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### Acrostics: Poetry, Top to Bottom

Acrostics are one of my favorite poetic forms! I think they're a blast to play with. The word *acrostics* comes from the Greek *ákros*, meaning top or tip, and *stíchos*, meaning verse. They are poems that, when you read the first letter of each line vertically down the poem, the letters form a new word or phrase, related to the poem.

Acrostics have been around a long time, and the earliest known versions were recorded in Ancient Greece. Focusing on the children's side of things, here's an example from *Through the Looking-Glass* (which is in the public domain), by Lewis Carroll.

The last chapter is called "A Boat, Beneath A Sunny Sky." The poem is an acrostic of Alice Pleasance Liddell, the name of the real Alice.

A boat, beneath a sunny sky  
Lingering onward dreamily  
In an evening of July -

Children three that nestle near,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Pleased a simple tale to hear -

Long has faded that sunny sky:  
Echoes fade and memories die:  
Autumn frosts have slain July.

Still she haunts me, phantomwise,  
Alice moving under skies  
Never seen by waking eyes.

Children yet, the tale to hear,  
Eager eye and willing ear,  
Lovingly shall nestle near.

In a Wonderland they lie,  
Dreaming as the days go by,  
Dreaming as the summers die:

Ever drifting down the stream -  
Lingering in the golden gleam -  
Life, what is it but a dream?

So, how do you write an acrostic? First, I have to know what I'm writing about. Unlike with free verse poems, I can't simply start spilling words onto the page and hope they'll make something good!

So I choose my topic. And, even *more* important, I think about what I want to say about my topic. I brainstorm lots of concrete words and sensory words related to my topic and what it is I want to say.

Then I choose my word and write it down the page, one letter per line. I look at my brainstormed list to see which letters might match up with which words, and I begin playing.

One thing about acrostics is that, for me, anyway, you just can't force them. You can't let the letters in the word force you to take your poem in a direction that makes no sense. Might the letters change the way I word what I want to say? Of course. But I'll end up with passionless nonsense if I'm totally dictated to by the letters.

One thing I will try is to change the word, but not the topic.

I had heard on a nature show on TV that in Japan, I think, they call avalanches "the white dragon." I loved that! I first tried writing a poem with WHITE DRAGON being the first letters of the lines. I got nowhere with that. Then I realized that I liked it better as a kind of riddle poem, with the title giving a clue, the poem itself describing the experience, and the letters down the left giving the answer—AVALANCHE.

It's one of the first acrostics I wrote:

**Revenge of the White Dragon**  
(An Acrostic)

**A** dragon wakes, his winter sleep disturbed. He  
**V**ows to punish you, the intruder.  
**A**ir swells with a low rumble.  
**L**and beneath you trembles.  
**A**bove, a wave of concrete snow thunders down. The dragon roars your  
**N**ame. But he can't find you.  
**C**hewing up trees and spewing them out, he searches for you.  
**H**is steamy, snowy breath clouds the sky, and the  
**E**arth cradles you to its rocky chest as the dragon's belly slides by. Safe!

Acrostics make great riddle poems. Click [here](#) to read a poem called "The Stone Skipping Record," from J. Patrick Lewis' *The World's Greatest: Poems* (Chronicle, 2008). The title tells you the subject, and the acrostic forms the answer. The last three lines nudge kids to look for the answer in the poem:

**G**uess

**H**ow many times

**T**he pebble dimpled the water.

Acrostics take many forms. You might have just one word per line, as I did here, in this poem from *Fuzzy-Fast Blur: Poems About Animals* (Capstone, 2008).

## A Closer Look

Glowing  
Orange  
Lacy  
Delicate  
Fanning  
Iridescent  
Shimmering  
Hoverer

Or you might use longer lines. Here's a poem from *Always Got My Feet: Poems About Transportation* (Capstone, 2008).

### From Behind a Window

Look at me!  
In here!  
Moving slowly, watching you  
Out there

I try to never use the word that the acrostic forms anywhere else in the poem or title, even if it's not exactly a riddle poem. I think that weakens the impact of the reader realizing the first letters create a word.

You could also try a phrase acrostic. This is a specialized acrostic where the first word of each line forms a well-known phrase. I haven't been able to do this for a kids' poem, but I blogged about it [here](#) and shared a phrase acrostic I wrote for adults.

