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Get your ’rick rolling: Style Invitational limerick guide

If you’d like to enter our Week 1396 Limerixicon contest, read these guidelines

By **Pat Myers (Empress of The Style Invitational)**

August 6, 2020 at 8:18 a.m. EDT

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The following is the guide we publish in conjunction with our limerick contests; it’s several years old, with updates for this year’s Limerixicon, [Week 1396](#).

The Style Invitational is renowned for all sorts of clever, irreverent humor and wordplay in its almost quarter-century of varied contests. Some are free-form, off the wall, while other contests state specific parameters in addition to the overarching requirement to Be Funny and Clever. Our limerick contests — like our annual Limerixicon, which seeks verses featuring a word from some sliver of the alphabet (this year, ha-) — belong to the latter group: Hewing perfectly to a meter and rhyme scheme is one of the things that make limericks and other light verse funny.

When we ask for a limerick, we want it to observe several rules. Some of them are more rigid than some other people’s standards; others are more lax. The rules sound technical, but really they’re just explaining the concepts of rhyme and meter that you’ve probably grasped since nursery school. They’re pretty much the same standards as the ones used at [OEDILF.com](#) — the Omnificent English Dictionary in Limerick Form. . In fact, I’m stealing some of the Oedilfers’ stuff right off their wiki.

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For the purposes of our contest, this is what a limerick is:

- **It’s five lines long.**
- **The rhyme scheme is AABBA** — that means Lines 1, 2 and 5 rhyme with one another, and Lines 3 and 4 rhyme with each other. (See “What a rhyme is” below.)
- **Limericks traditionally are made up of anapests**; an anapest is the three-beat rhythm “da-da-DAH.” As OEDILF puts it:

So the basic form is:
da da DAH / da da DAH / da da BING
da da DAH / da da DAH / da da DING
da da DAH / da da BAM
da da DAH / da da WHAM
da da DAH / da da DAH / da da PING

Here’s an example of an Invitational limerick that’s exactly in the form above, by Stephen Gold of London, whose very clever limbs appear in both the Invite and OEDILF. I’ll boldface all the strong beats, the ones in all-caps above:

“I’ll be **brief**,” said the **pelican**. “**We**
Are so **similar**, **me** and **BP**;
Tarred and **feathered**. Those **spills**
Mean we **both** have huge **bills**.
High and **dry**, we’re **complete** ly at **sea**.”

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■ **They don't have to start or finish with anapests:** Every line in Stephen's limerick above happens to start with an anapest, which is two weak syllables followed by an accented one — notice that the first boldface word in each line doesn't show up until the third syllable. But the Empress (as well as OEDILF) does *not* care if all the lines begin with the two weak beats of an anapest, and end with a strong beat. Instead, they can begin with one weak beat, or just come right in on the strong beat. Likewise, at the end of the line, you can add one or more weak beats as part of an extended rhyme (e.g., TALK-ing and WALK-ing; CRED-ible and ED-ible).

■ **In other words, what you absolutely must have**, in each line, are strong beats separated by two weak beats.

In Lines 1, 2 and 5, you need to include the rhythm of HICK-or-y DICK-or-y DOCK.

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In Lines 3 and 4, you need to have a DICK-or-y DOCK. Note how the boldface syllables in Stephen's limerick match the HICK, DICK and DOCK exactly.

But you certainly may also have the extra weak beats at the beginning and ends of the lines — in fact, there *should* be at least one weak beat (better, two) between the last strong beat of one line and the first strong beat of the next line; there shouldn't be two strong beats in a row. Those two weak beats can be on the same line, or at the end of one and the beginning of the next. But Lines 1, 2 and 5 must all end with the same number of weak beats (if any), as must Lines 3 and 4.

Here's an example from the Week 882 Invitational on the word "draconian," by the great limerick writer Chris Doyle, a major contributor to both the Invite and OEDILF. Note that Chris's Line 1 begins not with an anapest, but with just one weak beat ("The"), and that the extended rhyme at the ends of 1, 2 and 5 includes two weak syllables ("ni-an") — followed by another weak beat at the beginning of the next line. Yet the limerick — see how prescient it was, by the way, back in 2010 — contains a very strong "hickory-dickory-dock" rhythm at its core (strong beats again are in bold):

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The **cuts** at the **famed** Oregonian
Are **shockingly deep** and draconian.
The **newspaper trade**
Is **kaput**, I'm **afraid**.
What's the **future of news?** The i**Phon**ian.

