



# Writing poetry in Scots

Resource to support writing  
poetry in Scots in the  
secondary classroom

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Age 12-18

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CFE Levels Third, Fourth  
and Senior Phrase

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## How to use this resource

This resource will primarily be relevant to English Departments but may also support other secondary departments who are engaging with the Scottish Studies Award, as well as teachers and staff wishing to increase their knowledge about Scots.

This resource is designed to foster confident use and development of language skills, and to encourage self-directed learning and self-expression, through the writing of poetry in the Scots language.

The activities are not sequential, and are differentiated across a range of abilities. However, as Activity 1 is intended to act as a brief introduction to writing in Scots, and to encourage confident usage of Scots in poetry, it form a useful starting point from which to engage with subsequent activities.

Activities include reading, writing and speaking in Scots and cover a variety of outcomes for Talking and Listening, Reading and Writing for the Curriculum for Excellence. All activities aim to:

‘Enhancing skills in literacy, developing successful learners and confident individuals’.

# Activity 1: Oor Scots, Your Scots

LIT 3-02a

It can be very difficult to explain exactly what Scots is, but most of us recognise it when we hear it. Scots is all around us, and we encounter it everywhere we go – in our homes and our schools, on television and on the radio. When somebody tells us to “*keep the heid*” or to “*gie it laldy!*” we usually know what they mean, even if we don’t know exactly **how** we know!

Many of us hear Scots a lot in our everyday lives, but we don’t tend to see it written down quite so often. (This is changing, though, as more and more people use Scots in text messages, websites, and social media.) Because of this, it can be difficult to know how to spell our own Scots when we start writing it down. For instance, should we write “*gonnae no*” or “*gonny no*”? “*Fitba*” or “*fitbaw*”? “*Glaikit*” or “*glaikeit*”?

But the truth is, there’s no right or wrong way to write in Scots. For hundreds or years, poets and writers have been writing down their own Scots in their own way. When you look up a word in the [Dictionary of Scots Language](#), for example, you’ll be shown all the different ways that writers have spelled that particular word – sometimes there are dozens of different spellings of just one word! So the most important thing when you write in Scots is to write your *own* Scots, the way it sounds to you in your *own* head.

On the “Ma Scots Wird List” worksheet (appendix 1), you’ll find a few weel-kent Scots words, such as “*dug*”, “*hoose*” and “*greetin*”, along with plenty of space to write some Scots words of your own. Working alone at first, take a few minutes to add some of your favourite Scots words to the worksheet, along with their English definitions. Spell them however they sound to you when you say them, out loud or in your head!

Next, in groups of three or four, compare your list of Scots words with the lists of those around you. Things you might want to talk about to include:

- Are there any words which you hadn’t heard of before? If so, can the person who has written them down explain what the word means and where they first heard it?
- Are there any words on other people’s lists which you would spell differently? Compare how the word sounds when different people say it out loud. Are your pronunciations different from each other? How would *you* spell this word, and why?
- Are there any words which have more than one meaning? Some words mean very different things in different parts of Scotland. For instance, ‘*doss*’ can mean either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, depending on where you’re from!
- Has anyone else written down a Scots word you particularly like? If so, add it to your own list.

- If you or anyone else is not sure whether a particular word is Scots, look it up in the [Dictionary of Scots Language](#). Is it there? If not, why do you think this is?

## Activity 2: Acrostic poetry

LIT 3-20a, LIT 3-23a, LIT 3-24a

An acrostic poem is a poem where the first letter of every line spells out a word when you read it from top to bottom. Very often, this word is the name of the person, place, or feeling that the poem is about. For example, here is an acrostic poem about Glasgow (or, in Scots, *Glesga*):

*Gallus and great*

*Like a lost luve*

*Ever growin, ever new*

*Stoatin city*

*Gallus and great*

*Aw mine, aw mine!*

Pick a Scots word to form the basis of an acrostic poem of your own. (It may help to have a look at your Scots word list before choosing a word.) This could be a person, a place, an animal, an emotion... anything you like, or that interests you!

