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**r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r**  
**E. E. Cummings**

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## Teaching *r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r*

At first glance, this poem looks like complete nonsense. Explain to your tutee that actually, there are real words and a complete sentence hiding inside. Can you and your tutee decipher the poem? Give it a shot. It's like a word find puzzle, a secret code. Can you make something out of it? Try especially rearranging the letters in the first line to create a familiar word. If you need a hint, check the last line of the poem.

Rearranged, the poem reads:

*grasshopper, who, as we look, now upgathering into himself, leaps, arriving to become, rearrangingly, a grasshopper*

Right. Having done that, the words tell a story about a grasshopper jumping. This is the "what" of the poem, the subject, the message. But how does e e cummings get this message across?

Think: Have you ever seen a grasshopper hop? Together with your tutee, try and describe this experience, and see if you can relate it to the shape and movement of the poem. An example conversation is below...

*Often it's so still in the beginning, it blends so well with the grass, that you don't even notice it's there.*

Ask your tutee: at the very beginning of the poem, are there any "hidden" words that you don't notice right away? (as you found out, there is in fact a "grasshopper" hidden in the very first line)

*Then, the leap! Once it jumps, the grasshopper seems to move in every direction at once, wings beating, twirling*

Ask your tutee: Does this remind you of the way the poem moves? In what ways are the two movements the same?

*Then it finally comes to rest.*

Ask: Does this remind you of how the poem ends?

Ask your tutee: Why do you think e e cummings jumbles that perfectly nice sentence all up? Is it simply to confuse the reader? Or do you think what we've just learned proves that he has a purpose? Does the form of the poem help to transmit the message, the main idea, the "what"?

Additional discussion: e e cummings was also a painter, and his work has been described this way: "to force poetry toward a closer kinship with painting...and away from its kinship with music".

Do you think this is true, in light of this poem? Is the poem more musical (rhyme, rhythm), or more visual? Discuss with your tutee.

If you're brave, try writing a shape/motion poem of your own. You can pick any subject you want, though ideally it will be something that moves- a snake, or a subway, or a rocket, or a bouncing basketball, or fireworks. Brainstorm ideas for the words and the shape of your poem. Don't be afraid to make up words- "upgathering" isn't in the dictionary, but it gives us a good visual picture. Maybe your snake will be SsssSlippering along the ground. What shape could a poem about a snake have? Remember, you can write poems up-and-down, sideways, or draw a picture and fit them in. Be creative! This is a good side-by-side exercise, where both you and your tutee write poems.