Hands around the Christmas tree

By A.F. Harrold

For teachers: introduction and history
Every December in Trafalgar Square in central London a huge Christmas tree – seventy feet tall (over twenty metres) – is put up and covered in lovely lights. Did you know that this tree is a gift from the city of Oslo, and that a tree has been given each year for over sixty-five years?

A tree was first given in 1947 as a token of gratitude for British support for Norway during the Second World War. Britain had supported the government of King Haakon VII who was exiled in London after Norway was invaded by Nazi forces in 1940. Since then a tree is given each year from the city of Oslo to the city of Westminster as a symbol of continued thanks.

For the last eight years The Poetry Society has collaborated with the Royal Norwegian Embassy, the Office of the Mayor of Oslo and Westminster City Council to organise an exciting and unique annual poetry programme, using the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree as a focal point.

The Society commissions a poet to write a new poem each year to be displayed around the base of the tree. The poem is inspired by many hundreds of poems written by Westminster primary school children who go to school near Trafalgar Square.

This year A.F. Harrold is writing a new poem for the tree. He has provided worksheets for your class and an outline for his Christmas tree poem. You can use it to produce your very own poems in celebration of friendship, like the friendship between Britain and Norway that is symbolised by the Trafalgar Square tree.

Use the two exercises below to gather together some ideas before having a go at writing an A.F. Harrold-style poem using Exercise 3.
Hi there!

My name is Ashley. It says ‘A.F. Harrold’ on the front of the books that I write (story books and poetry books!), but you can call me Ashley, because that’s what my friends call me.

I’ve been asked to write a poem for the enormous Christmas Tree that stands in Trafalgar Square each year. You might not know but this tree is sent all the way from Norway, by the Mayor of Oslo, as a gift to London. It’s a ‘thank you’ to the people of Britain for being friends with Norway, and helping them during the Second World War.

This year the theme for the Christmas Tree’s poem is ‘Friendship’, which is really fitting, since that’s why the tree’s here in the first place. I’d like us to think about some of the things that friendship means, and how we feel about our friends, and use those thoughts to make our own poems for the Christmas Tree.

Today I think we should make that Christmas Tree feel welcome – after all, it’s all on its own in a new country. It doesn’t know anyone yet, so we should all go out of our ways to show it that we can be good friends to it, that we’ll include it in our games and our thoughts so it doesn’t feel so lonely or left out.

So, follow me and I’ll give you some tips and pointers to get your poems going.

Good luck!

Ashley
Poet and children’s writer
Hands around the Christmas Tree
Notes for teachers

I want to encourage some creative and poetic thinking about friendship, what it means and how we might express that. And to help with this I’ve set two exercises to help the kids create a bank of ideas and lines: I’ve given you the skeleton of a poem, with a beginning and an end, into which those ideas can be slotted. It’s important to remember that while some pupils might need that framework and might follow the ‘rules’ exactly, it’s only a guide and if they go off and make a whole new poem, ignoring my frame, that’s fine by me!

One of my novels, a book called *The Imaginary*, is about a girl and her imaginary friend, and another book, *The Song From Somewhere Else*, is about a girl who is being bullied and who gets ‘rescued’ (sort of) by the kid in her class who everyone ignores and whispers about (“He’s got fleas”), but she grudgingly becomes his friend. It’s worth remembering that friendship comes in all shapes and sizes – some friends are obvious, some are imaginary (or teddy bears), some are our brothers and sisters or our grandparents, some are penpals, some are just that kid who helped us out that time when we’re in trouble but never really knew...

Before doing any writing, have a conversation in class about friends – not about who in the class is friends with who else in the class, necessarily – but about other examples, maybe from books. Who can think of some friends they’ve read about: Pooh and Piglet, Batman and Robin, Moomintroll and Snufkin? How do you know they’re friends? What do they do for each other?

**Introducing the exercises**
The following two exercises can be done in either order. In both cases there’s an explanatory passage, which you can read out and discuss with the class and then a writing task.

In **Exercise 1**, the pupils can work their way through their senses to create their memories: the smell of this ___ or the taste of that ___, but they can approach these more obliquely, and more descriptively – the potent whiff of mum’s perfume or the gloriously fizzy fountain. If they can come up with examples of varying lengths, that will allow them to play with the rhythm of their final poem – so a line like the taste of chocolate is actually fine if it can be counterbalanced by the tickling giggle-making stroke of a swan’s feather along the back of my neck when I wasn’t expecting it. Variety is your friend! Sometimes add more and more details, sometimes pare them away.
This advice goes for Exercise 2 as well, with regards to variety and length and detail. Kids might be tempted to write only true things, but they should feel free to make it all up. They may never have fallen out of an aeroplane, but they might want to write: *When I fell out of the aeroplane, you packed a parachute in my lunch box, next to the ham and pickle sandwich.*

We’re not writing the sort of lines that necessarily need similes in, but again, if they appear, or if you see somewhere one might fit – it’s up to you, for example: *When I fell out of the aeroplane, you gave me a parachute that opened up as big as a football field and floated me to safety.*

Finally, turn to Exercise 3 and use your ideas to create your very own Christmas poem.

