

The Sound and the Feeling and How to Get There

If you've read a picture book to a class of students or a young child on your lap, you know each word must earn its place. That's what we're going for. **The best words in their best order.**

"I wish our clever young poets would remember my homely definitions of prose and poetry; that is, prose,-- words in their best order; poetry,-- the best words in their best order."

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

Editor Allyn Johnston and illustrator Marla Frazee put it this way in their May/June 2011 Horn Book article, ["Why We're Still in Love with Picture Books \(Even Though They're Supposed to Be Dead\)."](#):

Each syllable, each line break, each sentence's placement on the page ... the rhythm, the word choice, the repetition (and maybe even the rhyme, if it's done well) — all of these are massively important... The read-aloud experience should be so extraordinary that practically as soon as the book is closed, everyone just wants to open it up and do it again.

So how does a writer know which words to choose and how to arrange those words in ways that add to the sound and emotion, ways that get you *"there"* — that undefined but immediately recognizable story place that captures not only the sound and structure you aimed for, but the emotional feeling you intended to leave with readers? And how does a writer know if those words should *rhyme*?

Perhaps the easiest answer is - *it depends*. On the story. On the writer. On the ways the tools of poetry - those very syllables, line breaks, words, rhythms, and sentences - are put together. [Oliver Sacks](#), M.D. noted neurologist and author writes in ["Wired for Sound,"](#):

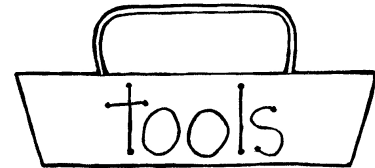
...not only is music one of the fundamental ways we bond with each other, it literally shapes our brains. Perhaps this is so because musical activity involves many parts of the brain (emotional, motor, and cognitive areas), even more than we use for our other great human achievement, language. This is why it can be such an effective way to remember or to learn. It is no accident that we teach our youngest children with rhymes and songs. (*O, The Oprah Magazine*, Dec. 2008)

Insert poetry/poetic in place of Sacks's references to music/musical, and it's easy to

understand the allure of rhyme.

But the powerful connection between music and words isn't *limited* to rhyme. Prose needs to "sing," too. And it can. With the tools of poetry.

In *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*, Georgia Heard divides these tools into **Meaning** - visual and sensory devices such as image, simile, metaphor, and word choice and **Music** - auditory devices such as repetition, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia.



First, MEANING:

* A writer's **WORD CHOICE** reflects not only a word's **denotation** – the specific, literal meaning or gist of the word – but also its **connotation** – the implied additional meanings of the word, its subtext, nuance, and implication. *Skinny, slender, thin, slight, willowy, bony, twiggy, gaunt, lithe* – each suggests something slightly different. (adapted from Paul Janeczko's *Favorite Poetry Lessons* , 34)

* The **ORDER**, or arrangement and length of the words, affect a reader's response. A character can *skip, dash, or march... saunter, shuffle, or waddle*. The latter three not only describe a slower pace, they are two syllables long and take longer to say or read. (adapted from *Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight*, Harrison and Cullinan)

Next, MUSIC:

*The link between Meaning and **Music** is simply that the **SOUND** of a carefully chosen word can support and amplify story meaning, deepening the emotional layers of a story.*

Think of the alphabet as families of sounds. For example, some letters in English produce a sharp, harsh sound. Others convey a soft, quiet sound. Learn more about the effects of various sounds in Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* ("Sound," chapter 4) and Ann Whitford Paul's *Writing Picture Books* ("Making Music with Your Prose," chapter 14).

Now, consider how letter/sound combinations work in the context of words, phrases, and sentences. Oliver writes:

The following three phrases mean exactly the same thing:

1. Hush!
2. Please be quiet!
3. Shut up!

The first phrase we might use to quiet a child when we do not want to give any sense of disturbance or anger.

The second phrase is slightly curt, but the tone remains civil...

The third phrase indicates ... impatience and even anger.

(A Poetry Handbook, 23-24)

And finally, consider how the **Music** of individual phrases and sentences supports **Meaning** through another tool in the writing toolbox - the up and down patterns of speech known as **RHYTHM**. A boisterous or silly story deserves an upbeat iamb or anapest rhythm. A story about childhood fears might use trochee or dactyl rhythms to echo the more serious tone.

So how does a writer get to the “sound and the feeling” of the *best of the best* picture books? By studying and using the tools of poetry. The best books *don't* always rhyme and they don't have to. But look closely and you'll find the author's used many of the tools of a poet, choosing the best words and placing them in their best order.

For more about the intersection of poetry and picture books, check out these links:

[Which Comes First: The Picture Book or the Poem?](#)

[The Art of Reduction: Meaning and Music – the Poetry of Picture Books](#)

[Poems and Picture Books for the Very Young](#)

[Poetry and the Life of a Flaneur](#)

[Poet Craft: a few titles to get you started](#)

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