

# The Limerick

The meter is anapestic—each foot having two unstressed and one stressed syllable. An example most of us know:

Tw<sup>as</sup> the **nigh**t be- fore **Christ-** mas and **all** through the **house**

A limerick has five lines.

- Lines 1, 2, and 5 rhyme. Lines 3 and 4 rhyme.
- Lines 1, 2, and 5 are anapestic trimeter, with three stressed syllables. Lines 3 and 4 are dimeter, with two stresses.
- Any line can have a single unstressed syllable before a stressed syllable—and sometimes includes extra unstressed syllables at the end of the line. But the stresses are essential—three each in lines 1, 2, and 5; 2 each in lines 3 and 4.

## An example:

The **limerick** packs **laughs** anatomical

Into **space** that is **quite** economical.

But the **good** ones I've **seen**

So **seldom** are **clean**.

And the **clean** ones so **seldom** are **comical**

The key when you're writing a limerick is to recite as you compose. You need to hear the sing-songy rhythm of the limericks you've heard (or of poems such as "The Night Before Christmas").

A limerick can be satirical. Or entertainingly silly. Or entertainingly bawdy. But I don't think it's possible to write a serious limerick. The combination of sing-songy rhythm and goofy rhyme precludes seriousness.

Our goal in this workshop is to write three or more related limericks. I recommend spoofing a piece of serious literature, but any subject of your choosing will do. Let's aim for satirical/silly, not bawdy.

A number of years ago, I had a great deal of fun with the characters in *Hamlet*:

## Limericks Inscribed on a Privy Wall at Elsinore

There was a queen full of lust named Gertrude:

To her villain, she simpered and cooed,

Said to anyone who'd listen,

"I know I'm a vixen

But it's so much more fun to be lewd!"

There was a young Dane who loved drama:  
He ranted and raved at his momma,  
Saw the ghost of his father,  
Lost his head cause he'd rather  
Have a life full of moping and trauma.

There was a young dame who loved Hamlet;  
She spread her legs for him as a gambit.  
Then the Dane drove her crazy,  
Left her pushing up daisies—  
Loved himself, not Ophelia a damn bit.

There was a young hothead, Laertes,  
As dutiful a son as was Xerxes:  
He gave in to choler,  
His rival to dolor,  
And neither—for either—showed mercy.

David Meischen

Here's a series shared with us by chapter member Janet Ruth:

## **FAME**

There once was a girl named Malvina,  
who purchased a pet javelina.  
She named him Voltaire,  
and taught him with care  
to play tunes on a blue concertina.

Malvina really pampered that pig.  
She was sure that his talent was big.  
She got an audition—  
Star Search—on condition  
that Voltaire would perform in a wig.

Voltaire played to wide-spread acclaim,  
but he didn't really handle the fame.  
He drank to excess,  
put his hoof up a girl's dress,  
and his career exploded in flames.

Disillusioned, Malvina shed tears  
when the audience cheers turned to jeers.  
But she found a new dream,  
for the promise, it seems,  
lies in Jack Rabbit's hip-hop career.

Janet Ruth