

GRADES

first, second, and third

MATERIALS

paper

pencil

stapler

construction paper

optional: a joke book

Persuading Sam to write was exhausting work. He even resisted signing his name. He didn't like reading, either. After a month of working with Sam, I had yet to stumble on a single book he found acceptable. So, with Sam in mind, I went book shopping. On a hunch, I purchased a collection of tongue twisters. The next time Sam came for tutoring, I presented him with the volume. He grabbed it—a good omen. He opened the book—even better. He agreed to read a twister: *Six thick thistle sticks*. We took turns trying to get our tongues around it, but had no success. Yet Sam wasn't complaining about reading. That was success enough.

Sam agreed to read some more. Occasionally, he interrupted his reading to share a twister that wasn't in the book.

Now if Sam was willing—almost eager—to read tongue twisters, mightn't he be willing—even eager—to write one or two? I closed the book and announced that it was time for writing. Sam grimaced and started to object. I quickly added that today he could write a tongue twister if he wanted. He could copy one from the book we were reading or he could write an old favorite.

"I can do that," he said with relief. I gave him a sheet of paper and he started writing.

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Sure, there were mistakes. But he and I could both read the twister—although neither of us could say it three times quickly. And then, amazingly, Sam asked to write a second tongue twister.

Why did tongue twisters have this effect? There were two reasons. First, the words were already set. Sam didn't have to imagine anything. All he had to do was say the twister slowly and write one word at a time. Second, Sam, like most children, loved tongue twisters. He thought it was neat, therefore, to record a few favorites.

Since Sam had gotten so excited about this work, I suggested that over the next several weeks we write a collection of tongue twisters. When we had a good amount, we could bind them to-

gether into a book. If he wanted, I added, he could include jokes and riddles in his collection. It would be an assortment of sillies—A SILLY BOOK. Sam thought this was a great idea. He wanted to write the second page right away, and he wanted to write a riddle. He took a sheet of paper and got to work. After he finished writing, we shared the job of illustrating the first two pages of his SILLY BOOK.



Session after session, going one joke, riddle, or tongue twister at a time, we eventually compiled a weighty manuscript: twelve pages. We made a construction-paper cover and stapled all the sheets together. Sam was proud of himself. He never thought he could write so much. He had certainly never thought he could ever write a book! He was willing now—at least sometimes, and with a gentle prod—to write a handful of words without complaining. That was progress.

Your child might like to make A SILLY BOOK at home with you. You might have trouble coming up with the right material, though. If that happens, poke around in a children's joke book or tongue-twister book. You'll find some titles in the Appendix: Books for Reading Aloud.

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nilla ice cream or a kiss?

Which number is more important—two or six?

Who is more powerful—Dracula or Superman?

Who is a better debater—you or your child?

If you really want to find out, play LET'S ARGUE. Roger and I played with delightful results. How did the debate start? Roger, who was very fond of his golden retriever, declared that dogs make better pets than cats. As a serious cat person, I could not let his declaration go unchallenged. So I proposed a debate.

For the debate, Roger would write five reasons why dogs make better pets. I would write five reasons why cats are preferable. Then we would compare arguments. Perhaps there would be a clear winner. If not, we would wait for Roger's mother to come pick him up at the end of his tutoring session. Then I would read both papers to her. Naturally, I would not disclose the author of either paper. After listening, she would decide which list was more convincing.

Roger loved the whole idea, but he was unsure how to begin. I offered to write my list first and show it to him. Perhaps my arguments would offer inspiration.

① Cats are soft and warm.

② It feels so nice when a cat purrs.

③ You don't have to walk a cat in the ice and snow.

④ Cats will catch mice and sometimes cockroaches.

⑤ You never have to give a cat a bath.

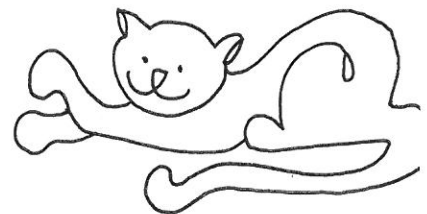
LET'S ARGUE

GRADES

second and third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil
a judge



Let's Argue

Roger was impressed. He thought the cockroach bit especially effective. And thus inspired, he was eager to compose his own arguments.

① Dogs ve frde

Dogs are friendly.

② Dogs go swig

Dogs go swimming.

③ Dogs eet fud ew
dn lick

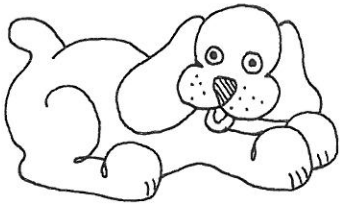
Dogs eat food you
don't like.

