

Kenning poems

Activity 1: Introducing kennings

The word *kenning* comes from Old Norse (the language of the Vikings) and Anglo-Saxon (Old English, the language that present-day English comes from). It is a way of talking about something without mentioning its name. For example, when talking about the sun we could call it “heat giver”, “light maker” or “skin burner”.

Note: Technically, this indirect way of expressing things is known as **circumlocution** or **roundabout speaking**. Kennings are also metaphors (see Unit B4) because they say that something is something else.

- A. In Viking culture, kennings were a poetic expression and also a riddle game – someone would give a list of kennings and others would have to guess what it was. For example, what animal might this kenning poem be describing?

Paw licker
Milk drinker
Tail swisher
Dog hater
Mouse hunter

- B. A kenning consists of two or sometimes three words on each line. The first is usually a noun; the second is often an *-er* word as in the example above. These *-er* words are nouns derived from verbs – complete the following sentences to show how this works. (**Hint:** You can find the answers in the example above.)

1. A _____ is someone or something that hunts.
2. A _____ is someone or something that drinks.
3. A _____ is someone or something that hates.
4. A _____ is someone or something that swishes.

- C. The second word does not have to be an *-er* word. For example, the sea in Viking and Anglo-Saxon poetry could be called the *whale road* or the *fish home*. The left-hand column below lists some other Viking or Anglo-Saxon kennings. Draw a line to match each one with its meaning on the right.

1.	sword storm	dragon
2.	wave swimmer	(strong) wind
3.	bone house	death
4.	fire lizard	sun
5.	sky candle	battle
6.	breaker of trees	blood
7.	sleep of the sword	ship
8.	battle sweat	body

Activity 2: Exploring kennings

- A. Many traditional kennings contained black humour because Viking and Anglo-Saxon societies were rather violent. For example, *battle sweat* meant blood; *feeder of crows* meant a warrior because crows feasted on the bodies of the many people who died in battle. Modern kennings also contain **humour**, although not always as black as the traditional ones. The following are some amusing ways of presenting a subject. Add your own ideas in each case.

	Subject	Sample kennings	Your own ideas
1.	Mother	peace maker, morning waker, "No" repeater	
2.	Annoying brother/sister	peace destroyer, space invader, wall of words	

- B. Kennings can be about ordinary, everyday subjects. When we write a kenning about a pencil or a mobile phone, the writing process leads us to think deeply about it and to describe it in an extraordinary way. We can improve our writing by including rhyme, alliteration and assonance. Add your own ideas to the examples below.

	Subject	Sample kennings	Your own ideas
1.	Teacher	fun wrecker – homework checker	
2.	Dog	flea finder – house minder	

- C. Everyday English has a number of words that are kennings. Dogs are sometimes referred to as *dish lickers* and horses as *hay burners*. What other everyday kennings can you think of?

- D. Can you work out what each of these kennings refers to?

- | | |
|------------------|------------------|
| 1. Night hunter | 2. Bubble blower |
| Chicken stealer | Teddy thrower |
| Rabbit killer | Doll destroyer |
| Cunning fugitive | Carpet crawler |
| Paw licker | Dummy licker |
| Dog detester | Air kicker |
| Den dweller | Endless babbler |

- E. In this poem the speaker has used kennings to refer to a number of different things as well as introduce himself or herself. Who is speaking and what does it all mean?

Greetings mind workers,
 I am your new lesson provider and moan abolisher.
 It's time to turn on your sound receivers,
 Prepare your idea shapers,
 And shut your din creators!
 Now let's begin ...

Activity 3: Writing your own kenning poem

1. Think of an object or element of the natural world you'd like to write about (eg, the moon, a house, a clock, a car, a tree, a shoe, rain).
2. List things that could represent your object or act as metaphors for it. These will be the **base words** of your kennings. The chart below shows what the list might look like for someone planning to write a kenning poem about a refrigerator.

What does it look like?	Tall metal box with doors; at night it looks like it's standing guard
How does it move; what could it be compared to?	It doesn't move; it's got doors and handles, like another room; it's got lots of things inside
What does it feel like?	Outside, just like a metal box; inside, cold/freezing
What does it smell like?	Not much smell, unless you turn it off!
What does it sound like?	Often silent but hums sometimes; you hear it at night
What does it do; what could it be compared to?	Keeps things cold and freezes them; like a glacier, an igloo, the Arctic
What doesn't it do?	Doesn't move

3. List things that describe your chosen topic and other objects that are associated with it in some way. They will be the **determinants** of your kennings – the clues that help your audience work out what your subject is. In the fridge example above, your list might include that it preserves food; it cools drinks and helps set jelly; it has a freezer that makes ice; it can have rubbish, dead insects and hiding mice under it; people (parents) put messages on it; and cats can get their heads caught in the door.

This draft poem is based on the lists above. Can you come up with any better kennings?

Our Kitchen Fridge

silent sentinel
 night hummer
 food saviour
 juice cooler
 salad resuscitator
 jelly setter
 water freezer
 parents' bulletin board
 cat head trapper
 insect cemetery
 mouse sanctuary

4. Write a poem that is *no more than 12 lines long*.
5. Remember that originally kenning poems were riddles. So read your poem out loud to your classmates and see if they can guess what or who you are describing. Also post it on the classroom noticeboard or publish it online.

Note: If you are writing a kenning poem on a human or animal, you approach it in much the same way, except that you will probably write more about how your subject relates to you. Do they make you feel good? Do they annoy you? How do they affect your life?