

\* ANDY CROFT \*

\* A CREATIVE

APPROACH TO

\* TEACHING \*

\* RHYTHM \*

\* AND RHYME \*

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The what, why and how  
of teaching poetry in context

FOR  
PRIMARY  
TEACHERS

BLOOMSBURY



# A Creative Approach to Teaching Rhythm and Rhyme



# A Creative Approach to Teaching Rhythm and Rhyme

The when, why and how to  
use poetry in the classroom

by Andy Croft

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*For Britta and Liz*



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# Introduction

This is not a book about writing poetry. Nor is it a book about teaching children to write poetry. It is a book about using words, sounds, echoes, patterns and rhythm in the primary classroom. It is a book about celebrating the music of ordinary speech.

A report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2013) suggested that children in the UK are now the least literate in the developed world. One in five children do not achieve expected literacy levels by the time they leave primary school. According to the National Literacy Trust, 74 per cent of headteachers believe that the speaking and listening skills of young children have deteriorated in the past five years. In a recent poll by the children's communication charity I CAN, 89 per cent of nursery workers said they are worried about the growth of speech, language and communication difficulties among pre-school children.

## Rhythm and rhyme

In the current debate about falling standards of literacy and oracy in primary schools, the potential role of rhyme and rhythm in the classroom is usually overlooked. The ability to enjoy the shared music of ordinary speech (rhythm, rhyme and repetition) can have a wider impact on the development of language in children. The self-conscious use of heightened, patterned language encourages a sense of the magic of words, a feeling for the unsuspected power and pleasure of using words with confidence and precision, an understanding of the importance of memory and anticipation, and a sense of ownership over language.

## Aims of the book

*A Creative Approach to Teaching Rhythm and Rhyme* is specifically designed to help teachers deliver the 'spoken language', 'reading' and 'writing' elements of the National Curriculum at Key Stages 1 and 2. You will find many ideas for helping children to 'appreciate rhymes and poems, and to recite some by heart'.

The book aims to provide you with practical and easy-to-use warm-up sessions, games, models, ideas, templates and examples that you can use in the classroom to encourage your children to become writers and readers through the noisy practice of rhythm and rhyme, sound, pattern and echo. It seeks to encourage a sense of the magic of words, the poetry of everyday subjects, the power of learning by heart and the value of memory and anticipation. These exercises are designed to explore patterned language, to encourage a sense of rhyme and to develop spelling and sound patterns. They will enhance children's phonological awareness, looking at consonant clusters, vowel phonemes and rhythmical speech through recognition and repetition.

The 'rules' of rhythm and rhyme are both recognisably strange and strangely recognisable. Using rhythm and rhyme is a democratic creative act that is equally hard and equally easy for everyone. It has special rules which won't let you settle on the first word that comes into your head. Your words have to fit the pattern. You don't have to write anything down, but you do have to become a writer. And once you have become a writer, you might become a reader.

Rhymes are everywhere – songs, playground games, football chants, hymns, raps, TV adverts, radio jingles, tabloid headlines. You don't have to think about rhymes. All you have to do is listen. Poems don't only happen in books. You don't have to be able to write in order to write. Or rather, you don't have to be able to use the written word in order to be creative. Oral literacy depends on rhythm, rhyme, repetition, chorus, echo, alliteration and gesture. These are the common tools of a democratic oral literacy which we all share.

The music of literature – specifically poetry – is much older than, for example, the rules of spelling and punctuation. Humans have been inventing, feeling, memorising and re-telling stories, songs and poems for thousands of years. But the highly-specialised techniques of reading and writing are very recent innovations. You don't have to be 'good at English' to be able to enjoy the music of ordinary speech. Very often children who do not consider themselves to be 'good at literacy' are more able to listen to the common music of language. They use their ears, as writers and audiences have always done.

*A Creative Approach to Teaching Rhythm and Rhyme* focuses therefore on the wider benefits of using rhythm, rhyme and repetition in the classroom, in developing children's speaking and listening skills, their use of anticipation and memory. Above all, it is a book about encouraging children to enjoy language and to participate in its common music.

## The author

This book is based on many years' experience of working with children in over 400 UK schools, including reception classes, infant, primary, secondary, special schools for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, pupil referral units and language units. I have used these exercises in schools in Paris, Connecticut, Moscow and Siberia, and in continuing professional development days for teachers all over the UK.

The arguments behind this book also derive from my practice as a writer. My own books of poetry are metrically precise, formally traditional and rhyme obsessively; they include a collection about sport for children, *On Your Marks* (Hodder Education, 2003) and two comic verse-novels for adults written entirely in Pushkin sonnets, *Ghost Writer* (Five Leaves Publications, 2008) and *1948* (Five Leaves Publications, 2012).

Some of the examples in this book were written for the CBeebies series *Poetry Pie* (2009). Others were written for *Horty Porty*, a verse-play for children performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2005. This play was set in a fairy-tale world where only rich children are allowed to talk in rhyme; everyone else has to talk in prose. This is connected to the unequal distribution of names (only rich people are allowed to buy names), sprouts and jammy-dodgers. Eventually the nameless poor kids demand the right to speak in rhyme:

*We ain't got no names  
And we can't talk in rhyme,  
They say it's illegal,  
They say it's a – sin!*

*They make all these rules  
That we have to obey,  
They police what we do  
And they watch what we – think!*

*Our life is a struggle,  
It keeps getting worse,  
O if only they'd let us  
Start talking in – poetry!*

