

Poetry Lessons for the Hard of Rhyming: 101

By

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Many years ago, my English professor, Dr. F., groaned about my lack of prowess in all things metrical, even though she found my verse reminiscent of Edward Lear. Lear with a definite clunk, I suppose. My good pal, J.E.A., used to wince when I wrote poetry. The two of them tried, oh how they tried, to teach me about meter. I just didn't get it. And I even had a degree in English. I had trochees running out my ears!

I persisted in writing bad poetry and was further confounded by conflicting advice from critique partners. And then I just quit. I figured I couldn't, so I wouldn't.

Until one day many, many years later, another good writing friend of mine, A.M.P., read one of my ditties. "Wow, I didn't know you could do that," she said. "Wow, I didn't know I could either," I said. So I tried again, and again, and again.

I went from being a total clunker to having [Sonya Sones](#) compliment my rhythm when I placed third in the poetry division of the [2006 Smartwriters W.I.N. competition](#).

So now today, I'm going to show all my fellow clunkers how I write a poem. I'm not going to get into beats and feet. I'm not going to tell you about iambs and dactyls and anapest, Budapest, and garden pests. I'm simply going to show you my process by writing a four-line poem before your eyes. That's right. This is live and not pre-rehearsed.

First I pick a topic. Rainbows

Then I brainstorm a first line.

I wish I were a rainbow today. The rainbow in the sky is pretty. If I were a rainbow. The rainbow stretched across the sky.

Next I decide what I want my rhyme scheme to be.

I usually write in couplets - two consecutive lines which rhyme aabb OR in quatrains with every other line rhyming abcb. (Rhyme schemes are described by giving a different letter to each different rhyme sound.) But today I'll be daring. Let's go abab. Yee-haw!

Now I pick my first line.

I need one with a good rhythm with plenty of rhyming possibilities. Look at the list. Say the sentences out loud. Which one has the best beat? Which one has a beat you think can be duplicated at least four times?

I think the final two have the most promise, but I decide on the last one because it's a little longer and has more rhyming potential.

The rainbow stretched across the sky.

If you read this aloud to yourself you should notice a pattern of unaccented/accented syllables - duhDUM duhDUM DuhDUM.

theRAIN bowSTRETCHED aCROSS theSKY.

You have four sets of duhDUM's.

That's your pattern. If you were knitting, this would be your first row. In order to make something pretty that won't fall apart, your next row needs to pretty much look the same. Any variation needs to be

slight and complementary.

Before writing my second line I check out rhymes.

Rhyming dictionaries are cool, but [Rhyme Zone](#) is really handy if you are already on the computer. Sometimes I just brainstorm end rhymes on my own by going through the alphabet and jotting down rhyming words for each letter. This morning I'm wimping out and going with Rhyme Zone.

I jot down some words that I think have possibility: why, spy, high, fly, shy, try, dry. I set these aside. I try to go for something fresh and unusual, not the thing people will think of first. So I leave these words to simmer. (Sigh..first I was knitting - now I'm cooking. Mrs. H., my tenth grade English teacher did complain about my mixed metaphors.)

I like the word shy. So now I'm going to think of a 2nd line that will lead into a 3rd line ending in shy. Hmm...shy..what's the opposite of shy...bright and bold and colorful and daring..hmmm..rainbows can be bright...hmmmm...

Now I brainstorm line two.

The rainbow stretched across the sky **brilliant, bright, and bold.**

Okay, I'll go with that for now.

Onward to line three. I want something with four duhDUMs that ends with shy. I come up with: It wasn't ____; It wasn't shy. Obviously I need a word for that blank-one syllable to fill in the DUM. I'll just leave it for now and be thinking about it in the back of my mind.

So far I have:

The rainbow stretched across the sky, brilliant, bright, and bold.

It wasn't ____; it wasn't shy

Now I need to look for rhymes for bold. Hmm..not a lot to work with. Gold looks like my best bet. Also, as you may have noticed, my second line is a bit different than the first and third. It's missing the unaccented first beat -which is okay-if I make the fourth line match.

Ooh—an idea pops up: Stories to be told, with stories to be told

So now I go back, and rattle those first four lines through my head. I like the first line, and I like the part about "shy," but the rest isn't working for me. So I repeat and rattle and think, and then it dawns on me - rainbows/gold...duh!

I come up with something new.

A rainbow stretched across the sky *from one end to the other* I need a rhyme with other, and come up with the line, *But first I ask my mother*. It takes a few minutes, but I am able to brainstorm a new third line. I reject anything that doesn't fit the rhythm. By this time that rhythm is internalized, and I can tell pretty quickly when something doesn't match.

For example:

A rainbow stretched across the sky from one end to the other.

I wanted to find the pot of gold

I decided to hunt for the pot of gold

I longed to find the pot of gold

But first I asked my mother.

The line in bold is the one that works. If you read them aloud

you will see how the third choice fits in, but the other two clunk.

So now I have a workable first stanza that I'm pretty pleased with. And yes, I've swapped my abab scheme for my usual abcb one.

A rainbow stretched across the sky,

from one end to the other.

I longed to find the pot of gold,

but first I asked my mother.

Two more lines come to me.

Be sure to wear your rain boots, son,

and take this bag of cookies.

Cookies? What the heck am I going to rhyme with cookies? Rookies. I don't have a whole line but I have "not for rookies" which matches the pattern of "bag of cookies."

So like I did before, I write down the verse with the parts I have. I leave blanks for the parts I need, and then try to think of what would fit. It's like figuring out a puzzle, hunting for something to complete a pre-established pattern. Like a jigsaw, I'll need to find the right shape, size, sound, and meaning to complete the big picture.

I now have the start of a rhyming story. I've established a rhyme scheme and meter. I have characters. And I have plot. Where this will take me? I don't know yet. The discovery is part of the fun of writing.

Remember, this is my process, and it may not work for you. I'm sharing it in hopes of helping others, especially those completely

befuddled by people screaming "Watch your meter!"

Some people prefer to rapidly write down all their ideas for a rhyming story, paying no attention to rhyme and meter. Then, they go back and clean it up. That doesn't work for me because once words are on paper, I just constantly try to "fix" that set of words. It's difficult for me to look beyond and maybe find a fresh start that works better. I do mine more line by line, piece by piece, like I demonstrated with what I wrote today.

If you love poetry, don't give up just because meter drives you wonkers. It's a learned skill. And some of us are slower learners, or learn in different ways.

Happy rhymes to you.

****These poetry lessons are dedicated to the memory of Mary Key Ferrell and John Edward Adams.**