④ Dogs pla catch in
the prk

Dogs play catch in
the park.

⑤ Dogs rnt scrd cats

Dogs aren't
scardy cats.



Roger's spelling was atrocious. That's why I have provided translation into standard spelling. His handwriting was horrifying. I didn't care. In all of Roger's seven years, he had never written so much in a single sitting. As I clapped my hands in appreciation, my office doorbell rang. Roger's mom—our official judge—walked in. Roger jumped up shouting, "Mom, you have to decide who's best, me or Peggy."

Roger's mom looked confused. I explained the situation, and then I read the papers. Roger's mother barely kept her composure. She figured out which paper was Roger's, of course. She instantly understood that this amount of writing and this level of enthusiasm for writing was very special. She calmly declared the dog argument superior. Roger leapt up, shouting, "Yes, yes, yes! That's me! I won!" Roger's mother acted suitably surprised while offering her congratulations.

The next time we worked together, Roger wanted—indeed insisted on—another debate. We picked a new topic. (I argued that

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popcorn tops all snacks. Roger fought for potato chips.) This time Roger and I worked on our lists simultaneously. He needed no help in developing his ideas.

To play at home, you will need debating topics and a judge. The judge has an important job, but it's not a time-consuming one. The judge doesn't even have to be in the house. You can telephone—or even fax—an aunt, grandmother, or family friend and get a long-distance referee. If no judge is available, you can hold on to your debate pages until someone is free to arbitrate. Or you can dispense with the judge altogether and evaluate the debates on your own.

As for topics, here's a list of argumentative ideas you can use.

Yes or no, children should pick their own bedtimes.

Yes or no, children should be allowed to eat whatever they want.

Which is better, living in the city or living in the country?

Which is better, Halloween or Thanksgiving?

Which would be better, the power to read people's minds or having one million dollars in cash?

Who is worse, a very wicked witch or Dracula?

Which is the better sport, baseball or football?

If LET'S ARGUE is a hit in your house, play as often as you want. Why argue with success?

DO IT

GRADES

first, second, and third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil



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arning: don't play this game if you're tired or lacking in physical energy. In my experience, DO IT is universally appealing to children. It is less than universally appealing to adults, however, especially on lazy days. In this game, you write a physical challenge for your child on a slip of paper. You might direct him to jump in the air five times, or tiptoe to the window, or do three sit-ups, or spin around six times. Your child reads the instruction and attempts the assignment.

Then, however, you are obliged to switch roles. Your child writes a physical challenge for you. He might order you to crawl to the desk, hop to the kitchen, or touch your toes sixteen times. And you will have to do as commanded.

You can set limits. I once outright refused even to attempt a hundred push-ups. But too many restrictions take the fun out of the game. The fun, for your child, is commanding you to embark on a series of daunting physical exertions. The more you moan and groan, the more your child will giggle with pleasure. If you fail altogether, well, nothing could be better—from your child's point of view. For you, the fun is watching your child enthusiastically write instruction after instruction. To my complete delight, I've known children to insist on writing more, more, and more, so long as it forces me to work out harder, harder, and harder. Adults know that learning to write is like learning to play catch or the piano: you must practice. Wise adults know that if the practice is fun or silly, children aren't likely to complain.

Spelling is not important in this game, nor is grammar. It doesn't matter if a child leaves out an occasional word. You will almost always be able to figure out what is expected of you, and if you cannot, just ask. Your child will happily explain.

Walk
with
a
book
on
your
head.

Do
7
jumping
jacks.

Hop
20
times
on
one
foot.

