

limericks

Limericks are light, nonsensical verses of five lines in which the first, second, and fifth lines rhyme with each other and the third and fourth lines, shorter in form, make up a rhymed couplet. The rhyme scheme can be represented by the formula **aabba**.

Though we know that limericks are named after the city or county in Ireland, we do not have a clear idea as to why they are so named. One theory is that the name comes from a group of poets who wrote in Limerick, Ireland in the 18th century. Another attributes the name to a party game of making up a nonsense verse and following it with a chorus of “Will you come up to Limerick.” The first limericks appeared in books published in 1820 and 1821, and the form was popularized by Edward Lear in a collection published in 1846.

TEACHING TECHNIQUES. Limericks, like poems, can be used in a reader’s theater approach to give students the chance to playfully interpret a passage in a mock-dramatic oral recitation. In preparing your students to present the limericks included in this section, use the following guidelines suggested by John Barry in the January 1977 issue of the *Forum*:

1. Speak so that every word is heard.
2. Vary the speed of presentation.
3. Vary the tone of voice to fit the meaning of the message. (Some parts may be neutral in tone, some joking, some mock-serious.)
4. Vary the volume of voice.
5. Decide what the emphatic words are and emphasize them.
6. Pause in appropriate places. (Do not be afraid to keep the audience waiting; give them time to ponder what has been said and to speculate about what is to come.) Pause before emphatic words, before and after direct speech, and before any kind of climax.
7. Do not recite mechanically, or exaggerate the rhythm of the poem.
8. Do not pause automatically at the end of lines if the meaning does not require.

I. There was a young fellow named Hall,
Who fell in the spring in the fall;
‘Twould have been a sad thing
If he’d died in the spring.
But he didn’t — he died in the fall.

II. There was an old fellow of Lyme
Who married three wives at one time.
When asked, “Why the third?”
He explained, “One’s absurd,
And bigamy, sir, is a crime.”

III. There was a young lady of Lynn
Who was so uncommonly thin
That when she essayed
To drink lemonade,
She slipped through the straw and fell in.

IV. There was a young lady of Bygur
Who went for a ride on a tiger;
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside,
And a smile on the face of the tiger.

V. There was a young lady named Bright
Whose speed was far faster than light.
She set out one day
In a relative way,
And returned home the previous night.

VI. There was a young girl, a sweet lamb,
Who smiled as she entered a tram.
After she had embarked,
The conductor remarked,
“Your fare.” And she said, “Yes I am.”

VII. An indolent vicar of Bray
His roses allowed to decay.
His wife, more alert,
Bought a powerful squirt
And said to her spouse, “Let us Spray.”

VIII.

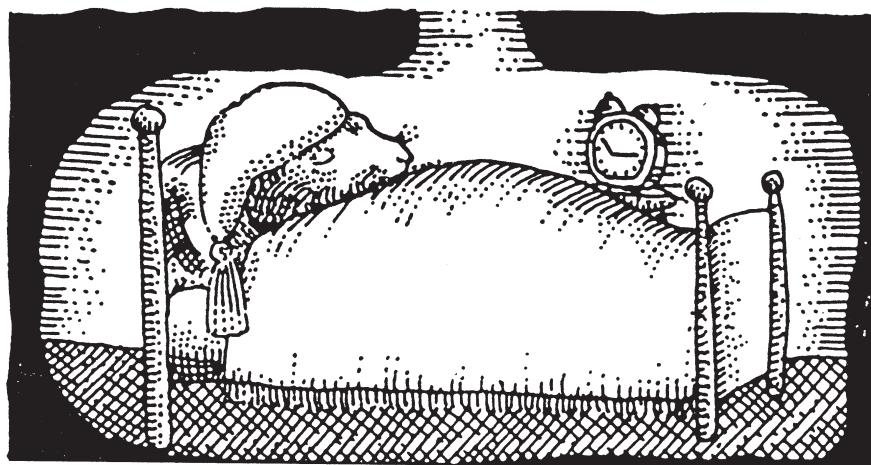
There was a young bard of St. Anne
 Whose limericks never would scan;
 When they said it was so,
 He replied: "Yes, I know,
 But I make a rule of always trying to get just
 as many words into the last line as I
 possibly can."

IX.

A decrepit old gasman, named Peter.
 While hunting around his gas heater.
 Touched a leak with his light;
 He rose out of sight —
 And as everyone who knows anything
 about poetry can tell you
 he also ruined the meter.

X.

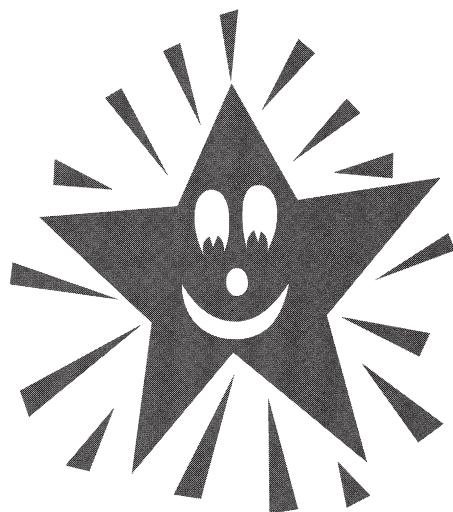
A groundhog who lived in St. Paul
 Was the laziest groundhog of all.
 On the second of Feb
 He stayed in his bed,
 And spring didn't come until fall!



NOTE: According to legend, the groundhog (a small hibernating animal, also called "woodchuck") comes out of his hole on February 2. If the day is cloudy, he stays out and spring is "just around the corner." If the day is sunny and he sees his shadow, he's frightened back into his hole; and there will be another six months of winter. St. Paul, Minnesota is known for its long winters, and groundhog watchers there might especially hope for an early spring.

Abbreviated limericks

In the following limericks the last word of the first line is a standard abbreviation. The last words of the second and fifth lines, which rhyme with the first line, are contrived abbreviations devised so that they bear the same relationship to the word (or phrase) they stand for as the real abbreviation in the first line does to the word (or phrase) it stands for.



I. As he filled up the order book pp.,
 He said, “I should get higher ww.”
 So he struck for more pay:
 But alas, now, they say,
 He is sweeping the elephant cc.

II. A girl who weighs many an oz.
 Used language I will not pronoz.;
 For a fellow unkind
 Pulled her chair out behind.
 —He just wanted to see if she'd boz.

After reciting some of these limericks, ask your students to work in groups to compose one of their own to perform in front of the class.