

Writing Limericks

Limericks are a fun, fun, fun form of poetry!

Limericks have a bouncy, catchy rhythm. They also have a simple structure that can help young poets write with confidence.

The structure of a limerick

Limericks have five lines.

The rhyme scheme is A-A-B-B-A. This means that the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme; and the third and fourth lines rhyme.

The rhythm of a limerick is:

(da) da DA da da DA da da DA (da) (da)
 (da) da DA da da DA da da DA (da) (da)
 (da) da DA da da DA (da) (da)
 (da) da DA da da DA (da) (da)
 (da) da DA da da DA da da DA (da) (da)

In this rhythm, **DA** represents a stressed syllable, **da** represents an unstressed syllable, and **(da)** represents an optional unstressed syllable at the beginning or end of a line. Try reading the lines out loud, disregarding the optional syllables, and coming down hard on the **DA** syllables. That's the basic rhythm of a limerick! Just keep in mind you can tinker with the syllable count a bit by including 0, 1, or 2 unstressed syllables at the beginning and/or end of each line.

An example of a limerick

Here's an example of a limerick I wrote several years ago:

Bulking Up

There once was a tiny toy poodle
 Who gobbled up gallons of strudel
 And dozens of pies—
 She doubled in size
 To weigh half as much as a noodle.

Bulking up

(showing stressed and unstressed syllables)

There ONCE was a TI-ny Toy POO-dle
 Who GO-bbled up GA-llons of STRU-del
 And DOZ-ens of PIES—
 She DOU-bled in SIZE
 To WEIGH half as MUCH as a NOO-dle.

This example is part of a collection I wrote about different breeds of dogs. All of these limericks start with a line that introduces the dog breed, for example:

- An ill-mannered, ill-tempered terrier...
- A rash and romantic young beagle...
- An animal-loving Akita...
- Said Derek, the devious dingo...

These starting lines all differ. As in the toy poodle example, however, limericks often start:

- There once was a...
- I once knew a...

The process of writing a limerick

My example limerick provides one approach to writing a limerick: You might suggest to students who have trouble getting started that they choose from a particular category (such as dog breeds, or other animals, or another category of interest) and that they start their limerick with "There once was a..."

For example, let's choose the animal, bear.

There ONCE was a BEAR.

Here, we need an extra "da da DA" to complete the line. Let's add the words "grumpy old."

There ONCE was a GRUM-py old BEAR.

That's better! And our first line is complete.

Now we need to find rhymes with the word bear. To identify rhyming words, I use the process of working my way through the alphabet:

- A – aear (no, not a word)
- B – bear (no, that's the word we're trying to rhyme)
- C – care (okay, that's a possibility!)
- D – dare (a possibility)
- And so on

Older students might also consider consonant blends with each letter of the alphabet (Bl, Br, Ch, Cl, Cr, etc.). After listing possible rhymes, consider the words that might suit the poem. A grumpy old bear might not CARE about things. A grumpy old bear might DARE another animal to do something. A grumpy old bear might throw a fit about having to go to the FAIR. And so on. Let's work with the word, lair:

*There ONCE was a GRUM-py old BEAR,
Who WOULD not come OUT of his LAIR.*

Next we have two lines that will rhyme with each other, but don't need to rhyme with "bear." So we can choose any ending word we want for the next line, which gives us some freedom. But the next line still must fit with the poem we've written so far—and must lead us to a final line that will again rhyme with "bear." For these reasons, I often think about what will happen in the final line before writing the 3rd and 4th lines. For example, in the 3rd and 4th lines, perhaps the bear warns against trying to lure him out of his lair, and then, in the final line, the bear says, "Come on in and try—if you dare." Working with this:

*There ONCE was a GRUM-py old BEAR,
Who WOULD not come OUT of his LAIR.*

"You can't MAKE me come OUT,"

He SAID, with a POUT.

"Come ON in and TRY—if you DARE."

And our limerick is complete!