

CONCRETE POEMS



BY YVONNE PEARSON

ILLUSTRATED BY KATHLEEN PETELINSEK

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What Is a Poem?



Poems are all around us. They are used in greeting cards. They are used in songs. Poems are even used in commercials.

It is very hard to say exactly what a poem is. That is because poems can be many different things. It is OK to break rules in poetry. Sometimes poems **rhyme**.



Poetry can be like taking a picture of a place or an experience. But poets create the picture using words. Readers then imagine the place or experience.

This means two words have the same ending sound. But not all poems rhyme. Many poems are written in lines instead of sentences. Lines can be as short as a single word or phrase.

All poems have at least one thing in common. The words in a poem are always chosen very carefully. Poets often choose as few words as they can. But they choose the best words. These special words bring up a feeling or picture in a reader's mind.

WHAT IS A CONCRETE POEM?

Concrete poetry is written so that it makes a certain shape. The shape is usually whatever the poem is about. A concrete poem about an apple could be shaped like an apple. A poem about an elephant could be shaped like an elephant. One famous



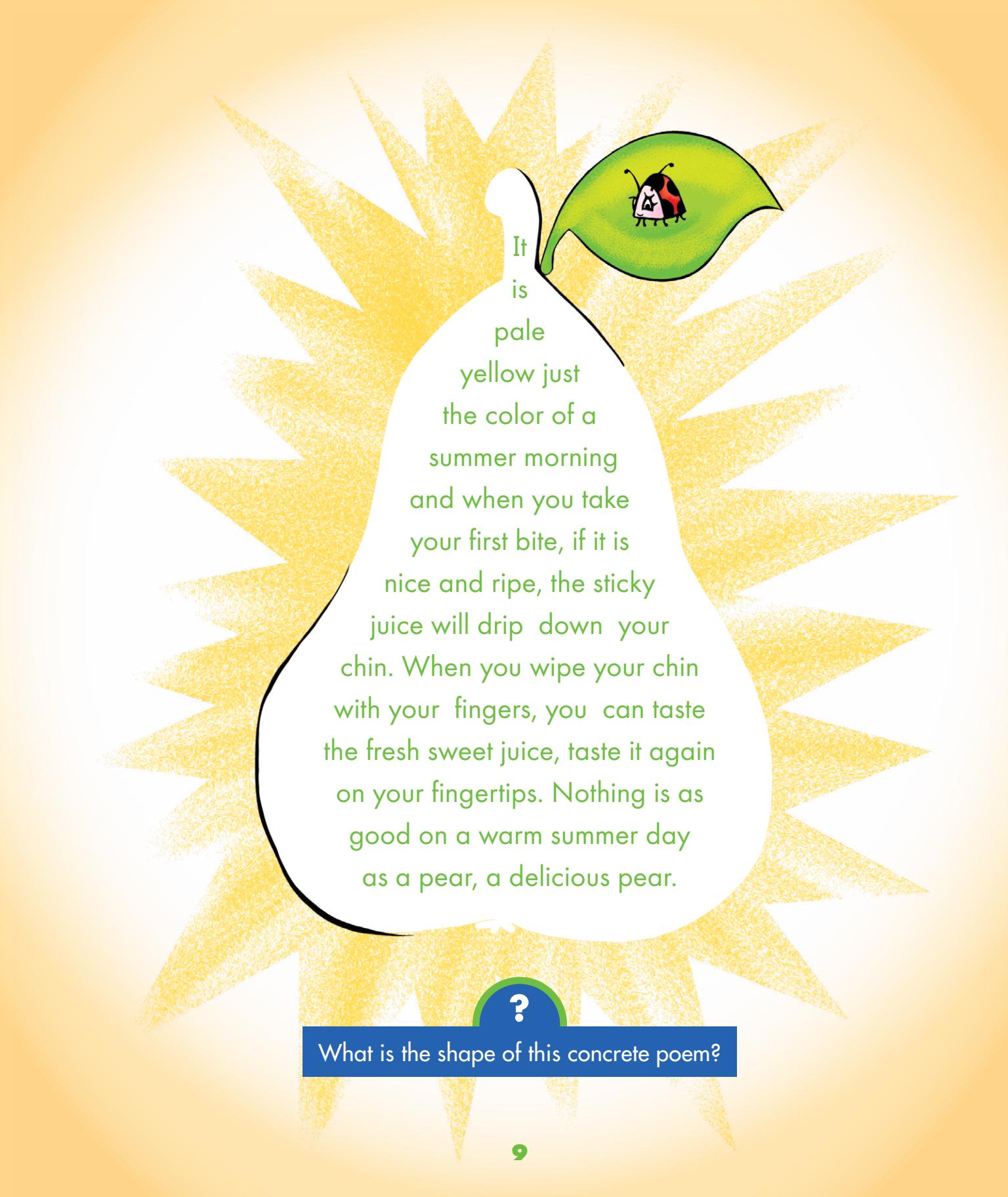


concrete poem, “The Mouse’s Tale,” is shaped like a mouse with a long tail. It is from the book *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. The words follow a curving line. The line gets smaller and smaller. Then it comes to a point at the bottom of the page.

Concrete poetry is better seen than heard. What the poem looks like is as important as the words in the poem. Concrete poetry is two kinds of art put together. It is written art and visual art.

Concrete poems are also called shape poems. A group of Brazilian poets gave concrete poems the name “concrete” in the 1950s. But concrete poems were written long before they were named. Ancient Greeks wrote concrete poetry in the 200s and 100s BC. Some poems were shaped like an ax or an altar. Concrete poetry became popular approximately 500 years ago. English poet George Herbert wrote a famous concrete poem in the 1600s. It is called “Easter Wings.” The poem is shaped like a wing.