Some useful tips for writing acrostic poem:

- Very often, each line of an acrostic poem will in some way describe the thing that the poem is about. So it might be useful, before you start, to make a list of Scots words which describe the subject of your poem. Scots has lots of great words which let the reader how something looks, or smells, or moves, or makes you feel. Listing some of these words will make it a lot easier to plan out your poem.
- Acrostic poems don't have to rhyme, or have the same numbers of words in every line – although they can, if you'd like! But the main thing is to really get over a strong impression of what the subject of the poem means to you, personally.
- When you're writing your acrostic poem, try not to use the name of the thing that you've chosen as your subject. Finding ways of describing something without actually saying what that thing is a big part of the fun of poetry!

## Activity 3: Haiku

LIT 3-20a, LIT 3-23a

Haiku are a form of very short Japanese poetry. A haiku consists of only three lines. The first line contains five syllables, the second line seven, and the last line five again, as in this very famous haiku by Matsuo Basho:

*The old pond is still  
A frog leaps right into it  
Splashing the water*

Haiku are often brief snapshots of nature or of everyday life, and because of this they work especially well in Scots!

Some tips for writing haiku in Scots:

- A good way to think about a haiku is as a moment that has been frozen in time. Imagine using a camera to take two photographs of the same thing or event, one a split-second after the other. Use the first two lines of your haiku to describe the first photograph, then use the third line to describe the second photograph. Show what has changed in that brief moment.
- Because haiku are so short, you can really focus on finding the *exact* words that you're looking for. Have a good look through the [Dictionary of the Scots Language](#), the [Online Scots Dictionary](#), or any other Scots dictionaries you can find, and see if you can find any unusual or interesting Scots versions of the words in your poem.

## Activity 4: Burns Stanza

LIT 4-20a, LIT 4-23a

The Burns Stanza is a poetic form which, as the name suggests, is closely associated with Scots poetry and Robbie Burns. Although Burns did not invent this form of poetry, he implemented it with such great effect in poems such as "To a Mouse" and "Address to the Deil" that the form is now not only named after him, but is recognised all over the world as a standard of Scots poetry.

The most noticeable thing about the Burns Stanza is that although it is six lines long, it only contains two rhymes. The first, second, third, and fifth lines all end with the same rhyme, whilst the fourth and six lines end with a different rhyme. Also, the

fourth and sixth lines are much shorter than the other lines – they are usually only four or five syllables long, whereas the other lines tend to be eight or nine syllables long.

This all sounds a lot more complicated than it is! So much of Scotland’s best-known poetry was written in Burns Stanza that most of us recognise how it works just from seeing or hearing it. Here’s a couple of examples from Burns himself:

*Wee, sleekit, cow’rin, tim’rous beastie,*

*O, what a panic’s in thy breastie!*

*Thou need na start awa sae hasty,*

*Wi’ bickering brattle!*

*I wad be laith to rin an’ chase thee,*

*Wi’ murd’ring pattle!*

(From “To a Mouse”)

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us*

*To see oursels as ithers see us!*

*It wad frae monie a blunder free us,*

*An’ foolish notion:*

*What airs in dress an’ gait wad lea’e us,*

*An’ ev’n devotion!*

(From “To a Louse”)

Many Scots poems, even to this day, are written in the Burns Stanza. So why not give it a go yourself?

Some tips for writing a Burns Stanza:

- Before starting your Burns Stanza, remember that for lines 1-3 and 5, you will need *four* different words which all rhyme with each other – for example, “*moon*”, “*broon*”, “*droon*” and “*doon*”. It’s a good idea to think ahead and make a list of a few different rhyming words which will fit with your subject.
- Remember as well that words which rhyme in English may not always rhyme in Scots, and vice versa! For example, “*water*” and “*daughter*” rhyme in English, but not in Scots – “*hoose*” and “*loose*” rhyme in Scots, but not in

English. Thinking about this can throw up some very interesting sets of rhyming words!

- The Burns Stanza is often used nowadays in funny or humorous poetry. Try thinking of lines 1-5 as the set-up for a joke, and the final short line as a punchline!

