Limericks!

What is a Limerick?

Limericks are one of the most fun and well-known poetic forms. No one knows for sure where the name "limerick" comes from, but most people assume it is related to the county of Limerick, in Ireland.

The reason limericks are so much fun is because they are short, rhyming, funny, and have a bouncy rhythm that makes them easy to memorize. In this lesson, I'll show you how you can write your own limericks in just a few easy steps.

The Rules of Limericks

Limericks, like all poetic forms, have a set of rules that you need to follow. The rules for a limerick are fairly simple:

They are five lines long.

Lines 1, 2, and 5 rhyme with one another.

Lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other.

They have a distinctive rhythm (which I'll explain shortly)

They are usually funny.

Rhyming a Limerick

The rhyme scheme of a limerick is known as "AABBA."
This is because the last words in lines 1, 2, and 5 rhyme.
Those are the "A's" in the rhyme scheme. The "B's" are the last words of lines 3 and 4.
Let me give you an example:

There was a young fellow named **Hall**

Who fell in the spring in the **fall**.

'Twould have been a sad **thing**

Had he died in the **spring**,

But he didn't—he died in the **fall**.

— Notice that the words, "Hall," "fall," and "fall" all rhyme.
Those are the "A" words in the "AABBA" rhyme scheme.
Also notice that "thing" and "spring" rhyme. Those are the "B" words in the rhyme scheme.

Limerick Rhythm

Now let's take a look at the rhythm of the limerick. It goes by the complicated name "anapaestic," but you don't need to worry about that. What I want you to notice when you read or recite a limerick is that the first two lines and the last line have three "beats" in them, while the third and fourth lines have two "beats."
In other words, the rhythm of a limerick looks like this:
da DUM da da DUM da da DUM
da DUM da da DUM da da DUM
da DUM da da DUM
da DUM da da DUM
da DUM da da DUM da da DUM

Limerick Rhythm

The rhythm doesn't have to *exactly* match this, but it needs to be close enough that it sounds the same when you read it.
For example, using the limerick above about the fellow from Hall, if we emphasize the beats, it reads like this:

there WAS a young FELLow named HALL
who FELL in the SPRING in the FALL.
'twould have BEEN a sad THING
had he DIED in the SPRING,
but he DIDn't—he DIED in the FALL.

Let's take a look at another famous limerick:
There was an old man of Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket;
But his daughter, named Nan,
Ran away with a man,
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

If you emphasize the beats when you read it, it comes out like this:

there WAS an old MAN of NanTUCKet
who KEPT all his CASH in a BUCKet;
but his DAUGHTer, named NAN,
ran aWAY with a MAN,
and AS for the BUCKet, NanTUCKet.

Some Limerick Tricks

There are two more things that you will notice when you read limericks:
1.The first line usually ends with a person's first name or the name of a place.
2.The last line is usually funny.
Because the first line is usually the name of a person or place, writing the first line is the easiest part.
You simply pick the name of a place or person – like "New York" or "Dave" – and write a line like this:

There once was a man from New York

Or

There was an old woman named Dave

Then go to your rhyming dictionary and start looking for rhymes like "cork," "fork," "pork," "stork," or "cave," "gave," "wave," and so on to find more words to complete your limerick.

Your Turn

Now it's your turn to see if you can write a limerick of your own. Remember to follow these steps:

Choose the name of a person or place and write the first line.

Look in a rhyming dictionary for words that rhyme with your person or place name.

► Write line 2 and 5 to rhyme with the first line.

► Now write lines 3 and 4 with a different rhyme.

When you are done writing, read your limerick out loud to see if it has the right rhythm; three "beats" on lines 1, 2, and 5, and two "beats" on lines 3 and 4, as shown above. If not, see if you can rewrite some words to get the rhythm right.