Size wise – Teacher Notes

BIG THINGS little things competition 2025

Size wise by Philippa Werry

Big things start small
Lungs expand
A heart swells
A step sets off a journey
or an avalanche
A single voice becomes a choir
A seed grows to a tree grows to the sky
A raindrop starts a stream starts a river
turns to a torrent turns to a flood
One lone cloud heralds a storm
A rumble turns to thunder
A shout becomes a roar that fills a stadium
A word gathers other words turns into a poem
or an anthem or a chant or a song
A voice crying for justice
changes the world.

Joint Winner — the Poets XYZ Phantom Billstickers
National Poetry Day 2025 *BIG THINGS little things* poetry competition.

the poets XYZ

About the Poet

Philippa Werry writes fiction, non-fiction, poetry and plays. She has a particular interest in history which has produced titles such as Anzac Day, Best Mates, Waitangi Day, Lighthouse Family, The New Zealand Wars, The Telegram and The Other Sister. Her verse novel Iris and Me won the Young Adult section of the New Zealand Children's and Young Adults Book Awards 2023 and was named in the IBBY Honour List 2024. She lives in Wellington.

In his judge's report, Bill Nagelkerke said: Size wise is a serious poem for serious times, but it's not heavy or despondent. It challenges as well as offers hope. Big things start small . . . /A voice crying for justice / changes the world. It adopts a free verse approach held together by a kind of litany of core movers: "start", "becomes", "grows", "turns", "gathers".

About the Poem

A poem can work on many different levels—often there is an element of mystery about it. It's always not necessary to fully understand what a poem means, or is trying to say, to enjoy and appreciate it.

In his judges report, Bill Nagelkerke includes this quote from Elif Shafak:
A poem is a swallow in flight. You can watch it soar through the infinite sky, you can even feel the wind passing over its wings, but you can never catch it, let alone keep it in a cage. Poems belong to no one . . . But now the swallow has fortuitously alighted in his hands. He can cradle it inside his palms, listen to its heartbeat.

a. Read the poem Size wise to the class or ask the students/ ākonga to break into pairs and read it to each other.

b. Ask the class what the poem means to them? (How does it make them feel? What images does it conjure up? There are no right or wrong answers).

Writing a list poem using Size wise as a model.

Size wise is a list poem - the poet has listed a number of things that grow from little to big and connected them with action words/verbs that relate to this concept e.g. start, expand, swell, become, grow, turn etc.

a. Ask the class to brainstorm examples of other things that go/grow from little to big (e.g. a balloon, a bubble, a snowball, ourselves etc.) and write their suggestions one half of the board.

b. On the other half of the board ask for suggestions of other action words/verbs the poet may have considered using (e.g. stretch, increase, widen/lengthen, crescendo, amplify, snowball etc.)

c. Using Size wise as a model and the words on the board as a resource, ask the students/ākonga to write their own list poem starting with the line "Big things start small". (The students/ākonga can choose to use the same action words/verbs as the poet, words from the board, their own, or a mix.)

For example:

Big things start small
A tickle turns to *ah* turns to *ahchoo*!
Magic beans grow to a beanstalk stretches to the clouds
A new moon waxes to crescent waxes to full...

Shape and Structure

In Size wise, the poet has put her list in a particular order so that the whole poem (as well as each line) grows from the first line to the last line—from a single breath to a voice that changes the world—giving the poem shape and momentum.

Ask the students/ākonga to try changing the order of the lines of their poems, and then read the new version out loud to themselves.

How does this change their poem? (Maybe it changes the meaning, makes it sound better, or feel more satisfying.)

Titles

A poem's title is like an extra line that can add to or sum up what the poem is about or sometimes provide another perspective/angle on the poem. Often it's easiest to leave the title until last.

Discuss as a class what the title Size wise adds to the poem? (e.g the word 'wise' ties in with the concept of 'justice', it's an expression meaning 'in terms of size' and relates to perspective and respective sizes, which ties into the BIG THINGS little things theme of the competition, it's catchy because it rhymes.)

Ask the students/ākonga to try to come up with a title (or another title if they already have one) for their own poems.

Performance ideas

a. Read the poem together as a class – start with one person then add more and more voices with each line until the whole class reads the last line together. Get louder and louder as you read it to mirror the structure of the poem.
b. Read the poem in pairs, taking alternate lines but read the first and last lines together in unison.
c. Give the students/ākonga an opportunity (for anyone who would like to) to read their own list poem out loud to the rest of the class.

Illustration

Size wise moves from concrete images (tree, river, storm etc.) to an abstract image at the end (justice).

a. Ask the students/ākonga to come up with ideas of how they might draw the last line (e.g iconic symbols like: scales, a raised fist, a handshake, a globe/earth etc., or something else original/ imaginative .)

b. Get the students/ākonga to illustrate their favourite line (or lines) from **Size wise** or their own poem.