What a rhyme is

Lines 1, 2 and 5 of a limerick rhyme with one another, as do Lines 3 and 4. For the purposes of The Style Invitational, a rhyme is a "perfect" rhyme and not a "near" rhyme or a "sight" rhyme. **A rhyme begins with the last stressed syllable of both words.** "Trying" rhymes with "crying" because the last stressed syllables, in this case "try-" and "cry-," rhyme and everything that follows is the same.

On the other hand, "finding" does not rhyme with "trying" or "crying," because the stressed syllables — "find" and "try" — don't rhyme. "Finding" rhymes with "binding," because "find" rhymes with "bind." And you can't pretend words are accented differently from how they really are, just because you've changed them in your head: You can't decide to pronounce it "hemor**R**HOID" so it'll rhyme with "my Droid" (that's from an actual entry).

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Remember that rhymes are determined by sound, not spelling. “Loser” rhymes with “cruiser” but not with “poser.” Tinkering with spelling for humorous effect is optional, as in “Dracula” and “vernacula,” as ace limerician Hugh Thirlway has done.

Content

The Invitational is a humor contest, and so we want our limericks to be clever and funny. The best of our limericks build to a punchline, a clever ending. Barbed “dark” satire with a bitter tone counts in our book as humor if it’s cleverly done, just as an angry political cartoon would. Chris Doyle’s limerick about police SWAT teams, used as an example for Week 1396, is a case in point. Puns and other wordplay are a good way to get ink (see the punchline of that same Doyle limerick).

As with all Style Invitational contests, **we don’t want work that’s been published elsewhere**, including online. It’s probably okay, though, if you’ve just shared your limerick with friends on your Facebook page, on a little-seen blog, etc. If you’re not sure about whether it’s kosher for this contest, go ahead and send it to me, but tell me where people might have already seen it.

There are always exceptions

Humor sometimes involves the conspicuous breaking of rules for comic effect, and we’re not averse to that. This is different, however, from limericks whose meter doesn’t quite scan, or whose rhyme is sort of close; almost-but-not-quite won’t wash in this contest: A limerick with flawed meter or rhyme would have to have unbelievably wonderful content to get Invitational ink; we typically run about 30 limericks from about 800 submissions.

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For more information and helpful hints on writing limericks, peruse the even more extensive guidelines and discussion all over the OEDILF.com site.

As usual, **the Empress may edit your limerick** to improve it mechanically, or occasionally to frame the humor better; unfortunately, there’s no time for her to consult with the writer over every tweak, but she will email you if she thinks you might disagree strongly with her editing. (See the [Style Invitational Rules and Guidelines](#) for the general procedures of the Invite, and be sure to look at the introduction of the contest itself at wapo.st/invite1396.) Note: Don’t bother marking the first letters in each line in boldface or some other special format; even the Empress can figure out the word you’re spelling out. Anyway, the entry form won’t transmit boldface or other coding.

Submitting to OEDILF: You may submit any of your Invitational limericks to the OEDILF database, but only after this contest’s results are announced online Sept. 6. After you submit your limerick there (you may undo the Empress’s editing if you like — sure, throw away the professional help), it will be “workshopped” with you by an editor and, upon acceptance, made a permanent part of the collection under your name or a pseudonym, along with the more than 100,000 limericks that so far form the Omnificent English Dictionary.

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Results of Week 1396 will be posted in The Washington Post’s Arts & Style section on Sunday, Sept. 6, 2020, and on washingtonpost.com Thursday afternoon, Sept. 3. The contest entry deadline is Monday, Aug. 17, at midnight, wherever your midnight might be.

Good luck!

GOOD LUCK.
Pat Myers
The Empress of the Style Invitational

Submit entries on the online form at wapo.st/enter-invite-1396. We are no longer using email for submissions.

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