant letters, plus words of varying size within phrases)

Talk with students about how the size, color, and orientation of the words conveys part of the meaning or impact of the poem. Type one of these poems in a typical or normal size font and then contrast this version with the original poem. How does the effect or impact change?

15. Poetry and Technology: The Moon
Sometimes it's fun to make connections between poetry and technology. For example, these three poems by Karma Wilson feature the subject of the moon:
- "Man in the Moon" (Is there an actual man in the moon?)

- "Shades of Gray" (What color is the moon?)
- "Sunrise" (The sun is "shooing away the dark of night.")

Use images of the moon from online resources at Space.com or SolarSystem.NASA.gov as a visual backdrop as you read these poems aloud. Then spend a few minutes talking about how the poet describes the moon. What descriptive words, phrases, or images are used? Then work together to fact-check those details against scientific sources.