

Topic: Poetry about the Magna Carta

Level: B2

Time: 75 minutes + 20 minutes for the optional haiku activity

Aims

- To improve pronunciation through rhyme and rhythm activities
- To use descriptive language to write short poems (haikus)
- To analyse poetry relating to the Magna Carta

Introduction

In this lesson, students analyse three extracts from Magna Carta-related poems. Although the vocabulary will be challenging for many students, the worksheets and activities are designed to make these texts accessible. The haiku writing activity (Task 9) is optional.

Preparation

The four pages of worksheets can be copied double-sided.

Three audio files are available with the lesson.

There is a **PowerPoint file**, enabling you to project the photograph of Runnymede for **Task 3**.

Procedure

Warmer – Magna Carta: the basics (5 minutes)

- Ask students what they know about the Magna Carta and to share knowledge with the class.
- Distribute the worksheet. Give the students 3–4 minutes to read the text and answer the questions.

Answers: 1 false 2 true 3 false

Task 1 – rhyming words in poem 1: *King John* (15 minutes)

- Ask students for examples of words which **rhyme**, e.g. *cat/fat*, *John/gone*. Elicit that the end of the words sound the same.
- Explain that in English poetry, pairs of lines often end with words which rhyme.
- Do the first example together – read the first line and elicit that *charter* rhymes with *tartar*.
- Students work individually to complete the blanks.
- Ask students to work in pairs and read the poem aloud to check the rhymes.
- Play the recording so students can check their answers.
- Ask if students noticed the strong **rhythm** of the recording. (*The poem has four stressed syllables in each line. The unstressed syllables fit into the gaps between the stressed syllables.*¹)
- Listen again to the recording then ask the students to practise in pairs.

¹ A more technical explanation is that English is a stress-timed language, meaning that stressed syllables have roughly an equal distance between them so that unstressed syllables slow down or speed up, depending on how many must be fitted in.

Answers: charter Runnymede day want Harpenden here John

- Fast finishers can move on to Task 2.

Task 2 – listening and speaking: *King John* (10 minutes)

- Get the students to discuss the questions. Answers will vary, but it is a comic poem which focuses on human weakness rather than on the gravity of the historical event.

Task 3 – describing nature (5 minutes)

- Show **slide 2 of the PowerPoint file**
- Read the instruction and ask the students to discuss in pairs
- Take some whole class feedback. Elicit descriptive vocabulary and write it on the board if new.

Task 4 – reading and listening to poem 2: *The Genius of the Thames* (10 minutes)

- Explain that poem 2 is the oldest of the three poems, and the language is both old-fashioned and poetic.
- Tell students to read it, using the glossary. Deal with any queries they may have.

Task 5 – the meaning and rhythm of poem 2: *The Genius of the Thames* (5 minutes)

- Play the recording. Ask the students to read and follow it, paying attention to the stress and rhythm. While there is a stress pattern and some rhyming, it is not as regular as the first poem.
- Students practise reading the poem aloud in pairs.

Answer: **a.** Lines 1–4 describe a beautiful and peaceful meadow. Lines 5–8 describe an event in that meadow, i.e. brave people challenged the king's power.

b. We know it is the Magna Carta from several clues: the location on the Thames; the tents and shield tell us it is before modern weapons; the tyrant king being challenged.

Task 6 – vocabulary for poem 3: *The Reeds of Runnymede* (10 minutes)

- Give students five minutes to match the vocabulary with the definitions.
- Explain that the poem they will hear and read in Task 7 uses this vocabulary.

Answers

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|
| 1. e | 3. g | 5. b | 7. f |
| 2. h | 4. a | 6. d | 8. c |

Task 7 – reading and discussing poem 3: *The Reeds of Runnymede* (10 minutes)

- Explain that the students are going to listen to and read a third poem about the Magna Carta, and that they will be asked to explain the meaning of the poem after hearing it.
- Play the recording, asking students to read while they listen.
- Ask the students to work in small groups and explain the meaning of the poem, using simple language, starting 'This poem is about the Magna Carta, which was signed at Runnymede. It was here that ...'
- Take some whole class feedback.

Answers

There are many ways to explain the meaning of the poem but the following are key points. People have rights (as long as they are freemen, i.e. citizens rather than serfs). These rights mean they cannot be made to pay money/fines, be put in jail or have their land taken away, unless this is passed in a law court by a jury.

Task 8 – discussing the three poems (5 minutes)

- Ask students to reflect on the three poems by discussing the questions in small groups.

Suggested answers:

- Poem 1 is a poem for children because of the rhythm, rhyme and comedy.*
- Poem 3 is the most political as it describes the contents of the Magna Carta.*
- Poem 2 describes the setting and the event.*
- students' own answers*

Task 9 – writing inspired by Haiku (optional – 20 minutes)

- Read the description of haiku poetry and answer any questions about the vocabulary.
- Read the example haiku in the box and ask the students to discuss in pairs whether they think it is effective (there is no right answer; 'history' needs to be pronounced with three syllables *hi-sto-ry* in order for the final line to have the required number of syllables).
- Take some whole class feedback.
- Students work in pairs to make two haikus from the six lines given.

Suggested answers: *In June, twelve fifteen*
King John's power was challenged
And people gained rights

White swans glide smoothly
Children race to the water
Summer by the Thames

- Use the supplementary question for fast finishers: Are there any other combinations (remembering the 5-7-5 rule) which make good poems? Why?/Why not?
- Students to write their own haikus and share with the class. (This can also be set as homework.)