A large yellow sunburst shape surrounds a central white circle containing a poem. In the top right corner of the white circle is a small illustration of a red and black ladybug on a green leaf.

It
is
pale
yellow just
the color of a
summer morning
and when you take
your first bite, if it is
nice and ripe, the sticky
juice will drip down your
chin. When you wipe your chin
with your fingers, you can taste
the fresh sweet juice, taste it again
on your fingertips. Nothing is as
good on a warm summer day
as a pear, a delicious pear.



What is the shape of this concrete poem?

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How to Make a Concrete Poem

Concrete poems have only one rule. The **appearance** of the poem has to add to its meaning. Concrete poetry usually does not rhyme. It has no rules about **rhythm**. This is the way words in a poem sound together.

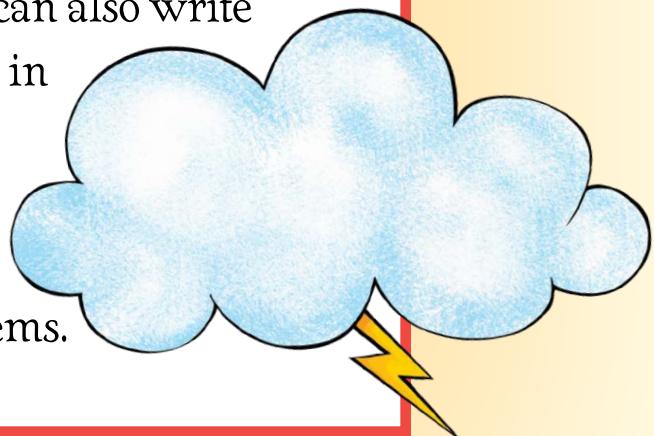


You can make a concrete poem by drawing a shape on a piece of paper. Then fill the shape with words, phrases, and lines that have something to do with that shape.

Concrete poems can be written about anything. But they are often written about art or nature. Poets also write concrete poems about seasons or relationships.

MANY KINDS OF CONCRETE POEMS

A poet can create a concrete poem's shape by how the lines are arranged. Let's say a poet wants to write a concrete poem about a pole. He could write one word under another from the top of the page to the bottom. He could also arrange words to make the outline of a shape. Then the middle would be empty. For example, a poet could write about a circle. The words would go around in a circle on the page. Poets can start at the bottom of the page and write to the top. They can also write diagonally. Poets can write in curly lines to mimic storm clouds. There is a lot of freedom to experiment when writing concrete poems.



A concrete poem can also be very simple. A poet could draw the shape of an apple. Then she could fill the entire shape with the word *apple*. Or she could fill the shape with the letters in the word *apple*. But the poet could scramble the letters. So *p*'s and *a*'s and *l*'s and *e*'s are everywhere.