GRADES

second and third

MATERIALS

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pencil

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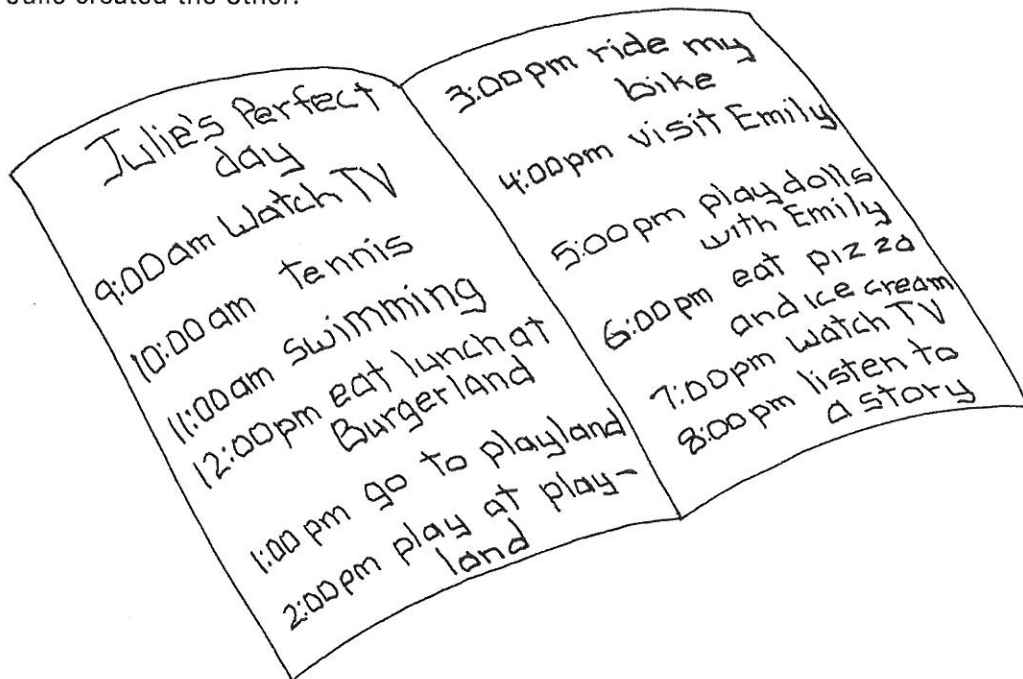
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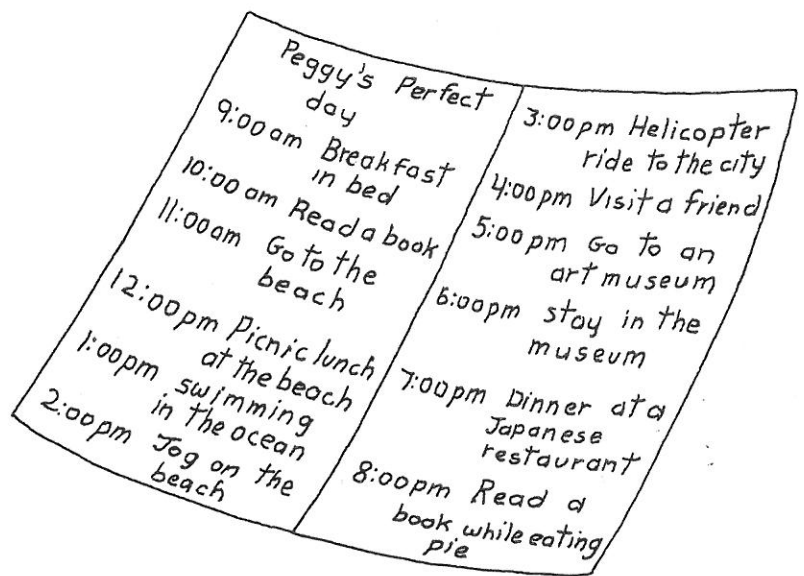
If you could plan a perfect day, selecting all your favorite activities with no restrictions, what would you do? See a movie? Read a book? Go swimming? Eat buttered snails in a four-star French restaurant?

If fantasizing about a perfect day appeals to you, you will enjoy SCHEDULES. Your model day will start at 9:00 A.M. and last until 8:00 P.M. Your job is to record each event, hour by hour. There is only one rule: you must include a minimum of eight different activities. In other words, you cannot spend the entire day lounging on the beach. You must rouse yourself for water skiing or a lobster lunch.

Meanwhile your child should construct a wonderful day of his own. What is his idea of perfection? You will find out by taking two sheets of paper and fixing each one up to look like a date book, one for yourself and one for the child. Then start writing.

Here are two sample pages. I wrote one. A third-grader named Julie created the other.

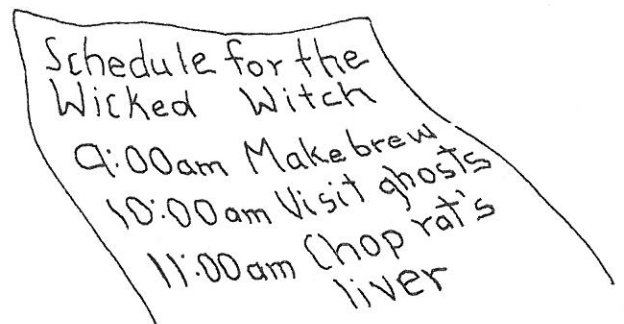




Julie liked this activity, and she worked hard writing her ideas. But when she suggested designing a second perfect day, I rejected the idea.

