

# Poetry 2012: The Written World



## Resources for Teachers

Country: Czech Republic

Poet: Miroslav Holub

Poem: Alphabet

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# About this Resource

Activities in this resource are aimed at pupils in upper primary school (P5–P7).

## **Literacy and English experiences and outcomes**

Reading poems from countries around the world links to CfE Literacy & English Experiences and outcomes by offering opportunities to:

- *develop my understanding of what is special, vibrant and valuable about my own and other cultures and their languages*
- *explore the richness and diversity of language, how it can affect me, and the wide range of ways in which I and others can be creative*
- *extend and enrich my vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading*
- *explore and discuss word patterns and text structures*

## **Curriculum for Excellence Correspondences (Level 2)**

Individual activities outlined below can link to particular experiences and outcomes:

### **Reading the poem**

- ENG 2-12a
- ENG 2-17a
- ENG 2-19a

### **Discussion**

- LIT 2-02a
- LIT 2-09a

### **Research Activity**

- LIT 2-06a
- LIT 2-14a
- LIT 2-15a

### **Creative Activity**

- ENG 2-26a
- ENG 2-27a
- ENG 2-30a
- ENG 2-31a

# Alphabet

Ten million years  
from the Miocene  
to the primary school in Ječná Street.

We know everything  
from a to z.

But sometimes the finger stops  
in that empty space between a and b,  
empty as the prairie at night,

between g and h,  
deep as the eyes of the sea,

between m and n,  
long as man's birth,

sometimes it stops  
in the galactic cold  
after the letter z,  
at the beginning and the end,

trembling a little  
like some strange bird.

Not from despair.

Just like that.

Miroslav Holub  
from *Poems Before & After: Collected English Translations* (Newcastle:  
Bloodaxe, 1990, expanded edition 2006)  
translated by Edwald Osers  
Reproduced by kind permission of the publisher.  
'Alphabet' was included in Holub's collection *Slabikář / Primer* (1961).

Notes: "Miocene" refers to a geological period; the *Shorter OED* notes that rocks from this time contain "fossil evidence of numerous mammals and the first hominids".

## *The Poet & His Work (& His Translator)*

**Miroslav Holub** was born in 1923 in Plzeň, in what was then Czechoslovakia. After secondary school, he worked as a labourer at a warehouse and at a railway station. When Czech universities re-opened following the end of Nazi occupation, Holub studied biomedical science at Charles University in Prague. His work, suppressed in Czechoslovakia during the period of communist rule, frequently draws on his experiences as an immunologist and clinical pathologist. The title of his main collection in English, *Poems Before and After*, refers to the watershed moment of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. Despite the wide audience which his poetry found, he regarded himself as scientist before poet. Holub died in Prague in 1998.

**Ewald Osers** (1917–2011) was a distinguished translator of Central European literature into English. Born in Prague to a secular German-speaking Jewish family, he studied chemistry in Prague and in London, where he remained after the Munich Agreement of 1938. He worked for the BBC World Service, retiring in 1977. His versions of another Czech poet, *Selected Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert*, were recognised by award of the Poetry Society's European Poetry Translation Prize in 1986.

## *Reading the Poem*

- Why does the poem start in the Miocene era and end in “Ječná Street”?
- What does it mean to “know everything / from a to z”?
- In the poem, “the finger stops / in that empty space between” three pairs of letters. What are they?
- It also stops “after” a single letter. What is it?
- What adjectives are used to describe the spaces between and after the letters?
- Which of these spaces would you most like to be in? Why?
- Which of these spaces would you least like to be in? Why?
- Near the end of the poem, the poet mentions a “strange bird”. What kind of bird might it be? (Perhaps thinking about the Miocene era will help you.)
- Why do you think it is “trembling”?
- What is “despair”?
- What does the poet mean in the last line, when he writes that the bird is trembling “just like that”?

## Discussion

“We know everything from a to z.”

- Talk about a range of things you know about – things you learned in school, and out of school. Think about everything from cars and dinosaurs to recipes and short cuts.
- In pairs, make a list of ten things that you know – then reduce this to three. Combine the three things of each pair, so you have again a longer list for the whole class.
- You could arrange this in alphabetical order, so you have your class “A to Z”, or “encyclopedia”.
- Are there any obvious gaps in it? What would you like to learn more about?

## Research Activity

- Find out about the *Miocene* era. How do we know about the creatures that lived then? What kind of creatures were they?
- Where does the word “alphabet” come from? What is an alphabet?
- In English, we use the Roman alphabet. Find out about other alphabets, for example, the Russian, Greek, Arabic and Hebrew alphabets. How many letters are in each? Are there any similarities with the Roman alphabet? Write your name, or the name of your school, in one of these alphabets.

# Creative Activity

Write an alphabet poem, that is a poem with 26 lines, or 26 verses, one for each letter of the alphabet.

You could write this as a whole class, or in groups, or individually.

Decide what you would like your poem to be about.

It has to be something you know quite a lot about, for example

- 
- your school – your town – Scotland – the Olympics
- if you are near the end of a school project, try writing about that

First of all make a big list of words to do with your subject. At this stage don't worry about what letter they start with. *Nouns* are good, but think of *adjectives* and *verbs* as well. For example, if you're writing about your town

- for *nouns* think of place-names, and people's names, and buildings
- for *adjectives*, think of how you would describe the town to someone who doesn't live there
- for *verbs*, think of what you – and others – do there

Once you have your list, put the words in alphabetical order. If there are any gaps, try to fill them in. Often the hardest letters to find words for are Q, X and Z.

- for Q, wait in a *queue*, or (in this Jubilee year) mention the *queen*
- for X, think of words like *extra*, *exit*, *exciting*, and so on
- imagine someone asleep, *zzz*, at the *zoo*, or on a *zebra crossing*

Then write your poem.

- start each line or verse with its letter and word, so A is for a—, B is for b—, and so on
- you can write one line for each letter, or two, or even three, but try to make each line or verse the same length
- you can use rhymes as well, but you don't have to

When you've written your poem, you'll have an A to Z of your subject – a poem that tells the reader *everything* about it!

## Further Reading & Weblinks

The poem 'Alphabet', representing the Czech Republic, is part of The Written World – a collaboration between the Scottish Poetry Library and BBC radio to broadcast a poem from every single nation competing in London 2012.

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/alphabet](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/alphabet)

'Alphabet' on the SPL website

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/about/projects-partners/written-world)

Other poems selected for The Written World

[www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/miroslav-holub](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/miroslav-holub)

Biography, bibliography and poems

[www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Holub.htm](http://www2.arts.gla.ac.uk/Slavonic/Holub.htm)

An overview of Holub's poetic career

[www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17220018](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-17220018)

Czech Republic country profile

[www.guardian.co.uk/world/czech-republic](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/czech-republic)

Recent news articles about the Czech Republic

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*This is one of twelve resources, written by Ken Cockburn for the Scottish Poetry Library's project The Written World, May 2012.*

[www.kencockburn.co.uk](http://www.kencockburn.co.uk)

[www.spl.org.uk](http://www.spl.org.uk)