## Activity 5: Storytelling through Scots

LIT 4-20a, LIT 4-23a

Many of the most famous poems in Scots tell a story about a person, place or event. “Tam o’ Shanter”, for instance, is the tale of a drunken farmer who stumbles across a coven of witches whilst riding home one night; “The Brus”, on the other hand, tells the story of the Scottish king, Robert the Bruce.

Not all poetry has to tell a story, of course, but because Scots is used much more often for speaking than for writing, Scots is particularly well suited to telling a story through poetry!

You can write a story-telling poem in many different ways, but Scots poems which tell a story are often written in rhyming couplets. This is a very simple poetic form which is made up of pairs of rhyming lines, as in “Tam o’ Shanter”:

*This truth fand honest Tam o’ Shanter,  
As he frae Ayr ae night did canter:  
(Auld Ayr, wham ne’er a town surpasses,  
For honest men and bonnie lasses).*

Think of something that has happened in your own life that would make a great story. This could be a journey you went on, a sporting event you watched (or played in!), a party or a family occasion. Then tell the story of that day or that moment in your own best Scots!

Some tips for storytelling poetry in Scots:

- Storytelling poetry often has a *narrator*, which is a person who is telling the story. They might be the hero of the story, or a friend of the hero, or just someone who was standing by watching. Think about who the narrator of your

story should be. Whose version of the story would be the funniest, or scariest, or saddest?

- Try to base your narrator on a person you know who uses loads of Scots words. What would they think about what was going on? What kind of phrases would they use to describe what was happening? Do they have a favourite saying in Scots which they use all the time? Imagine how that person would tell this story, what kind of Scots they would use, and write it down!
- The story you're telling doesn't have to be something that happened to you, or even something that happened at all. It could be something that happened to a friend, a relative, a historic figure, or even someone completely made-up. The interesting thing here is to make that person speak in Scots! How would Lionel Messi, or Joan of Arc, or Buzz Lightyear tell their stories in Scots? What about the first alien visitor to Earth, or the first human visitor to Mars?



## Appendix 1: Ma Scots wurd list

We aw ken at least a wee bit o Scots On this sheet ye can keep track o ony Scots wirds ye ken awready, and write doon ony braw new yins ye find oot about!.

<p><b>Animals</b></p> <p>Dug _____ <i>Dog</i> _____</p> <p>Cuddy _____ <i>Horse</i> _____</p> <p>Lambie _____ <i>Lamb</i> _____</p> <p>Hoolet _____ <i>Owl</i> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><b>Body Pairts</b></p> <p>Heid _____ <i>Head</i> _____</p> <p>Haund _____ <i>Hand</i> _____</p> <p>Mooth _____ <i>Mouth</i> _____</p> <p>Neb _____ <i>Nose</i> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>People</b></p> <p>Lass _____ <i>Girl</i> _____</p> <p>Laddie _____ <i>Boy</i> _____</p> <p>Polis _____ <i>Police</i> _____</p> <p>Fitba Player _____ <i>Footballer</i> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><b>Places</b></p> <p>Hoose _____ <i>House</i> _____</p> <p>Cludgie _____ <i>Toilet</i> _____</p> <p>Toon _____ <i>Town</i> _____</p> <p>Kirk _____ <i>Church</i> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
<p><b>Activities</b></p> <p>Lowpin _____ <i>Jumping</i> _____</p> <p>Bletherin _____ <i>Talking</i> _____</p> <p>Greetin _____ <i>Crying</i> _____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>	<p><b>Ither Scots Wirds</b></p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>

## Further reading and online resources

- [Dictionaries of Scots Language](#)
- [Scots Online Dictionary](#)
- [Scots Hoose](#) – Learning and Creativity in the Scots Language
- [Scots Education](#)
- [Skoosh!](#) – New writing in Scots by children and young people
- [Scots in Schools](#) – Free online resources for teachers, pupils and parents
- [Wee Windaes](#) – Multimedia resources on classic Scots texts from the National Library of Scotland
- [Creative Writing in Scots](#) – Scottish Book Trust resource for CFE Levels Third, Fourth, and Senior Phase