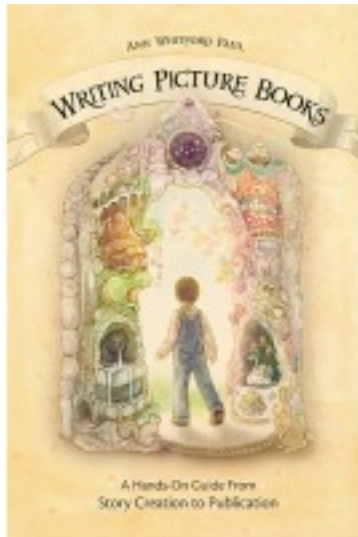


## Which Comes First: The Picture Book or the Poem?

*An Interview with author Ann Whitford Paul*

Years ago, as a brand new, wanna-be children's writer, one of my first writing classes was taught by [Ann Whitford Paul](#). A generous teacher, poet, and the author of many successful picture books, Ann is also responsible for writing one of the most



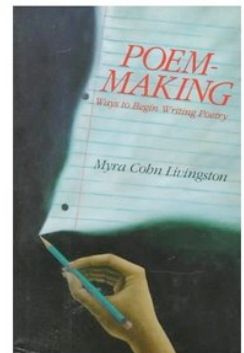
comprehensive craft books written specifically with the picture book in mind. *Writing Picture Books* is like one of Ann's marvelous classes packaged between the covers of book. Enjoy this 2008 interview and peek into the writing life of a picture book author.

*Dianne: Poetry infuses all of your work – from your collections of poems and nonfiction to your picture books and easy reads. What brought you to your interest in poetry, and how has this influenced your writing and the types of books you create?*

**Ann:** Coming to poetry was a fluke. At an event for my first book *Owl at Night*, someone said that I wrote poetically. I was so stunned that when I heard about Myra Cohn Livingston's children's poetry class at UCLA, I decided to see if what that person had said was true.

Probably the years of bedtime reading (of poetry and picture books) to my four children had allowed an informal knowledge of poetry to seep into my brain, but studying with Myra forced me to pay attention to poetry in a systematic way.

Becoming comfortable with rhythm and rhyme and other poetic techniques has made my writing much stronger. Now I can better see that a section of my story might not be as strong as it could be because I have not paid enough attention to manipulating rhythm and word sounds to echo the action of the story.

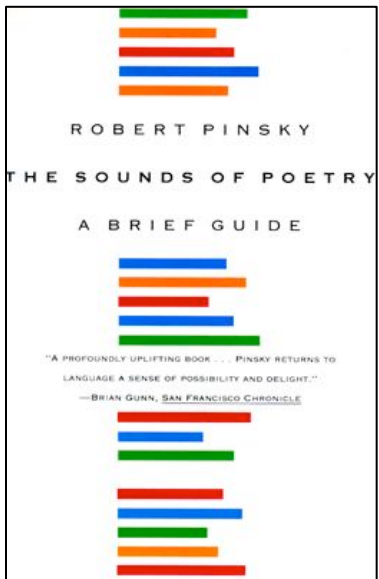


Also poetic techniques help my words flow easily for the adult picture book reader. Young listeners, new to books and reading, respond to rhymed picture books, not only with their heads, but with their hearts and bodies. These techniques allow them to

anticipate what might be coming and make it easier for them to remember the text. When they can say the upcoming words, children have the feeling that they are reading.

*Dianne: What do you currently do to nourish the poet inside?*

**Ann:** All my reading now, whether books for adults or children, is done with attention to the poetry of the prose. I recently finished reading Charles Dickens' Bleak House. What a master he is of poetic prose! I couldn't skim his words (all 800 plus pages) for fear of missing some wonderful twist of language that would take my breath away.



I don't write poetry every day or even every week, except when I'm working on a particular manuscript or collection. I do take time however to listen to soft breezes and birds' songs, to study camellia blossoms and spiders' webs and to savor the taste of fresh pineapple and chocolate cake. The more one pays attention to the world, the more one is alive to new ways of seeing and to the unfolding of poems.