Concrete poems can also be more complicated. A poet could fill the apple shape with sentences that describe an apple. The poet could talk about what apples remind her of. Or how apples make her feel.



FUN WITH LETTERS

Still another way to make concrete poems is to suggest ideas with **typography**.

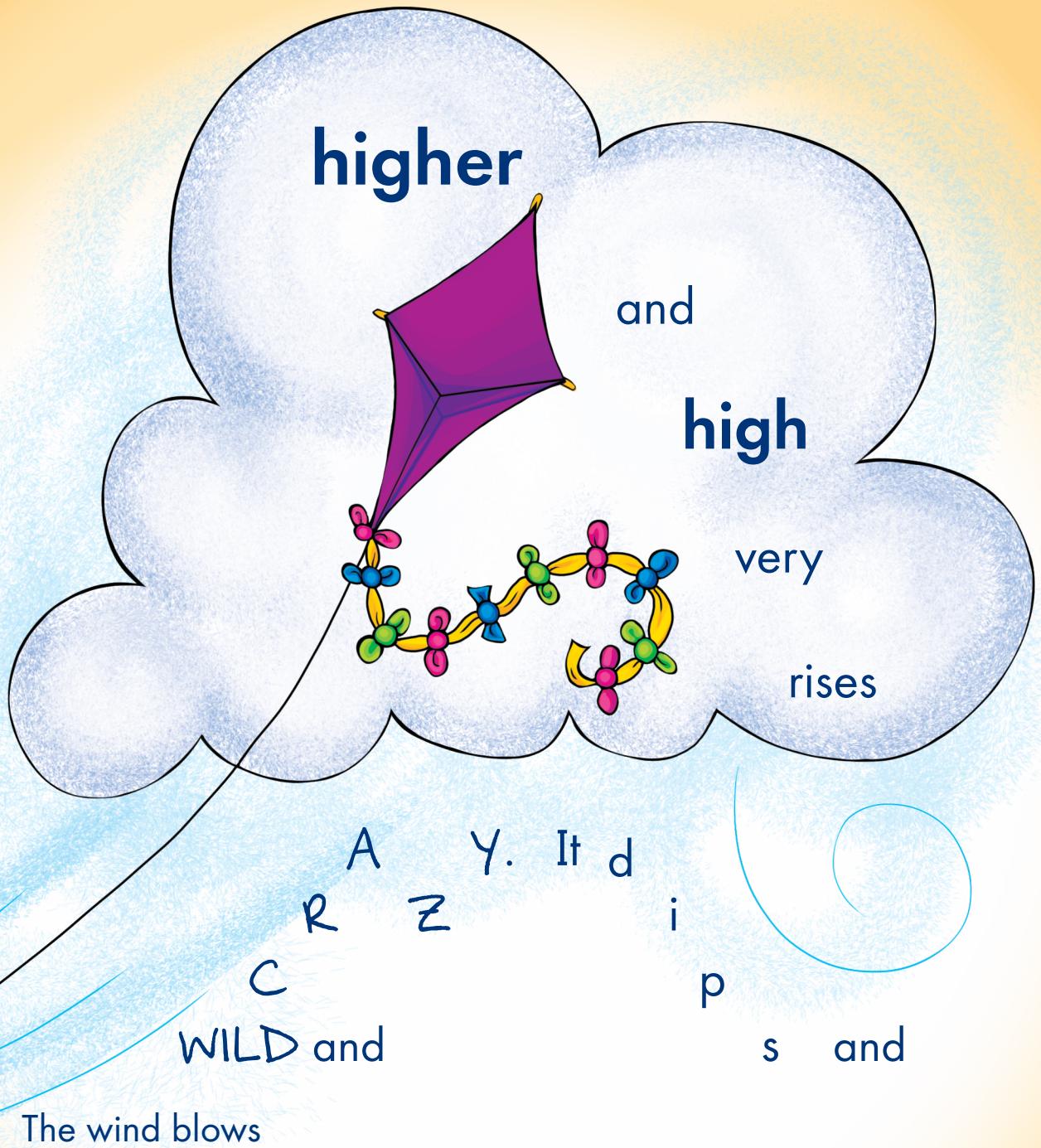
Typography is how letters look. Poets can use *curly letters* or **dark letters**.