Acrostics do not traditionally use any particular meter, nor do they rhyme. But every once in a while, I like to play around with a rhyming acrostic. This poem is from *Shrinking Days, Frosty Nights: Poems about Fall* (Capstone, 2008).

### Watchman

Stay out of our  
Crops or I will get  
Angry—crows, grackles, and sparrows, too!  
Robbing our harvest is  
Ever so rude, thinking our  
Corn and wheat is for you. Fly away,  
Race to some other farm, to filch your  
Oats and seeds for free. You're better off finding an empty field  
Without a scary guard like me!

And this one is from *And Then There Were Eight: Poems About Space* (Capstone, 2008).

## And Then There Were Eight

Poor ball of ice, we know you exist; but you're  
Little and solid and we must insist on  
Undoing the past, so though you'll be missed, we've  
Taken you  
Off of the "real planet" list

Rhyming ones are really fun to write! You just have to let go of the expectation that your rhymes will fall at the end of the lines. At least I do! I want the rhymes to fall where they should when the poem is read aloud (or silently, but by an accomplished reader), but I don't worry about trying to make the lines end with the various rhyming words. One thing I like about this is that the rhyme and meter often come as a surprise to the reader!

Now, I've said acrostics are fun, and they are. But they don't always work. Here are a couple of failed attempts.

For my fall poetry book from Capstone, I had a stunning image of white birch trees against an unbelievably beautiful fall blue sky. The tree limbs looked like they were stretching right into the sky. I wanted to write an acrostic, a spare, strong acrostic, to complement that image.

Here are my attempts. As you'll see, when I work on a draft, I just skip a letter if I'm having trouble with it.

### Branches

I  
Reach  
Crooked  
Hands  
Ever  
Skyward

### Bare

I  
Reach  
Cold  
Hands to the  
Ever-after  
Sky

Running into problems, I brainstormed a few more words:  
trees birch sticks smooth papery old earthy

It didn't really help.

Bare  
Illuminated arms  
Reach  
Cold  
Hands to the  
Effortless, ever-after  
Sky

Branches,  
Impatient,  
Reach papery  
Cold  
Hands to the  
Effortless, ever-after  
Sky

Bare,  
Impatient branches  
Reach  
Cold  
Hands to the  
Effortless, ever-after  
Sky

## Up

Bare,  
Infinite branches  
Reach  
Cold, white  
Hands to hold the  
Endless  
Sky

I actually like this last version, but it's not very kid-friendly, and it didn't get used in the book.

Here's one I was trying desperately to make work for the weather poems collection I wrote last year. This is straight out of my Word document:

Spring  
Puddles  
Leap,  
Alive or Applauding  
Sparkling or Seas of  
H?ing

Stomp!

Pound!  
Let  
All  
Shoes

Spring  
Puddles  
Leap,  
Arcing  
Seas of

entertainment

force

Spring  
Puddles  
Leap,  
A  
Sea-sonal  
Hobby

sea  
season  
seal  
seam  
seat

One small sea  
defines the season

S  
P  
L  
Admiral of the  
Sea of

Hmmm...not sure. Thought an acrostic would be easy, but H is killing me. A is not great, either

S  
P  
L  
A  
Spring's  
Heart – too sappy

Small  
Puddle

Leftovers  
Are  
Spring's  
Heroes

Set aside for now.

Well. The last line says it all!

So, acrostics may look very simple, and they should look that way. And sometimes I find they spill out almost without effort, while other times I labor over them and end up with nothing.

That's poetry for you.

Are you ready to give an acrostic a try?

- 1) Choose your topic
- 2) Choose the mood or main point of your poem
- 3) Brainstorm a long list of words that describe this topic (without thinking about what letters they start with)
- 4) Write the topic word vertically down the page
- 5) Try writing a draft, with one word or phrase per letter, each flowing logically and naturally from the line before
- 6) Repeat steps 4-5 until you have a decent draft or you're stamping your feet in frustration—whichever comes first

I hope you'll try an acrostic. And feel free to drop by [my blog](#) on 15 Words or Less Thursdays and write a short (very short) acrostic based on the image I provide. I'd love to see what you do!