About the author

A.F. Harrold is an English poet who writes for both kids and adults. His books for children include the poetry collection *Things You Find In A Poet’s Beard* (illustrated by Chris Riddell), the very funny *Greta Zargo and the Death Robots from Outer Space* (illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton), and the slightly spooky book *The Imaginary* (illustrated by Emily Gravett). He has a beard and often visits schools, libraries and literary festivals to wave it around while reciting poetry at kids. He lives in Reading with a stand up comedian and two cats. A.F. Harrold. Photo: Naomi Woddis.
Friends share things

The Christmas holidays are coming up and soon school will break up and a lot of people will be going their different ways for a while. Some people will be going off to visit family in other places, other towns, cities or countries even. Or they’ll have family coming to stay with them, and sometimes Christmas gets so busy you might not see your friends until the New Year!

Imagine you could give them a few things to remember you by. What would they be? Unlike Granny, who you have to give that talcum powder and ninja costume to (because they were on her list), a friend doesn’t need an expensive gift, they just want something that comes from the heart, something they can put in an imaginary pocket and know is always there.

So we’re going to give our friend a memory, rather than a thing, maybe a memory of something you’ve shared. Let me give you a few examples…

‘The sound of my laugh when the squirrel fell out of the tree’

‘The burn-your-mouth chilli we ate by the campfire’

‘The smell of the toasted cheese sandwich your mum makes when we have a sleepover’

‘The buzzing purr of the cat on the sofa when we try to watch TV’

‘The rainbow we watched from the car as we ate our picnic’

Do you see each one of those examples used a different sense? That’s a good way of coming up with memories: the smell of ___ , the sound of ___ and so on. Try to add some detail to make the memory (and it can be a made up memory) specific, so it’s not just ‘the taste of sweets’ – what sweets? Where did you eat them?

Make them memories you’d like to share with your friend, memories you’d like to remember. See if you can come up with four or five or six of them...

All illustrations by Gemma Correll. gemmacorrell.com
Friends help each other

What’s brilliant about friends is that they’re not just there when you’re feeling good and when you’re having fun. They’re also there for you when things aren’t going so well, when the world isn’t smiling on you. They’re the people who will listen to you grumble and listen to you moan and put an arm around you when you need an arm around you and will try to say the right thing, even if sometimes it doesn’t work.

I’d like you to have a think about what you’d do for a friend who’s having a hard time, and what you’d like to do for them.

When [this thing happens to me] you always [do this].

For example: When I fall down you help me up.
Or: When I’m feeling sad you give me a fresh hanky.

And you can turn it around the other way.

When you tread on a hedgehog I help you pick the prickles out of your foot.

When you eat dad’s burn-your-mouth chilli I pour milk into your mouth.

So your examples can be serious, or can be funny. It’s about how friends help each other, in good times and bad times, because that’s what friends do.

Make some of them simple: When I am sad you cheer me up.

And make some of them complicated with lots of details: When I am feeling sad because I fell off my bike on the same day that my football team lost their most important match of the season you showed me a photo of a goat up a tree.

Mixing up short ones and long ones give you a nice amount of variety for your poem (and also, photos of goats up trees are brilliant).
Let’s make a poem together

Hands around the Christmas Tree

From forest dark to bright-lit square
this tree has travelled over the sea,
a gift to share, for friendship’s sake
from them to us, from you to me.

‘I’ve left my friends in Norway’s cold.
I’m stood here in the square.
Surrounded by my new friends here,
who’ve come along to share…’

‘Here we are sailing the friendship together
through hot or cold or stormy weather.
Through winter’s blast or summer’s sun
we stand strong when we stand as one,
because…’

‘We’re friends, my friend, friends indeed,
I’ve come to you from across the sea
and it’s me and you and you and me –
link your hands around me: the tree!’

What shall I do?
You could add extra lines of your own in the spaces
or take some out, or change it all around and make
a new poem. It’s up to you because this is your poem!

What goes here? Use some of your memories from
Exercise 1. You might begin them by saying ‘We give
you the ___’ or ‘I give you the ___’ or ‘Remember the
___’ or ‘There’s the ___’ or you might continue in the
tree’s voice and just begin ‘the ___’. It’s up to you, but
let’s give the tree some nice memories.

What about here? Insert some examples of how friends
help one another from Exercise 2. For example: ‘When
you fall over, I help you up.’

WELL DONE! You’ve written your very own Christmas
tree poem!