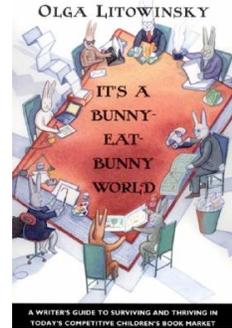


The Art of Reduction:

Meaning and Music - the Poetry of Picture Books

In [“What Makes a Good Picture Book?”](#) we looked at picture book basics. Next, we’ll consider several picture book writing tools.

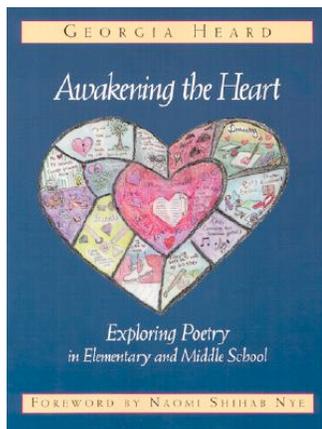
“Picture book making,” says author/illustrator Laura Kvasnosky, “is a reductionist art.” Picture book authors, like poets, use the tools of language to “boil down” and intensify the “flavor” of story. Olga Litowinsky says it this way in *It’s a Bunny Eat Bunny World*: “Like a poem, a picture book is short, tells a story and captures an essential moment. It shows a love of language and has memorable imagery.” (59)



Consider, also, this quote from Laurence Perrine’s *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*:

The peculiar function of poetry...is to convey not sounds but meaning or experience *through* sounds. In third- and fourth-rate poetry, sound and rhythm sometimes distract attention from sense. In first-rate poetry the sound exists not for its own sake nor for mere decoration, but as a medium of meaning. Its function is to support the leading player, not to steal the scene. (197)

As these quotes might suggest, picture books, like poetry, use language to convey emotional “sense and song.” Authors who skillfully use poetic principles deepen the emotional power of story. Those who use the principles carelessly dilute the story and sacrifice its emotional core.



A Poet’s Tools, A Picture Book’s Principles

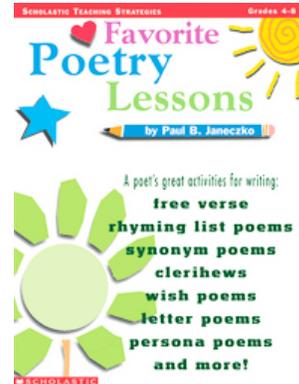
What are these poetic principles, and how does the picture book writer use these tools to add depth and beauty to the language of story?

Dianne White
www.dianneWrites.com

In *Awakening the Heart: Exploring Poetry in Elementary and Middle School*, Georgia Heard categorizes the tools (of *poetry*) into two toolboxes: **Meaning**, which is conveyed by means of visual and sensory devices (image, simile, metaphor, word choice), and **Music**, which is achieved through the use of auditory devices (such as repetition, rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance, consonance, and onomatopoeia).

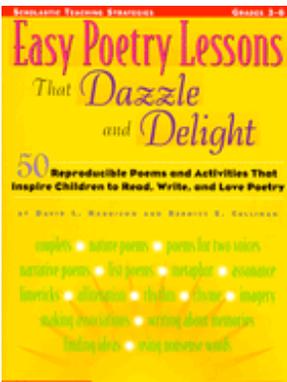
Let's think about some of these tools, starting with the **Meaning** toolbox:

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.



How do we react when we hear (or use) – for example – *skinny, slender, thin, slight, willowy, bony, twiggy, gaunt, lithe*? What are the connotations of each word? Is one word better than another? How will our word choice convey not only a more exact meaning, but also a more accurate reflection of the mood we hope to create?

adapted from Paul Janeczko's *Favorite Poetry Lessons*. (34)



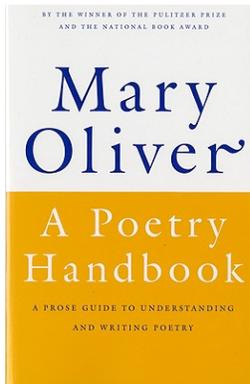
In the same way that *WORD CHOICE* has implications for *MEANING*, so does the **ORDER**, or arrangement and length of the words, affect a reader's response.

In *Easy Poetry Lessons That Dazzle and Delight*, David L. Harrison and Bernice Cullinan write:

A character moving across a room quickly can *skip, dash, or march*. A slower character might *saunter, shuffle, or waddle*. These words not only describe a slower pace, they are two syllables long and take longer to say or read. (58)

How do *WORD CHOICE* and the arrangement of words in sentences convey meaning in your own work?

Next, the *Music* toolbox:



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

Consider the letters of the alphabet as “families.” Mary Oliver writes, “Here we begin to understand that our working material – the alphabet – represents families of sounds rather than random sounds...” Each of these contains, she says, a “felt quality of their own kind of sound.” (*A Poetry Handbook*, 21- 22)

Some letters, such as /b/, /d/, /k/, /p/, /q/, /t/, hard “c” and “g” in English produce a sharp, rather harsh sound. Others, such as /oo/ in “soon” and “moon” or /sh/ as in “hush” or “mush” convey a soft, quiet sound. Liquid consonants /l/, /m/, /n/, and /r/ suggest a more fluid sound. This can be a powerful tool that you’ll do well to explore further in books about poetry, such as Oliver’s *A Poetry Handbook* (“Sound,” chapter 4) and Ann Whitford Paul’s *Writing Picture Books* (“Making Music with Your Prose,” chapter 14).

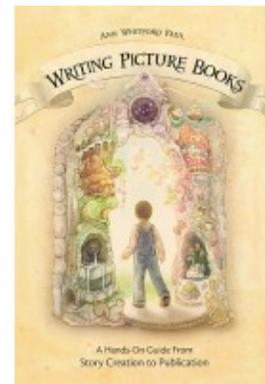
Now, consider how sound works in the context of words, phrases, and sentences. Oliver writes:

The following three phrases mean exactly the same thing. But we would use each of the phrases only under certain circumstances, and not at all under others. The phrases are:

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... (This phrase uses four mutes, *p*, *b*, *q*, and *t*, but in almost every case the mute is instantly “calmed down,” twice by a vowel, and once by a liquid.)



The third phrase is the most curious and instructive. It is abrupt; it indicates, unarguably, impatience and even anger. Someone using this phrase means business. (In this phrase the mutes, t and p, are not softened; rather, the vowel precedes them; the mutes are the final brittle explosion of the word. Both words slap shut upon their utterance, with a mute.)

(A Poetry Handbook, 23-24)

And finally, consider how the **Music** of phrases and sentences rises and falls and thereby supports **Meaning** through another tool in the writing toolbox - **RHYTHM**.

Rhythm is about patterns and the ups and downs of speech. 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.

The following are the four basic rhythms you'll need to know about:

RISING:

Iamb - a short unaccented syllable followed by a stressed syllable

- / - /
to day Ma rie

Anapest - two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable

- - / - - /
dis a gree 'Twas the night

FALLING:

Trochee - accent on the first syllable followed by an unaccented beat

/ - / -
soc cer Ja mie

Dactyl - accent on the first syllable followed by two unaccented syllables

/ - - / - -
el e phant Jen ni fer