They can use *light letters*. Poets can use CAPITAL LETTERS or **big letters**.

They can use small letters or **colored letters**.

Extra spaces might describe something that is far away. Extra letters make a word look loooooong.





?

What examples of typography do you see in this poem?

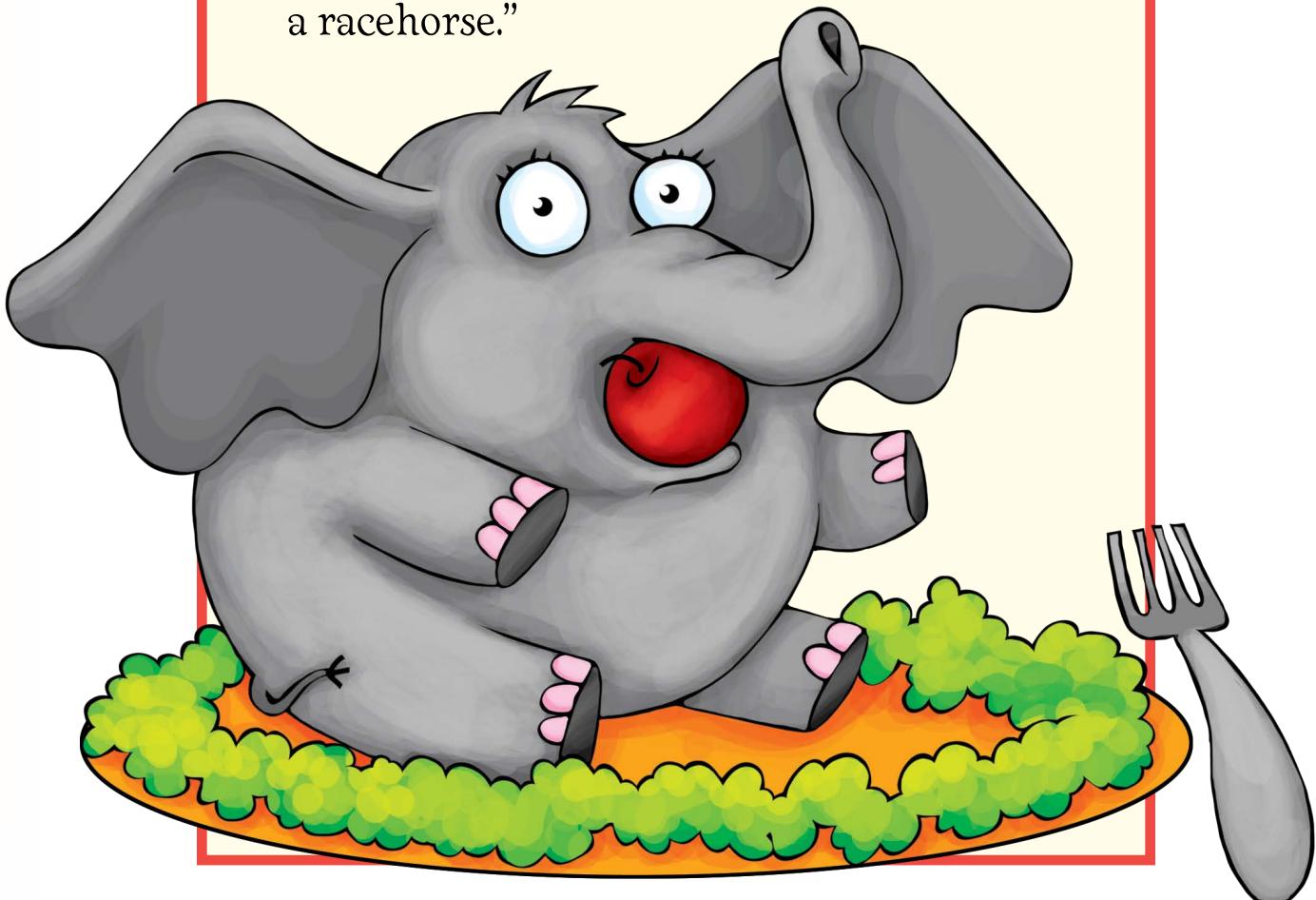
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A Poet's Tools



Poets do not have to use rhyme or rhythm in concrete poems. But they can use them if they want. Rhyme and rhythm are tools that can make a concrete poem fun to read.

