

# NATIVE AMERICAN EDUCATION FOR ALL RESOURCES

Partnership of IllumiNative and the National Indian Education Association



ILLUMINATIVE



Grade Level

**6-8**

Subject

**Reading**

Lesson Title

**Celebrate Joy Harjo: The First Native American Poet Laureate**

**Activity Description:** Joy Harjo (Muscogee Creek) is the first Native American chosen to be the US Poet Laureate. This activity explains what a poet laureate does and introduces Joy Harjo and one of her poems "Remember." Young people can also explore Joy Harjo's passion for poetry as a way to remember her ancestors and celebrate the future of her Native people. This activity also features several ways to write poetry and includes an inspirational poem performance by the US Youth Poet Laureate.

## MATERIALS NEEDED

- WiFi access required for most of this activity
- Digital or print version of the article ["Joy Harjo Becomes the 1st Native American US Poet Laureate"](#)
- Digital or print version of Joy Harjo's poem ["Remember"](#)
- Library of Congress video [interview with Joy Harjo Poet Laureate](#)
- Pencil and paper

## STEPS

This activity introduces you to Joy Harjo, the 2019-2020 US Poet Laureate. Joy Harjo, of the Muscogee Creek Nation, is the first Native American to be named US Poet Laureate. Follow the links below to discover who Joy Harjo is, what a poet laureate does, and how Joy Harjo defines the importance of poetry for her people.

### Activity Steps:

1. Read NPR's article ["Joy Harjo Becomes the 1st Native American US Poet Laureate"](#)
2. After reading the article, answer these questions on paper or discuss them with someone:
  - a. What is a poet laureate?"
  - b. Think about Harjo's comment "It's such an honoring for Native people in this country, when we've been so disappeared and disregarded. And yet we're the root cultures, over 500-something tribes and I don't know how many at first contact. But it's quite an honor ... I bear that honor on behalf of the people and my ancestors." What does this quote mean to you?
3. Watch a clip of [Joy Harjo's interview for the Library of Congress](#) after becoming the poet laureate.
  - a. How does Joy Harjo explain why poetry is so important?
  - b. What did Joy Harjo say that was meaningful to you?
4. [Read Joy Harjo's poem "Remember"](#) or you can listen to her read it on this [YouTube video](#)
  - a. After reading, think about what/who Harjo wants us to remember. Why is this important to her?
  - b. What does Harjo mean in line 18 "They are alive poems"?
  - c. How can you be sure that you "remember"?

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## HELPFUL TIPS

**Parents and caregivers:** This is an opportunity to encourage young people to write poetry as a way to understand how they may feel about moments in their lives or life questions they have. Joy Harjo speaks about poetry being the DNA of humanity. Poetry can seem challenging especially getting started. Read this list "[Every Student Can be a Poet](#)" for ideas on writing poetry. Here are the steps for writing a word scramble poem. This can be done individually or together. You will need paper, pencil, and scissors.

1. Think about Joy Harjo's perspective that poems speak for the past, present, and future.
2. Write a list of words (objects, places, people, or feelings) that are important to you. Cut each word out.
3. Mix them up on a table or flat surface. Move the words around on a flat surface and choose the words that you want to include in your poem.
4. Add sentences or phrases around the words to build a poem.
5. If you feel comfortable, share your poem with others. Otherwise, you can also keep a poetry journal to express how you feel about ideas that come to you or events that take place.

## WANT TO LEARN MORE?

**Families and Educators:** This activity can inspire young people to use their voice through poetry to express themselves as a way to understand the world but also empower them to change their world. For more Native poetry, visit these websites:

- If you want to learn more about Joy Harjo and her writing, visit [her official website](#).
- To learn about other Native American poets and poems, visit [Native American Poetry and Culture](#)
- To listen to the US Youth Poet Laureate bring hope and optimism to the nation during the COVID-19 pandemic, watch Amanda Gordman perform her poem "[The Miracle of Morning](#)"
- To read poems by Native American youth, check out the book [When the Rain Sings](#)

### Activity Adapted from:

- "Interview with Poet Laureate Joy Harjo" by the Library of Congress on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qv6DitwvoQw&t=10s>
- "Joy Harjo Becomes 1st Native American U.S. Poet Laureate" by NPR <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/19/733727917/joy-harjo-becomes-the-first-native-american-u-s-poet-laureate>
- "Teach This Poem: Remember" lesson plan by the Poetry Foundation <https://poets.org/lesson-plan/teach-poem-remember-joy-harjo>

### Additional Resources:

- "Every Student Can be a Poet" by *Edutopia* <https://www.edutopia.org/article/every-student-can-be-poet>
- Joy Harjo official website, <https://www.joyharjo.com/>
- "Native American Poetry and Culture" from the Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/144560/native-american-poetry-and-culture>
- Amanda Gordman performs "The Miracle of Morning" on *CBS This Morning* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4QPftpS600>
- *When the Rain Sings* book link on Amazon <https://www.amazon.com/When-Rain-Sings-Native-Americans/dp/0689822839>