

Writing in Rhythm and Rhyme

by Elena de Roo

"Something wonderful happens when the words of poem flow through a metrical pattern... Poetic rhythm comes from blending the fixed (meter) and the flexible (speech)."

Writing Poems - 6th ed., Michelle Boisseau and Robert Wallace, Pearson 2004.

This year I've been spending a lot of time writing children's poems, and rhythm in one form or another - whether it's simply an accentuation of the natural rhythm/cadence that is present in all writing, or whether it follows a strict metre - is at the heart of all poetry. This is true for many picture books as well, since a rhythmic text lends itself so well to being read aloud.

Most of the time I find writing in rhythm (and rhyme) fun. If you don't enjoy it, then it's probably better to avoid. There's no point making life hard for yourself. To make it scan and not sound forced, you'll need to be prepared go over and over the words, then leave it for a while, read it aloud (or better still get someone else to read it aloud) and go over it again ... and again. Although come to think of it this probably applies to writing in general anyway.

What rhythm to choose?

Sometimes it's easy, **The Rain Train** was always going to be in the rhythm of a train. Sometimes the name of a main character sets the metre (I've always loved A.A. Milne's Disobedience, featuring James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree), but mostly I just start writing and look for the natural rhythm of the words. Hopefully by doing this the rhythm will then also reflect the tone and add an extra dimension to the words.

Does it scan?

Once you've established a rhythm in your lines, the reader will expect you to keep to it. The most common way to check the scansion is to count the stressed and unstressed syllables in a line - there are lots of books and websites on this, just google scansion, metre/meter and rhythm.

As an alternative, I often find myself translating the rhythm of the words into musical notes in my head, or clapping out the beat. The important thing in the end is that the stressed syllables/words match up with the stressed beats in the rhythm you want to use. Of course a sentence can often be read a number of different ways, with the stresses falling in different places (hence the need to get someone else to read it aloud) - usually the more unambiguous you can make it, the better.

For example in **The Rain Train** the rhythmic clackety-clack pattern I wanted to repeat was:

te TUM te te TUM te TUM te te TUM
te TUM te te TUM te te TUM te te TUM

which translated into words became

the **wail/** of the **wind/** the **sway/** of the **train/**
the **strum/** of the **wheels/** to the **beat/** of the **rain/**

In hindsight (i.e. reading up on how to do it properly for this article) I have found out that each line has four anapestic (two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable) feet - gulp! I also see that I have dropped some unstressed syllables, especially at the beginning of lines. This is okay, so long as it's not too frequent and the metre isn't lost. In fact, it can be good to have a little bit of variation in the rhythm so it doesn't become too monotonous, or for special effect.

Apparently the most common trap when writing a rhyming/rhythmical picture book is to let the rhyme lead the story, i.e. don't put a dinosaur in your story just because it rhymes with rhino store. Or should that be the other way round? Though I have to confess, for me, a lot of the fun is in the interesting and quirky places rhyme can lead you to. Sadly though, in the cold light of day, most of them have to be discarded. Sigh! Maybe that's why I like poetry so much.