*Dianne: Your years studying with Myra Cohn Livingston "planted" poetry in your bones. Do you feel the work now comes intuitively or is there something particular to your process that allows you to continue to create poetry?*

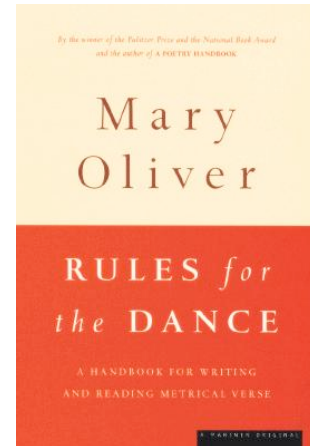
**Ann:** I think poetry comes intuitively now. It is so ingrained in me that coming back to it is never difficult—which isn't to say that poems flow easily and perfectly the first or even the 10<sup>th</sup> time. But that the knowledge Myra imparted has given me skills to deal with most of the problems a poem presents.

*Dianne: Which comes first for you? The picture book or the poem? In other words, do you make a decision to write a picture book, and then let what you know about poetry influence and shape the picture book? Or do you write a poem that then grows to become a picture book or part of a collection?*

**Ann:** Some picture books can't be written in any other form but a poem. This is true especially with picture books for the very young. Recently I've been working on books that are more concept than story. Rhyme and rhythm seems to keep the subject matter lively. Longer stories however always work better for me in prose.

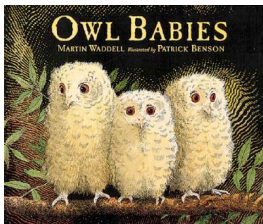
**Dianne:** *What suggestions can you offer for the writer who would like to grow the poetic side of his/her prose?*

**Ann:** Read poetry with a pencil or pen always in hand. Study the rhythm and rhyme patterns. Mark places where word sounds enhance the poem. Look for examples of alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeic words, etc. Check out simile and metaphor and consider how the voice used (narrative, lyrical, mask, conversation and apostrophe) contributes to the poem. Practice different rhythms until you can hear them in your sleep.



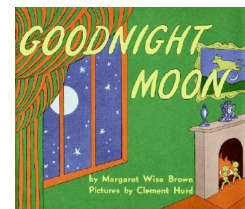
**Dianne:** *Do you have a favorite poetry exercise you do with children or adults that you'd be willing to share?*

**Ann:** Most good poetry comes from paying attention and seeing things that others don't. When I am about to write a poem, I spend a long time free-associating about the object or subject. I speed write, not allowing myself to stop until my brain is blank. Any association, any description, any metaphor, any fantasy I can get down will help make my poem stand out from other poems. Observation is the key to a unique poem.

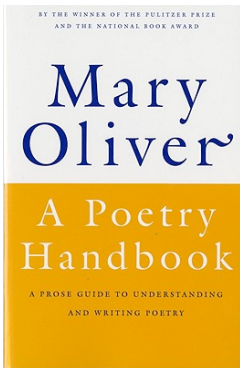


Another exercise I love is to have students experiment with different voices (narrative, lyrical, mask, conversation and apostrophe) for writing a poem. Stories offer even more possibilities for variety in telling. For example if the story is about people, maybe it would be better with animals. If the story takes place in the present, why not try setting it in medieval times? Maybe the story might be better told in letters than a straight narrative. Maybe telling the story from a different character's point of view might make it stronger.

**Dianne:** *In [It's a Bunny Eat Bunny World](#), Olga Litowinsky writes, "Like a poem, a picture book is short, tells a story, and captures an emotional moment. It shows a love of language and has memorable imagery." Ellen Roberts describes it this way, "Poetic principles are a picture book writer's basic tools." Do you agree or disagree? Elaborate.*



**Ann:** Absolutely. I agree with them both. Elaborate? I guess you could say that not all picture books capture an emotional moment, but certainly the good memorable ones do. [Owl Babies](#) and [Goodnight Moon](#) are two examples.



Ellen Roberts' statement has definitely been true for me. Without knowledge of poetic principles my stories would be flat and boring. The day I first walked into Myra Cohn Livingston's class became the most important day of my professional life. Not everyone can have a Myra in her life, but there are fabulous books that can be a good substitute. *Poem-Making* by Myra, *An Introduction to Poetry* by X.J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* by Robert Pinsky, and *Rules for the Dance* and *A Poetry Handbook*, both by Mary Oliver.

To read more about Ann Whitford Paul and her books, visit her website at [www.annwhitfordpaul.net](http://www.annwhitfordpaul.net) .