Perfection should be unique—a one-time thing. We did, however, come up with some other schedules. We plotted the worst conceivable day. Then we made schedules for other people, real and imagined. We created a schedule for Cinderella, Humpty-Dumpty, the Wicked Witch of the West, Julie's two-year-old cousin, and Santa Claus. Sometimes we worked together on the same schedule, but usually we worked independently.

Try SCHEDULES at your house. If you like the game, you might end up scheduling it into your week on a regular basis.



IS IT TRUE?

Take a look at this list:

1. I had a hamburger for lunch.
2. I called someone in California today.
3. I love washing dishes.
4. My new shoes hurt my toes.
5. I read the newspaper this morning.

GRADES

second and third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil

I wrote it. It contains three true statements and two lies. If we were playing IS IT TRUE? I would hand you my list and you would try to determine which sentences are true. You would put a *T* (for *True*) next to each of those. You would put an *L* (for *Lies*) next to the two potential falsehoods. Each correct guess racks up five points. Did you mark 2, 4, and 5 with a *T*? Did you mark 1 and 3 with an *L*? Then you earned twenty-five points in this round of IS IT TRUE? All five statements *might* have been true, but two of them happened not to be.

If you play IS IT TRUE? at home, you and your child will each write a list. Then you will exchange papers. After you have both filled in *T*'s and *L*'s, you'll go over the lists and tally points. You need to accumulate fifty points to win this game, so even if you lose the first round, you still have a chance.

I have found IS IT TRUE? to be a very popular game. Why do children like it? I think they like ferreting out my secrets. And they enjoy fooling me with their lies. I'm partial to IS IT TRUE? because it gets children writing without inhibitions. Isn't that worth stretching the truth a bit?

Is It True?

61

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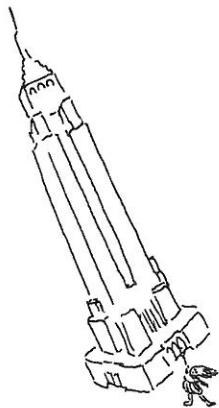
BRAGGING CONTESTS

GRADES

second and third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil



Sascha liked to brag. According to him, he ate six pepperoni pizza pies for dinner. He slammed a baseball so hard, he split the ball in two. Last month, he taught his dog a thousand tricks. And he didn't go to sleep at all over the weekend. Instead, he stayed up all night Saturday and all night Sunday playing Nintendo. Sascha was a weaver of tall tales. He and Paul Bunyan had a lot in common.

Given Sascha's fondness for exaggeration, I thought he would enjoy a BRAGGING CONTEST. The rules are simple. Contestants take turns bragging about one subject—for instance, the brute strength of each player. With every turn, you write a statement that's more astonishing than your opponent's last claim. If you can outdo your opponent, the game goes on. When one player's mind goes blank, the game ends.

Here's what I wrote to begin a contest with Sascha:

I'm so strong, I can lift the
Empire State Building with one hand.

Could Sascha top that? He did by writing:

I can lift a mountain
with my pinky

Now I had to devise something even more outlandish:

I am stronger than you. I can
pick up an erupting volcano
and toss it in the ocean.

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Sascha countered with:

I can lift the ocean



"Wow, you got me, Sascha," I said after reading this wild invention. "I can't think of a bigger brag. You're the winner."

To be honest, I *could* have dreamed up a more extravagant boast—picking up the galaxy, for instance. I chose not to for two reasons. First, I didn't want to tax Sascha with another round of the game. Two brags was, for Sascha, a lot of writing. Second, you only get a winner in this game when one player concedes defeat. Imagine Sascha announcing, "Peggy, your brag was so good, I can't think of a better one." Never; it would never happen. Unless I conceded, the game would have gone on till midnight. I didn't mind losing. Sascha had done a great job. He deserved victory.

You can make your own BRAGGING CONTESTS last longer—assuming that you and your child are both enjoying yourselves. You don't have to brag about physical prowess. You can boast about other talents and abilities. Here's a list to get you going:

- I'm so strong, I . . .
- I'm so rich, I . . .
- I'm so sneaky, I . . .
- I'm so smart, I . . .
- I'm so silly, I . . .
- I'm so tall, I . . .
- I'm so magical, I . . .
- I'm so fast, I . . .

