

# Mushrooms, a Poem by Sylvia Plath

## Objective

Students will

- Read a poem that describes how mushrooms grow and guess what the poem is describing.
- Discuss the poem and answer comprehension questions.
- Read an informational passage describing how mushrooms grow and compare with the description in the poem.

## Procedures

1. Read the poem “Mushrooms” to your class without reading the title.  
— Ask students what they think the poem is describing.
2. Read and discuss background and vocabulary about mushrooms and fungus.
3. Provide copies of the poem for students to read on their own or in groups.  
Ask students how the poem has changed, based on what they have learned about mushrooms.  
— Students will answer comprehension questions about the poem.
4. Provide copies of the “How Mushrooms Grow” reading page.  
— Students will answer the questions on the reading page to compare and contrast the reading page with the poem.

## Oklahoma Academic Standards

### GRADE 3

Speaking and Listening:  
R.1,2,3; W.1,2. Fluency:  
1,2. Reading and Writing  
Process: R.1,2,3. Critical  
Reading and Writing:  
R.1,2,3,4. Vocabulary: 1,3,5

### GRADE 4

Speaking and Listening:  
R.1,2,3; W.1,2. Fluency:  
1,2. Reading and Writing  
Process: R.1,2,3. Critical  
Reading and Writing:  
R.1,2,3,4. Vocabulary: 1,3,5

### GRADE 5

Speaking and Listening:  
R.1,2,3; W.1,2. Reading  
and Writing Process:  
R.1,2,3. Writing: R.1,2,3,4,6,7.  
Vocabulary: 1,3,5

# Mushrooms

by Sylvia Plath

Overnight, very  
Whitely, discreetly,  
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses  
Take hold on the loam,  
Acquire the air.

Nobody sees us,  
Stops us, betrays us;  
The small grains make room.

Soft fists insist on  
Heaving the needles,  
The leafy bedding,

Even the paving.  
Our hammers, our rams,  
Earless and eyeless,

Perfectly voiceless,  
Widen the crannies,  
Shoulder through holes. We

Diet on water,  
On crumbs of shadow,  
Bland-mannered, asking

Little or nothing.  
So many of us!  
So many of us!

We are shelves, we are  
Tables, we are meek,  
We are edible,

Nudgers and shovers  
In spite of ourselves.  
Our kind multiplies:

We shall by morning  
Inherit the earth.  
Our foot's in the door.

1. Who is speaking in the poem? Is the narrator speaking in first or third person
2. Describe what is happening, in your own words. What is the setting? What is the plot? Who are the characters? How would you describe them? What is the theme?
3. Why does nobody see us?
4. How are the mushrooms shelves and tables? What literary devices are used in this poem? Provide examples?
  - simile
  - metaphor
  - personification
  - onomatopoeia
  - hyperbole
  - imagery
  - symbolism
  - tone
5. How does the use of imagery affect your understanding of the poem?
6. Describe the structure of the poem. (description, compare/contrast, sequential, problem/solution, cause/effect) Why does she repeat the line "So many of us!"
7. What does this poem tell you about the way mushrooms grow?
8. Draw a picture to illustrate this poem.

Oklahoma Ag in the Classroom is a program of the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry and the Oklahoma State Department of Education.

# How Mushrooms Grow

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Mushrooms like to live in dark, damp places. They feed off the decaying matter around them. As the mushroom grows, it develops spores. New mushrooms grow from these spores. The spores are so tiny you can't see them without a microscope. Millions of spores together look like fine powder. A mature mushroom will form as many as 16 billion spores.

When the spores are ripe they shoot out of the mushroom and drift away in the wind. If they land in a dark, damp place with a food source, they will grow into new mushrooms. First, they develop a threadlike structure called a hyphae. A large number of hyphae grow together and form the mycelium. The hyphae and mycelium grow under the surface where you can't see them. The fruiting body is the part of the mushroom that appears above ground. When it first appears, it looks like a little button.

Because the mycelium of many kinds of mushrooms tend to grow in a circular pattern, the mushrooms often grow in a circle or ring. People long ago called them "fairy rings" because they thought they were made by fairies dancing through the night. Some believed mushrooms were created by thunderbolts because wild mushrooms appear after storms.

The fruiting part of the mushroom that we see is only a small part of the mushroom. The entire body of a mushroom is usually spread out over a large area. In nature some species of mushrooms may have a body that spreads over hundreds of square miles. A population of honey mushrooms in the Blue Mountains of eastern Oregon was found to be the largest single organism in the world, spanning 2200 acres.

1. What is the main idea in this passage? What are the supporting details?
2. How do key details support the main idea of this passage?
3. What is the author's purpose in the passage above?
4. Describe the structure of the passage (description, compare/contrast, sequential, problem/solution, cause/effect).
5. Compare and contrast this passage about mushrooms with the poem "Mushrooms," by Sylvia Plath.