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Sublime Rhyme

By Janet Lawler

Editors and writing guides tell you to avoid rhyme. But we keep finding it in publishers' catalogs and on bookshelves. Is there any rhyme or reason for this seeming contradiction? You bet!

Well done, a story in rhyme is pure joy – to read out loud, to share with children, and, yes, to be picked up again and again. Unfortunately, poorly written manuscripts in verse are frequent fodder for editors' horror stories. If you like to write in rhyme, how can you be sure you are not the butt of publishers' slush pile jokes? Here are some secrets to rhyming success.

The story/concept must come first

Think about rhyme as an added layer. Like frosting on a cake, it makes a story better. But you need to start with good batter and cook the cake first. Write a rough draft in prose to see if it is strong enough. If it's more than a concept or snuggle book, does it have a beginning, middle and ending? Is there tension? Resolution? It's easy to focus on the rhyme and forget the basics of good story telling.

When I started drafting *Tyrannoclaus* fifteen years ago, I began in prose. I had a pretty good idea of the plot and my prehistoric world before I switched to rhyme.

Finding a rhythm

The methods used to create rhyming work vary from author to author. I start by developing a pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. I usually draft two lines and say the words out loud while simultaneously making marks on a piece of paper to match every syllable, accented or unaccented. For example, the first two lines of *A Father's Song* are:

If I lift you up high on my shoulders to see,

the view becomes better for both you and me.

Using a small "u" for unaccented, and a dash for accented, here is my pattern:

uu/uu/uu/uu/ (12 beats)

u/uu/uu/uu/ (11 beats)

It doesn't matter what my pattern is, so long as I adhere to it. As I write, I keep referring back to the established scheme to confirm that my words fit this pattern smoothly. Sometimes I may complicate things by adding a refrain, with an alternate scheme.

Occasionally, I switch patterns unintentionally, writing an internally consistent couplet (two lines working well together) that doesn't match my scheme. I catch these mistakes by periodically running all the lines through the pattern. See how these two later lines from *A Father's Song* match:

*If I fly you around like an airplane that swoops,
you spread out your wings, making wide loop-de-loops.*

Other authors use methods different from mine. Dori Chaconas writes wonderful stories in rhyme. Visit her website (<http://www.DoriChaconas.com>) to read about how she constructs rhymes. Joan Horton, another rhyme master, manages to do it all in her head. I envy her intuitive ability to get it down just right. But no method is magic. They all involve hard work and re-writing.

Writing the rhymes

Writing in rhyme involves more than making the end syllables of two lines rhyme. An entire line must flow and work well with the next. Every syllable of every word counts, literally, for your beats and for your meaning.

When stuck, think hard about what you want to say or show. If you end a sentence with a noun and are having trouble drafting the second line, rework the "scene". Can you say the first line another way and end with a verb? Give yourself the chance to create a new, more fun, couplet. For example, consider these early lines of *Tyrannoclaus*:

The lava had hardened as night turned to day

The sleigh and Tyrannoclaus lifted away

These lines worked, but "day" and "away" are not the most creative rhymes. As I revised, I kept thinking about making these lines more interesting. How else could I say "night turned to day"? The lines now read:

The toy sacks were empty as daylight appeared.

The sleigh headed north while Tyrannoclaus steered.

While drafting, I often alternate focusing on what I want to say and what end words I want to use. When I've written a first line, I run the end word through the alphabet, trying possibilities. "Appeared" leads to several story-related options, such as "beard", "feared", "weird", or "steered".

There are on-line resources and rhyming "help" books. I own *The Scholastic Rhyming Dictionary*, by Sue Young, but it's helped with only one or two rhymes. Certainly, you can't write in rhyme relying on such an aid. More often, if I draw a blank, I must start over with questions - what do I want to say and how can I say it another way, with a totally different rhyme? Again, the key is to stay creatively "loose". Play "what if?" and "what else?" Take the story in a whole different direction to find a fun rhyme.