When you play, something extraordinary may happen. Your child may discover how much he likes writing. And that's not a brag. That's a real possibility.

RHYME TIME

GRADES

first, second, and third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil

For some children, poetry offers the best and fastest way to dispel the terrors of writing. Poetry's first advantage is its brevity. Four or five lines can make a very fine poem, which is reassuring to any young child who trembles at the thought of having to write at great length. Poetry's second advantage is its lightness. A silly poem can be a good poem. That, too, is reassuring. And there is a third advantage. Many children seem to gravitate naturally toward poetry. They enjoy listening to poetry read aloud. Sometimes they memorize poems just by hearing them.

Kate, a second-grader, was like that. She hated writing, but she loved poetry. She could even recite a few favorite verses that had been read aloud to her. With that in mind, I suggested, as a way to get her writing, that we compose a poem together. At first she balked.

"I can't write rhymes," she said hoping to quash any new demands on her.

I reminded her that poems don't have to rhyme. Kate was skeptical. She viewed rhymeless poetry as inherently inferior.

"In that case, I have a way to help you make a rhyming poem," I said. "Want to try it?"

I put a couple of sheets of paper and two pencils on the table.

"First, we need two lists of rhyming words. Let's start with *boat*. How many different words can you think of that rhyme with *boat*?"

"There's *coat* and *goat*. That's all, I think."

I wrote these words on a sheet of paper. "Those are good words. There are more, though, and I know how to find them."

I jotted letters on a sheet of paper. The sheet looked like this:

b c d f g h j k l m n
p q r s t u v w x y z

These were all the consonants in the alphabet. Then I jotted down a large number of what are called "blended consonants" (*bl*,

cl, st, etc.) and "digraphs" (sh, ch, etc.). This new list looked like this:

bl br ch cl cr dr fl fr
gl gr pl pr sc scr sh shr
sr st sw th thr tr wh wr

The purpose of putting all these consonants on the page was to help me find rhyming words. Skimming the letters with *boat* still in mind, I stumbled on the letters *fl*. *Boat* led to *float*, an excellent new rhyme. Also, I hoped that Kate would, in time, study the list along with me.

I said to her, "I'm looking for a letter that will help us make a rhyme. There's *n*." I pointed to it. "With an *n*, we can change *boat* into *note*."

"Note—boat," Kate said. "Yeah, that rhymes."

"I'll write it down on a new sheet of paper. *Note* and *boat* aren't spelled alike, the way *boat* and *goat* are, but they certainly do rhyme. Now, how about a word that begins with *thr*?"

"Throat!" Kate shouted.

Throat went on our list. After a few minutes we had collected nine words on our new sheet.

boat coat goat float
note throat vote quote moat

There are other possibilities, of course, but nine words would do for our purposes. Besides, we had to conserve our rhyming energy to create a second list. The kind of poem I had in mind requires at least two different rhymes. I proposed a new word, *stop*. Now we looked for words to rhyme with *stop*. We found quite a few.

stop hop pop top
slop chop drop flop mop



It took about ten minutes to develop our word collections. Once we had completed this job, we started the poem. Kate had the task of composing the first line. This line had to end with a word from the *boat/coat* list. Kate took a minute to study the list. Then she dictated a line, which I inscribed on a fresh sheet of paper:

I have a big goat.

"Nice," I said after I finished writing. "You'll be happy to know that it's up to me to create the next line. I want it to rhyme with your contribution. So I will end with a *boat/coat* word, too. But not *goat*, since you already used it."

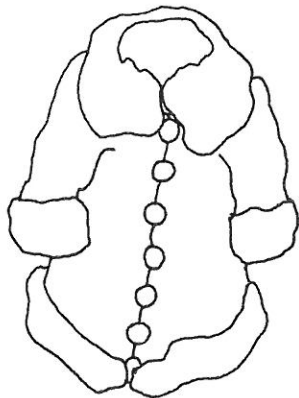
I puzzled over the list before writing:

I have a big goat.
He wears a wool coat.

"That's two lines," I said. "Now we need a third, and you're going to write it. This line should end with a word from the *stop/hop* group. Can you write a line like that?"

Kate composed a humorous bit that she, all by herself, wrote down on the paper.

I have a big goat.
He wears a wool coat.
He eats lots of slop.



