

Science & Poetry Starter Ideas From The Tree that Time Built by Mary Ann Hoberman and Linda Winston

In the notes below I briefly describe one or two things that each poem does, and my notes constitute a list of “starter” ideas for your own science poems. You can scan the list for an inspiring starter idea, or you can read the poems first, pick one that inspires, and then find the poem on my starter idea list.

Page Number / Starter Idea

Oh, fields of wonder: poems about pondering mysteries and beginnings

- 4 marvels at the origin of things
- 5 admires a repeating shape in nature
- 6 wonders about the microscopic world
- 7 sees something profound in the tiny details
- 8 explores an unseen world; repeats sounds for emphasis
- 9 plays with the paradox of being two things at once
- 10 finds the extraordinary in the ordinary; leads to a larger metaphorical point
- 11 finds wonder in nature’s splendor
- 13 compares nature to our own activities; finding what we need in nature
- 15 asks ‘what if’ animals could speak; wonders about different perceptions of animals and humans;

The sea is our mother: poems about deep time, life’s origins and adaptability

- 20 personifies an element of nature; repeats sounds for a musical effect
- 21 uses irregular rhyme; the pacing and repetition convey a sense of persistence, determination; repeats sounds for a musical quality
- 22 uses similes and metaphors to paint a vivid picture; starts and ends a poem with the same word for an ‘echo’ effect
- 23 plays with words: ‘star’ is both an astronomical feature and a celebrity
- 24 connects humans to the history of life
- 25 uses humor; in this case the poet imagines a rivalry between species; celebrates the durability of uncelebrated species
- 26 uses a Q and A format; writes in an animal’s voice or point of view
- 27 uses a ‘borrowed’ form, in this case a ‘for rent’ ad; anthropomorphizes an animal
- 28 ponders imponderable things like deep time
- 29 ascribes human feeling to something inanimate
- 30 starts with something big and progresses to something small
- 31 surprises the reader with an unexpected conclusion; emphasizes meaning with the sounds of words

Prehistoric praise: poems about fossils

- 36 sings the praises of unsung heroes in nature; treats the ordinary and mundane as extraordinary
- 38 turns a writing convention upside down; in this case ‘once upon a time’ comes at the end instead of the beginning; writes about the relative nature of time
- 39 writes about the similarities between us and other species
- 40 directly addresses the subject in a ‘poem of address’
- 41 uses a ‘borrowed’ form, in this case, an obituary; backs up whimsy with research
- 42 uses an irregular pattern of rhyme; writes about extinct animals
- 43 marvels at an astonishing scientific fact
- 44 tries to reconcile what is known intellectually with what is felt emotionally

Think like a tree: poems about plants

- 50 provides instructions; in this case, tells how to be a tree
- 51 looks ahead to the future; rhymed couplets
- 52 uses unexpected and fresh combinations of words (autumns of patience); offers advice to the young in a fresh way
- 53 examines a paradox (ex: if you dissect beauty, you can't see it; if you stand back, you can)
- 54 observes a relationship between species in nature
- 55 comments on the endurance and stamina of life
- 56 uses an extended metaphor
- 57 advises how to accept our place in the natural world
- 58 personifies an element of nature; uses language that creates a mood
- 59 explores the relativity of time
- 60 uses assonance to create a coherent feel; uses repetition to emphasize a point; persona poem, first person plural point of view
- 62 expresses gratitude for the beauty of something; rhymed couplets
- 63 examines our disconnect with nature in a child's voice
- 65 asks a question, the poem answers it; in this case, the answer is an extended metaphor
- 67 explores cause and effect
- 68 reminds how we need nature's inspiration; we're diminished without it

Meditations of a tortoise: poems about reptiles, amphibians

- 74 uses humor to write about the uniqueness of each individual
- 75 modifies an existing document into a poem; 'found' poem
- 76 picks one example that illustrates a scientific concept, in this case, camouflage
- 77 expresses sadness at the extinction of a species; sets words apart to emphasize them
- 78 makes an ordinary thing extraordinary
- 79 observes something very, very closely; show, don't tell
- 80 asks 'what if...?'; in this case, what if I were to become a snake?
- 81 provides instructions; a quatrain, rhyme scheme is ABAB
- 82 turns a storytelling convention on its head; an untransformed dead frog is the prince
- 83 provides a snapshot of nature; haiku; poem about a small discovery
- 84 focuses on wordplay, repetition and rhyme to create delight
- 85 focuses on one small aspect of a larger subject
- 86 juxtaposes science and origin tales; persona poem, an animal's point of view