Troubleshooting your manuscript

Stop, Look and Listen

Pause frequently as you draft and focus on every word. Read your work aloud, over and over. Listen as someone else reads. Eliminate words that can be pronounced in different ways, unless their placement leads a reader to say it just right. Take this example:

They fed the puppy to insure

he wouldn't chew, or cry, or grrr!

In these two lines, "insure" works with "grrr", as long as you pronounce "insure" with the accent on the second syllable, i.e., inSURE. However, many pronounce this word "INsure". Avoid words with alternative pronunciations, or place them at the end of the second line, so the reader is led into the correct rhyming pronunciation.

Watch for words that are one syllable, but often are pronounced as two. For example, the word "tire" is one syllable, often stretched to two. Be extremely careful with words such as these. They will cause readers to stumble. "Tire" may rhyme with "fire", but does it really rhyme with "buyer"? It depends on the reader.

Sometimes, words read out loud will "fight with each other". Your poetry should flow off the tongue. If you have consonants backed up on each other, a line may be problematic, even if the end rhymes work fine. In *Tyrannoclaus*, the second line of this couplet was very hard to pronounce smoothly:

And into the bottom of one crevice falls

a sackful of Bronto-bat gift packs with balls.

The “b”s, “g”s and “p”s of the second line clash. I finally changed these lines during revision. Read both versions out loud and see how much easier this second is to say:

And three sacks of toys tumbled down off the side

right into a crevice that split open wide.

Forced rhyme

“Forced” rhyme is when you choose a phrase or end word because you need to find another line to accompany the one you already have drafted. It can be forced by switching natural word order to put the rhyme at the end, or by using words that really have little content to further your story. An example of the latter is my original first two lines of *If Kisses Were Colors*:

If kisses were colors, you’d be every hue

of the widest of rainbows, my baby, it’s true.

The ending of the second line is weak, with no meaningful content. My revised lines better set the tone for a poem that compares a mother’s love to natural wonders:

If kisses were colors, you’d see every one

of the bands of a rainbow that shines in the sun.

Forced rhyme also happens when end words rhyme, but your word choice or placement requires a reader to alter natural syllable accents. For example, using this scheme, u/u/u/u/, consider:

The robin flapped his wings and flew.

He worried that he’d miss curfew.

“Flew” rhymes with “curfew”, but to make this couplet work, a reader must place emphasis on the second syllable of curfew – pronouncing “curFEW”. The rhyme doesn’t flow if you pronounce it properly, as “CURfew”. It is not enough to simply have the right number of syllables and end sounds that rhyme. The accents must match and occur naturally, as well.

Avoid trite and repeated rhymes

Night/fright, slow/go, away/day are examples of rhymes you might have written in grade school. Of course, they may work fine and further your story. But avoid too many trite rhymes. It usually means you are not stretching yourself enough creatively. A related caution is to avoid repeating an end sound too often. In a short text, you don’t want night/fright/tight/might.

One revising technique to use to check for these concerns is to circle all the end words in your draft. Have you repeated sounds? Are these words the best you can do? Have you picked these words just to make two lines “work”?

Adding humor and action

If you are writing a humorous story, continually search for opportunities to ratchet it up as you revise. What would make it funnier? Think about kid humor and adult humor. Combining both in a rhyming text can be a winner. Lisa Wheeler’s *Sailor Moo, Cow at Sea*, is full of hyperbole and humor that span all ages.

Also, examine every verb, whether at the end of a line or not. Substitute “dash” or “zip” for “run”. Of course, this advice applies to prose manuscripts, as well. Often the joy of rhyming picture books is in the verbs, so pay close attention to them.

Once you are satisfied with your pattern, your word choice, and your plot, focus on each line or two and ask yourself, am I leaving anything for an illustrator to work with? Description lends itself to rhyme, but you don’t want too much description (unless it is a “mood” manuscript, not in great demand at this time). Do your couplets burst with action? If not, get back to work!

Can it be read over and over?

Finally, you need to ask yourself if the story can stand repeated readings. If you follow the above suggestions while drafting and troubleshooting, you should end up with a manuscript that sings, no matter how often it is read. And when it arrives at a publishing house, it may well be circulated for possible acquisition, rather than for a good editorial laugh at your expense.