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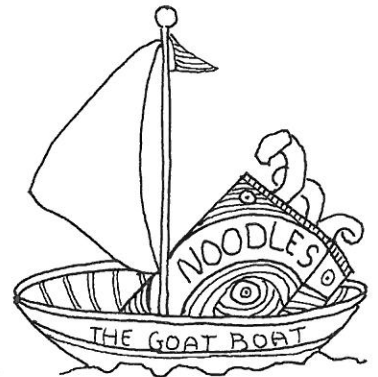
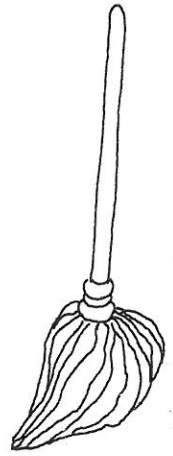
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If Kate had run into trouble composing this or any other line, I would have smoothed her way. How? By suggesting poetic possibilities. As it was, I needed to muster my own literary powers to produce the fourth line. It had to rhyme with line number three.

I have a big goat.
He wears a wool coat.
He eats lots of slop,
And cleans up with a mop.

That was pretty good. In a fit of ambition, I suggested that, having achieved such dazzling results with four lines, we trudge onward with a fifth or sixth line. The best thing was to return to the *boat/goat* list and look for another rhyme. Kate and I pored over the list. We pondered, we experimented, and, at last, in a burst of inspiration, we composed the final couplet. Our poem was finished. It went like this:

I have a big goat.
He wears a wool coat.
He eats lots of slop,
And cleans up with a mop.
He sails on a boat
With a noodle in his throat.



The part about the noodle was extremely puzzling, and gave our poem a somewhat curious ending. Oh, well, many is the time when I have read a poem that I could not fully understand.

The next time we worked together, Kate asked to write a new poem. She had never asked to write anything before, but now she wanted to return to poetry. So I knew that the goat with the noodle in his throat was, in fact, a great triumph. The new poem required two new sets of rhyming words. We also decided—it was I who made the decision, actually—to vary our rhyme pattern. The poem about the goat followed the pattern of AA-BB-AA. But this time we composed our poem according to the rhyme scheme A-B-A-B-A-B. It was up to me to propose the two rhymes. I suggested one list of words rhyming with *back* and a second list rhyming with *light*. Then I wrote out the consonants on a sheet of paper and we began looking for rhymes. We found *back, lack, sack, rack, snack*, and I wrote them down. *Light* was just as simple: *light, night, fight, white, right*.

It's true that poems composed by means of rhyme lists tend to end up silly and nonsensical. But that is their appeal. Laughter and learning are not contradictory. As one poet has written:

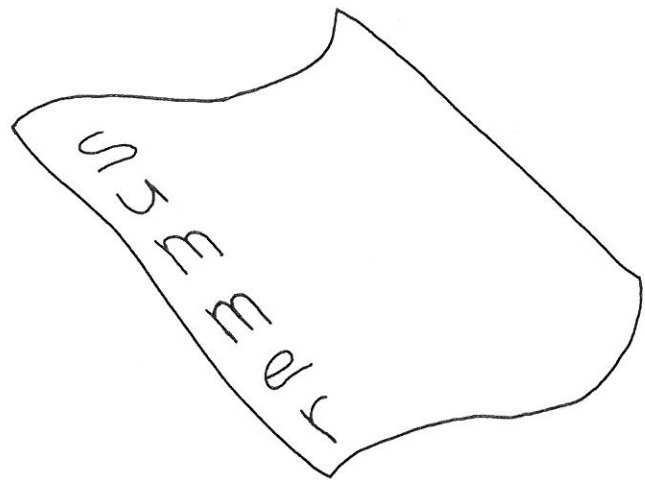
You can do worse
Than to toil at verse.
Rhyming may weary us,
But its purpose is serious:
To make learning to write
A child's delight.

and gave our
he time when
write a new
but now she
th the noodle
oem required
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A-B-A-B-A-B.
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snack, and I
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Laughter and
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Don Quixote de la Mancha was a slightly mad knight, but he had several good ideas, and one of his best was to commission a poem dedicated to his true love, Dulcinea del Toboso. He asked the poet to start each line of this verse with a letter of Dulcinea's name. This may be the first reference to a rare but lovely form of poetry called acrostics. In an acrostic, you can read the first letter of each line down the page and you will discover a word, a message, perhaps a person's name. It may be that you and your child will enjoy creating acrostic verses. You might begin with a tribute to summer.

Write the letters *S U M M E R* on a sheet of paper like this:



Now think of summer delights. Consider the many qualities that make summer special. Can you describe those wonderful summertime qualities with words or phrases that begin with the letter *s*? *Sunny, surf, scorcher, showers, swimming, solar, sultry*, and *sand* are good possibilities. Which of these words conjures the season most vividly? *Sunny* is an excellent choice. Write *sunny* on the top row. Since the letter *s* is already in place, you merely add the letters *unny*. Better yet, have your child write those letters.

