

## Writing a Limerick



There was an old man with a beard,  
Who said, "It is just as I feared! –  
Two Owls and a Hen,  
Four Larks and a Wren,  
Have all built their nests in my beard!"

Edward Lear, *The Book of Nonsense*, 1846

### What is a Limerick?

A Limerick is a five-line poem that tells a funny story and uses the rhyme scheme AABBA. Using the Edward Lear example above, this means that the first two lines rhyme with each other (beard, feared), the next two (shorter) lines rhyme with each other (hen, wren), then the last line rhymes with the first two (beard).

### The History of the Limerick

The earliest version of a limerick appeared in a Latin prayer written by Thomas Aquinas in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century William Shakespeare used limericks or limerick meters in *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Tempest*, and Edmund Spenser published *Mother Hubbard's Tale*, a precursor to the *Mother Goose* nursery rhymes published in 1780 which contained gems we all recognize today, such as *Hickory Dickory Dock*.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the limerick soared in popularity in British and Irish writings. Edward Lear, Robert Louis Stevenson, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and Rudyard Kipling all published pieces that contained limericks. Collections of limericks featuring funny illustrations were published and newspapers and other publishing houses began to hold weekly competitions that encouraged their readers to write limericks. The winner had the limerick featured in the publication and was often awarded a large cash prize. They became popular in schools, too, as they were easy and fun for young children to read, remember and write.

## How to write a limerick

Reading limericks out loud is the best way to get comfortable with how they sound. In the example below by Spike Milligan, notice that the **A** lines 1,2 and 5 have **7** syllables and rhyme with each other; the **B** lines 3 and 4 have their own rhyme and are shorter, having **6** syllables.

A man called Percival <b>Lee</b>	<b>A (7 syllables)</b>
Got up one night for a <b>pee</b> .	<b>A (7 syllables)</b>
When he got to the <b>loo</b>	<b>B (6 syllables)</b>
It was quarter to <b>two</b> ,	<b>B (6 syllables)</b>
And when he got back it was <b>three</b> .	<b>A (7 syllables)</b>

In the Edward Lear poem at the beginning of this sheet, note that lines 1,2 and 5 have **8** syllables; lines 3 and 4 have **5** syllables.

The rule is: lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme and have 7–10 syllables; lines 3 and 4 rhyme and have 5-7 syllables. Don't stray from this structure. The subject matter can be about absolutely anything you like, but you need to follow the **AABBA** rhyme scheme and the rhythm pattern.

1. Now it's time to come up with some ideas. You are telling a story, so start by introducing your character. This could be someone specific: *Percival Lee*, or someone generally *old man with a beard, man from Nantucket*. Try starting with your own name, or that of a friend. Then jot down words that rhyme with it and see what amusing limericks you can come up with, e.g. Kate, date, late... Pat, cat, bat... Dilly, frilly, silly...
2. Make it silly! Limericks are meant to be nonsensical. When you have introduced your character, put them in an absurd scenario to ramp up the humour, e.g. *got up one night for a pee, it is just as I feared!*
3. End with a twist. The last line of a limerick is like the punch line of a joke: *have all built their nests in my beard! when he got back it was three!*
4. Read your limerick out loud as you write it, as this will help ensure you have the right rhythm. Then, when you're done, read it in front of people to get a good laugh.
5. Do send us your limericks at CARM! We would absolutely love to read your poems. If you are happy, we will share them with others through our App as part of our getting creative art project, and perhaps in our next newsletter.

Send your limericks to: CARM, Unit 12, Mountfield Road, New Romney, Kent TN28 8LH or email to: [rem@carmromneymarsh.org.uk](mailto:rem@carmromneymarsh.org.uk). ! Let us know your first name, age, what area you are from, and contact details.

**Take care and stay safe xx**