Some primal termite: poems about insects

- 92 just plain silliness
- 93 celebrates the mundane, the insignificant things in nature
- 94 focuses on a famous person/scientist, and how he/she advanced scientific knowledge
- 96 just plain silliness
- 97 whimsically compares insects to humans
- 98 focuses on a really odd aspect of an animal; asks 'what if...?'
- 99 uses a regular and logical form to describe an animal 'scientist'
- 101 discovers things in unexpected places
- 102 tells us how humans can learn from animals
- 103 haiku; describes the steps of a scientific phenomenon (in this case, in just six words)
- 104 uses enjambment to avoid a sing-song feel to a rhymed poem; reminds us that life is short, maybe predictable, but still worth living
- 105 expresses curiosity, asks Qs; poem of address
- 106 uses a title that carries two meanings; wonders about the meaning of death
- 108 describes a fascinating scientific fact
- 110 describes something odd or amazing in nature, then relates it to people

- 111 uses humor to help convey a scientific concept
- 112 describes the activities of animals in human activity terms
- 113 tells a story with great verbs; poem of address

Everything that lives wants to fly: poems about animals that fly

- 118 understands science from a Native American point of view
- 119 repeats lines to emphasize them
- 120 treats serious scientific subjects with humor and delight
- 121 identifies with wild creatures; in this case, the writer and the birds are seed eaters; fresh adjectives
- 122 expresses gratitude for the pleasure that nature offers us
- 123 provides a list with a texture theme
- 124 wonders about nature's mysteries
- 125 inspires flight of fancy from real scientific fact
- 126 closely observes odd behavior; an accessible introduction to a sophisticated scientific concept
- 127 offers fresh look at a slightly scary animal

I am the family face: poems about heredity, making connections

- 132 speaks from the point of view of an inanimate, abstract concept
- 133 borrows the appealing form, rhythm, and cadence of a well-loved poem
- 134 empathizes with a captive animal
- 135 empathizes with a captive animal; haunting simile
- 136 just plain silliness
- 137 uses free verse to describe the differences between us and other animals
- 138 offers a different take (from previous poem) on the differences between us and other animals
- 139 uses a refrain, varying it just a bit each time; wordplay enhances the experience of reading it
- 141 compares two seemingly dissimilar things, in this case, sheep and rocks
- 142 identifies with (or connects with) an animal
- 143 uses extremes: the smallest something, biggest something, tallest, shortest, etc.
- 144 thinks about how different creatures and things 'see' the world and perceive truth; in this case, an embryo can't 'see' beyond the womb, therefore, the wider world doesn't exist

Hurt no living thing: poems about examining the present, contemplating the future

- 150 instructs (do this, don't do that)
- 151 seizes the moment, enjoys each moment
- 152 presents a paradox about our brief moment on the planet
- 153 names symbols or markers for the seasons
- 154 suggests that beauty doesn't last, is easily destroyed
- 155 mourns the loss of beauty in nature; uses alliteration to increase the impact of the message
- 157 describes an extinct animal
- 158 gets extra mileage out of words; in this case, takes advantage of the name of an endangered animal
- 160 marks the extinction of a species — with humor?
- 161 uses 'circle' writing; poem ends with the first line; uses assonance and alliteration to increase the beauty and poetic quality of the language
- 162 mourns the decline of a spectacular natural phenomenon
- 163 poses the question: how are we treating the earth?
- 164 poses the question: what's to become of us?
- 165 suggests we are tied to the earth, can't escape it
- 166 reminds us we often can't understand home unless we've explored far-away places
- 167 tells us that even though one person seems insignificant, he/she is part of a larger world
- 168 modifies an existing document; found poem
- 171 reminds us we are part of a larger continuity, can't escape it, but it can also comfort us