**FCWC Children’s Writing Intensive 2023**

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**“WHEN RHYME IS A CRIME”**

You might have heard that “Rhyme is a crime,” and that editors don’t like rhyming board books and picture books. That’s not exactly true. Editors just don’t like BAD rhyme. They like rhyming board books and picture books that are written well. It’s just that they have seen so much bad rhyme over the years, their hearts might be a bit hardened toward rhyme. But if you can write good rhyme—then go for it! Most of my children’s books are written in rhyme, and I continue to sell rhyming manuscripts. But let’s write good rhyme! Don’t be a rhyme criminal!

Let’s take a look at the top rhyme felonies I see when judging contest manuscripts.

**Felony #1: Letting rhyme dictate the story.**

If your story has been kidnapped all to make a rhyme work, then you’re a rhyme criminal. In other words, if your story is about a lizard who becomes a wizard simply because the rhyme worked, then it’s probably not a very strong story and if you wrote the same storyline out in narrative, you’d soon realize that the rhyme is really the only thread holding it together, and that’s not enough.

>Clever rhymes are fun to read once or twice but if the storyline is weak and the characters aren’t very strong, your story won’t be able to keep the attention of children through endless readings. It won’t have that re-readability factor that’s so needed in picture books.

**Felony #2: Using odd sentence structures to make a rhyme work. #justsayno**

For example, in the song you might’ve sung in Vacation Bible School, “Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man” (Remember that one?), the lyrics go:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man*

*A wee little man was he.* (Why would we ever restate that he was a wee little man, and why would we say it in this odd sentence structure? Because we need it to rhyme with “see.”)

*He climbed up in a sycamore tree*

*For the Lord he wanted to see.* (Again, we would normally write, He wanted to see the Lord. But we changed the sentence structure so we could make an easier rhyme…)

>If you find yourself changing around parts of speech for the sake of rhyme, your name might as well be “Felony Melanie” because you’ve committed a rhyme crime. Just say no to doing that—promise?!

**Felony #3: Being a lazy rhymer and settling for near rhymes.**

For example, nursery rhymes and song lyrics get away with this lazy rhyme crime a lot, but it’s not going to fly with most of today’s picture book editors.

“Baa, Baa, Black Sheep” Lyrics

Baa, baa, black sheep,  
Have you any wool?  
Yes sir, yes sir,  
Three bags full.  
One for the master,  
One for the **dame,**  
And one for the little boy  
Who lives down the **lane**

Though “dame” and “lane” have the same long vowel sound, they aren’t perfect rhymes. They are near rhymes. A perfect rhyme would have been to rhyme “lane” with “Jane”—see how that works?

>Don’t ever settle for the easiest rhyme. Don’t name a character “Forange” simply to rhyme it with the color Orange. 😊

**Felony #4: Writing a poem and calling it a picture book.**

Just because it is a nice rhyming or rhythmic poem doesn’t mean it’s a picture book. It might just be a nice poem for you to sell to a poetry anthology for children or possibly a poem you can sell to a children’s magazine that features poetry.

For example, I wrote a poetry book for kids called, “My Funny Valentine” for Ideals Children’s Books, and it has over 30 rhymes in it, but they are simply fun poems—not stand-alone picture books.

**“Secret Admirer”**

I see her every single day.

I think she is the bomb.

I’m making her a valentine.

But please, don’t tell my mom.

I think I’ll write: “You really rock!

You’re very, very cool.”

But if I say that mushy stuff.

She might think I’m a fool.

So I won’t sign my name to it.

She’ll never know it’s me!

I’ll tell her that she rocks my world,

And makes my heart run free.

I’ll sign it, “From your biggest fan.”

I slide it in her locker.

But if she finds out it’s from me.

I’m gonna have to sock her.

>A picture book will have re-readability; it will have a need for at least 12 scenes of artwork; it will have page-turning breaks; it will have a story arc; etc. Just because it rhymes, doesn’t make it a picture book.

>Also, just a series of events or a rundown of a day, no matter how well they are written in rhyme, is also not a picture book. There’s no story arc there.

**Felony #5: Writing in rhyme and being the only one who can make it rhyme.**

This is maybe the worst felony of all. If you can only make your story rhyme while standing on one leg and holding your head just right, it’s probably not written in good rhyme and meter.

>Always read your manuscripts out loud to see where you get tripped up, but most importantly, have others read your manuscript out loud and see if they have trouble with any part.

>Study other rhyming books that are published and use them as mentor texts.

>Love this book, “R is for Rhyme: A Poetry Alphabet” by Judy Young (Illustrated by Victor Juhasz). <https://www.amazon.com/Rhyme-Poetry-Alphabet-Judy-Young/dp/158536519X/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1ZSS6EXWJ39U0&dchild=1&keywords=r+is+for+rhyme+a+poetry+alphabet&qid=1600965632&sprefix=R+is+for+R%2Caps%2C186&sr=8-1>

**Felony #6: Writing in rhyme just for the sake of it.**

Sometimes stories can be told WAY better via narrative, not rhyme. You’re robbing yourself if you don’t try writing your story both ways. You might be surprised which version is stronger.