Many other poetic tools work well with concrete poetry, too. When poets exaggerate, they use **hyperbole**. This makes something seem larger or greater than it really is. “I could eat an elephant” is hyperbole. So is “that girl ran faster than a racehorse.”



Personification is another tool that works well in concrete poems. This is when a poet gives human traits to things that are not human. One example is “the wind sighs.” People sometimes sigh when they are tired. The wind can’t really sigh. Why would a poem say the wind sighed? It could be a way for the poet to express a feeling of weariness.



“The clouds weep” is another personification. What feelings or events might this personification express?

Onomatopoeia is another fun device to use in concrete poetry. This is when a word sounds like the thing it describes. “Buzz” sounds like the noise bees make. “Meow” is the sound a cat makes. “Caw” sounds like the call of a crow. “Zing,” “splat,” “tick-tock,” and “clickety-clack” are all onomatopoeia. Can you think of other words that sound like what they describe?





THE BUTTERFLY

tiny butterfly flutters
in, then he waves at
fast as airplanes fly,

Whoosh whoosh
back and forth.
flash quickly
brightly as

He twirls high
round my yard.

"Hello," I say. "May
I'll sit so quietly
to where the flowers
breeze, red and blue
you, my butterfly,"

A
by my window. He peeks
me and whips his wings as
as fast as blinking lights.
yes *w h o o s h!* They go
His yellow wings
by me, glowing
a yellow sun.
up then circles
He plays all day long.
I catch a ride with you?
on your wings, look down
are dancing in the summer's
and pink, where they wait for
to land upon their petals.
Ah!"



Which poetic tools can you find in this poem? Can you find an example of onomatopoeia? What about hyperbole? Or personification?

NOW IT'S YOUR TURN!

In concrete poetry, the look of the poem is as important as the words a poet uses. But that is the only rule. This gives poets a lot of freedom when they write. Now that you know more about concrete poems, it's time to write your own! You can write in any shape you want. What shape can you imagine for your poem?



TIPS FOR YOUNG POETS

1. Read books with concrete poetry. Make a list of the shapes in which the poems are written.
2. Look around you for shapes you might want to use for a poem.
3. Keep the shape simple. It is easier to write a concrete poem if you don't have to fit the words into odd shapes.
4. Choose something you like to do or think about for your poem's topic.
5. Make a list of onomatopoeia words you might use in your poem, such as *purr* or *zap*.
6. Make a list of personification words you could use in your poem.
7. When you have written your poem, draw your shape on a piece of paper and fill it with your poem.
8. Add colors to your concrete poem.

GLOSSARY

appearance (uh-PEER-uhns): What something looks like is its appearance. One of the most important parts of a concrete poem is its appearance.

hyperbole (hi-PUR-buh-lee): Hyperbole is an exaggeration to make a point. A poet might use hyperbole to describe something as larger or greater than it really is.

onomatopoeia (ah-nuh-mat-uh-PEE-uh): Onomatopoeia is the use of a word that sounds like the sound the word is talking about. *Buzz* is an example of onomatopoeia.

personification (pur-sahn-uh-fuh-KAY-shun): Personification is giving human traits to things that are not human. “The wind sighed” is an example of personification.

rhyme (RIME): Words that rhyme have the same ending sound. *Sun* and *fun* rhyme.

rhythm (RITH-uhm): Rhythm is a repeating pattern of sounds in poetry. Rhythm is not important in concrete poetry.

typography (tye-PAH-gruh-fee): Typography is the appearance of printed words on a page. Poets can use many different kinds of typography in concrete poetry.

TO LEARN MORE

BOOKS

Atwood, Megan. *Connor and Clara Build a Concrete Poem*. Chicago: Norwood House, 2011.

Bodden, Valerie. *Poetry Basics: Concrete Poetry*. Mankato, MN: The Creative Company, 2011.

Sidman, Joyce. *Meow Ruff: A Story in Concrete Poetry*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006.

ON THE WEB

Visit our Web site for lots of links about concrete poems:

www.childsworld.com/links

Note to Parents, Teachers, and Librarians: We routinely check our Web links to make sure they're safe, active sites—so encourage your readers to check them out!

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