ACROSTIC POEMS

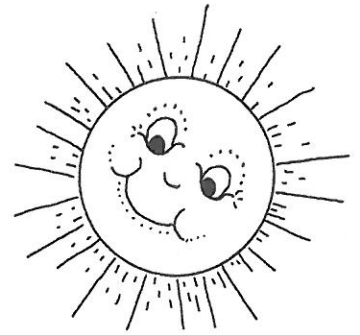
GRADES

first, second, and third

MATERIALS

- paper
- pencil
- optional: cactag or craft paper and colored markers

Sunny
Summer



That leaves *summer's* next letter, which happens to be *u*. What could possibly be a summertime word or phrase that begins with *u*? A few ideas come to mind—for instance, *umbrellas on the beach*, or *underwater swimming*. You could always get desperate and use a word like *unwintery*, which is kind of cheating, except that with letters like *u* it's sometimes hard not to cheat. And having found a word or phrase for *u*, you must now move along to *m*, *m*, *e*, and finally *r*, in each case writing down your chosen words and phrases. Here's a version of summer:



Sunny
Umbrellas on the beach
magical
moonlight swims
easy living
relaxation

Read the words out loud: "Sunny, umbrellas on the beach, magical, moonlight swims, easy living, relaxation." That's a summertime ACROSTIC POEM. Maybe it's not the greatest poem ever written. Still a poem is a poem, even if, as in this case, it has neither rhyme nor a steady rhythm.

I've used ACROSTIC POEMS with dozens of students. Somehow

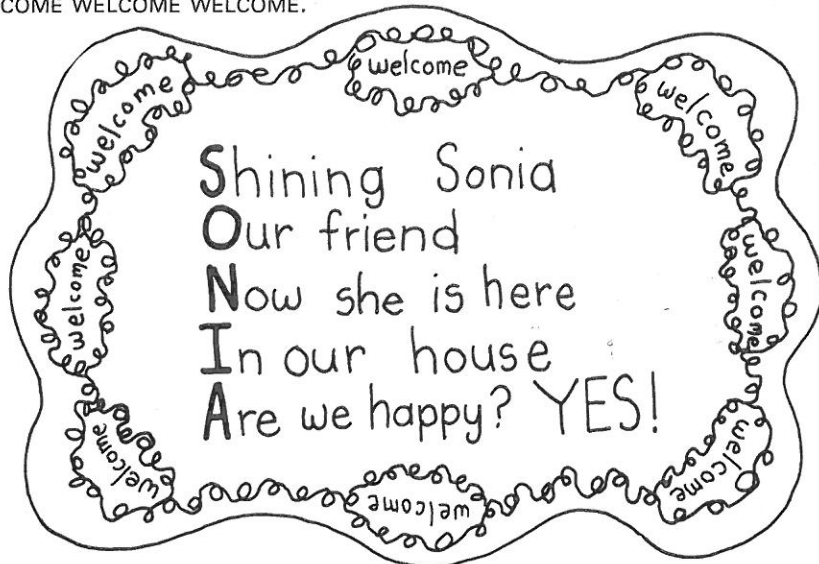
they are always fun to write. When you create an ACROSTIC POEM you can begin with any word you want: your name, your child's name, your pet's nickname, a favorite storybook character, a sports team, a holiday.

ACROSTIC POEMS are useful, too. For instance, they make excellent birthday cards. Fold a sheet of paper so that it looks like a greeting card. On the front, write the appropriate name in the proper acrostic manner and fill in celebratory words. The more colorful and elegant the lettering the better. Inside the card, draw a picture or write a greeting.



The next time you're expecting a houseguest, try making a jumbo acrostic welcome sign. Buy a large sheet of oaktag or craft paper. Now write your guest's name in colored marker lettering

down the left-hand side of the paper. Start composing the poem. When you're finished, surround your work with a garland of WELCOME WELCOME WELCOME.



If you and your child have trouble thinking of appropriate words, turn to a dictionary. Skimming through the listings for *m* in a children's dictionary, I discovered all these wonderful entries: *magical*, *magnetic*, *majestic*, *marvelous*, *masterpiece*. I found them without going past *ma*. Imagine what I might have found by moving ahead a few pages to *me* or *mi*! Sharing the dictionary with your child is a fine idea under any circumstances, but it's especially fine when the purpose is clear: Let's give Sonia a grand hello!

