

Dr. Birch's guide on how to write good limericks

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Dr. Robert W. Birch, a retired psychologist living in rural Ohio (USA), has over the years developed a keen interest in the writing of a variety of poetry and verse. With his kind permission Skoletorget has compiled an extract based on his essay on how to compose a good limerick.

Metrical feet

The limerick is a poem of five lines written in *Poulter's Measure*, a folk metre that consists of 13 beats. The first two lines rhyme with the fifth. The third line rhymes with the fourth.

A limerick contains three metrical feet in lines one, two and five, and two metrical feet in lines three and four. Hence:

da da DUM da da DUM da da DUM	1
da da DUM da da DUM da da DUM	2
da da DUM da da DUM	3
da da DUM da da DUM	4
da da DUM da da DUM da da DUM	5

Stick to the metre

The rule is, you must stick to this metre in the composition of your limerick. The metrical foot, *da da DUM*, is called an *anapest*, and there are three anapests in the first, second and fifth lines and two anapests in lines three and four. From an anonymous writer comes this example:

Said an ape as he swung by his tail,	1
To his offspring both female and male;	2
"From your offspring, my dears,	3
In a couple of years,	4
May evolve a professor at Yale."	5

But there are exceptions to this rule!

There is the option of making the first foot an *iamb*, which is *da DUM*. Thus, a line could have one iamb and two anapests. For example: "There once was a man from New York". I have written the following, using an iamb at the beginning of lines one, two and five. Lines three and four begin with anapests.

A dino once said to his friend,	1
I think that our kind will soon end.	2
Evolution it's called,	3
But it seems to be stalled,	4
Unless there's a monkey to send.	5

There is another exception. The metrical feet at the end of the lines of a limerick can contain an extra "quiet" syllable, as in *da da DUM da*. For example: "There was once a young man from Mount Vernon". However, when this is done, each of the matching lines (i.e., one, two and five or three and four) must also end in an extra unaccented syllable.

The limerick must flow

If a limerick does not flow easily when read out loud, something is probably wrong.

A limerick must rhyme

You will never get away with writing a limerick that does not rhyme. The last word of lines one, two and five must rhyme with each other, and so must the last words of lines three and four. It is an *aabba* pattern, and there are only rare exceptions.

My girlfriend had put on my sweater,	a
The one with my big high school letter,	a
And it then seemed to me,	b
And I'm sure you'll agree,	b
On her it looked quite a bit better.	a

Opening lines

There is a tradition regarding the opening line of a classic limerick. The classic standard for a first line is to use it to identify a character, as in "There once was a fellow named Jake," or "A silly old man they called Ned" (each of these opening lines has one iamb and two anapests).

Another use of the opening line is to identify a location, as in "There once was a gal from New York." Again, the meter is a single iamb, followed by two anapests. A limerick by *Stephen Cass*, published in the book *The Penguin Book of Limericks*, begins with a line having three anapests as it introduces both a character and a location.

A psychiatrist fellow from Rye	1
Went to visit another close by,	2
Who said, with a grin,	3
As he welcomed him in:	4
"Hello, Smith! You're all right! How am I?"	5

Now it's your turn!

Can you make your own limericks? Try with some friends! Good luck!

Suggested topics for philosophical discussion

1. Take another look at the limerick about the psychiatrists. When they meet, the one psychiatrist says to the other: "Hello, Smith! You're all right! How am I?" The normal thing to say when you meet a person is: "Hello, how are *you*?", not: "Hello, how am *I*". By turning the usual greeting "upside-down", the composer of the limerick makes fun of the fact that psychiatrists usually try to find out how other people are feeling.

Now, suppose you meet an English friend of yours on the street one day and he says: "Hello my friend, how are you?" How would you answer him if you:

- were very, very happy that day?
- didn't like your friend very much anymore?
- didn't have any clothes on?
- were together with your parents?
- had not eaten for several days?
- couldn't see clearly who was standing in front of you?
- wanted to be as polite as possible?

Is it possible to give the same answer no matter how you feel? For example: "Thank you, I am fine!"/> Or do you think we should answer differently in different situations? What do you think is the most important thing to remember: to always be honest, or to always be polite?