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Betsy was a bright second-grader who liked outsmarting adults. That is why she enjoyed playing ONE QUESTION, PLEASE. The game combines a guessing tournament and a writing contest. With a little luck, a clever child can outmaneuver an unwitting adult, which is always a thrill.

Before the action could begin, Betsy and I both had to think of a secret animal. Any animal would do—a wild beast, a pet, an insect, a fish, or a fowl. I settled on a rabbit. But I didn't write *rabbit* anywhere; I kept the word in my head. I had no idea what animal Betsy had picked, of course. The challenge for me was to identify her selection before she could zero in on my rabbit. If I could, victory would be mine.

We needed to be cautious, however. Players who guess incorrectly automatically lose the game. But, by means of written words, Betsy and I could question each other and in that manner slowly close in on the other's mystery animal. The search for information was limited, though. We could only ask questions whose answers were "yes," "no," "yes and no," "sometimes," "maybe," or "I don't know." And we could ask only one question at a time.

Once I was sure that Betsy understood the rules, I composed a question for her to answer,

Do people
ever keep
your animal
as a pet?

And she wrote one for me.

Is your
animal
fery?

ONE QUESTION, PLEASE

GRADE

third

MATERIALS

paper
pencil

One Question, Please

73

When we finished, we switched papers. I didn't complain about "fery." ONE QUESTION, PLEASE is a writing game, not a spelling game. Anyway, I knew she meant "furry." I wrote my answer to her question:



Is your animal fery?
yes

Rabbits are covered with fur; that's for sure.

Meanwhile, she wrote an answer to my question:



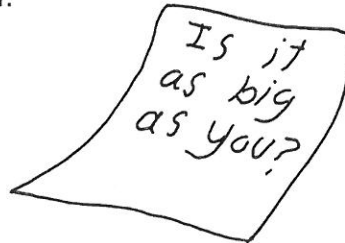
Do people ever keep your animal as a pet?
NO

Now Betsy knew that I'd selected a furry beast and I knew that her animal was not a pet. Neither of us knew enough to guess yet, so we each wrote another question. I asked:



Does your animal live on land?

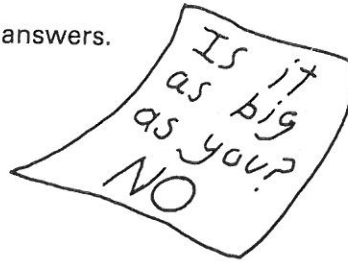
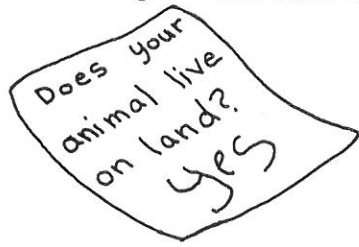
Betsy asked:



Is it as big as you?

explain about
not a spelling
ny answer to

And then we gave each other honest answers.



We both felt the need for more information, so we continued writing questions and answers. After several more rounds, I knew that Betsy had picked a vegetarian land animal that climbs trees, might or might not like bananas, and is not a household pet. I had a lot of information, but Betsy's animal still eluded me. Betsy knew that my animal was furry, smaller than me, eats vegetables, can be a pet, does not bark, and has a tail and pointy ears.

She put these facts together and announced, "I think I know your animal."

"Are you positive?" I asked. "Remember, you lose the game if you're wrong."

"I think it's a rabbit," she said, a little hesitantly.

"You got it!" I replied. "I wish I knew your animal, but I'm still confused. What is it?"

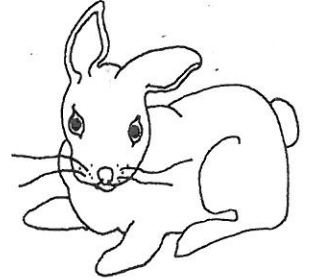
"A koala bear!" she shouted.

"I had no idea," I said truthfully.

Betsy wrote a considerable number of words during this game, but she didn't complain once. In fact, she asked when we could play again. That's why this game is a stress buster. It gets children like Betsy writing without complaining. And if a child writes enough questions and answers, he may notice that writing isn't so hard to do after all. And if writing isn't so hard, well then, maybe it's not such a bad way to spend time.

What if your child dislikes animals? You can play the game with a secret food, a city, a famous person, or a household object instead.

If the game is a success in your house, you may find yourself writing questions during long car rides or while waiting for the dentist. One question seems to lead to another.



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