

# Motivating Readers, Inspiring Teachers



*Playing With Poetry to Develop  
Phonemic Awareness*

*by Mary Jo Fresch & David L. Harrison*

**T**here are many paths followed by young learners as they become readers and writers. Some travel on rocky terrain, whereas others experience a smooth journey. With the guidance of a parent, grandparent, teacher, sibling, or educational television show, young literacy learners begin to connect the sounds of our language with the print on a page.

One of the early steps in this process is the development of phonemic awareness. In fact, research has shown over and over that it is essential for learners to make meaning of the language they hear. Born with the ability to hear any sound, young learners soon pay attention to those sounds that create meaning in their lives. Soon, those sounds will connect with print—and the first steps of literacy begin. So, if phonemic awareness is an essential skill, what exactly is it, and how do we help young learners acquire it?

## Phonemic Awareness: What Is It?

Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds (or phonemes) of language. It does not require knowledge of print. In fact, phonemic awareness could be practiced in a dark room because it is all about what we hear! Adams (1990) suggested five levels of phonemic awareness necessary to develop children's abilities for later success in reading. A learner needs to do the following:

- Hear rhymes (e.g., *cat, hat, sat*) and alliteration (*Wee Willie Winkie*)
- Do oddity tasks (e.g., “Which does not belong: *cat, hat, sat, dog?*”)
- Blend and split syllables (e.g., “What word is *san-dy?* What syllables do you hear in *sandy?*”)
- Perform phonemic segmentation (e.g., “What sounds do you hear in *dog?*”)
- Perform phoneme manipulation tasks (e.g., “If I change /h/ to /b/ in the word *hat*, what new word do I make?”)

Knowing how well children are moving along in these abilities can help teachers plan effective



instruction. Yopp (1995) developed a phoneme segmentation test to assess a child's ability to hear and manipulate sounds. The assessment (available at [teams.lacoe.edu/reading/assessments/yopp.html](https://teams.lacoe.edu/reading/assessments/yopp.html)) provides teachers with information about how individual children are performing on the hierarchy of phonemic awareness abilities. Another assessment, available through the University of Virginia, is PALS (Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening; available at [pals.virginia.edu/tools-prek.html](https://pals.virginia.edu/tools-prek.html)). Additional assessments that can be purchased, such as the University of Minnesota's *Get It! Got It! Go! Phonemic Awareness in Young Children* (available at [ggg.umn.edu/siteindex.html](https://ggg.umn.edu/siteindex.html); Adams, Foorman, Lundberg, & Beeler, 1998), *The Phonological Awareness Test 2* (Robertson & Salter, 2007), and the *Pre-Reading Inventory of Phonological Awareness* (Dodd, Crosbie, McIntosh, Teitzel, & Ozanne, 2003), all test children's abilities to name pictures, name alphabet letters, hear phonemes, and/or name rhyming parts of words.

## Phonemic Awareness: Why Is It Important?

Perhaps the most important reason for teachers to pay attention to a learner's developing phonemic awareness was best stated by Stanovich (1993), who posited that this skill was one of the best predictors of reading acquisition, “better than anything else that we know of, including IQ” (p. 284). Adams (1990) claimed phonemic awareness was an important precursor toward becoming a reader.



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It seems, then, that phonemic awareness is a powerful skill to help children develop both as language users and, later on, as readers. Research continues to make the case of the importance that Stanovich first put forward regarding phonemic awareness. “Correlational studies have identified [phonemic awareness] and letter knowledge as the two best school-entry predictors of how well children will learn to read during the first 2 years of school” (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000, p. 2–1). Additionally, students who were at a lower performance level in terms of phonemic awareness remained at the bottom of literacy development through fourth grade (Juel, Griffith, & Gough, 1986). So, knowing how to help students develop this important skill is key.

## Phonemic Awareness: How Can We Nudge It Along?

Researchers recommend particular tasks to encourage children’s phonemic awareness development (Ehri et al., 2001), which include phoneme isolation (e.g., “What is the first sound in *dog*?”), identity (e.g., “What is the same sound in *dog*, *door*, and *date*?”), categorization (e.g., “Which one

doesn’t belong: *paste*, *pull*, *car*?”), blending sounds (e.g., “What word is /d/ /o/ /g/?”), segmentation (e.g., “What sounds do you hear in *dog*?”), and deletion (e.g., “What word is *date* without the *d*?”). Of course, hours of isolating, identifying, categorizing, segmenting, and deleting do not sound like child-centered activities. Drill and kill will not enhance, develop, or encourage children’s understandings in any area of the curriculum, so we suggest a fun romp through the language that keeps the interest of young learners (Fresch & Harrison, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2013e).

Instruction that supports learning while having a fun romp through language is sure to entice even the most reluctant learner. That is where poetry comes in! Why poetry? Children’s author and illustrator Karla Kuskin (1996) noted, “If there were a recipe for a poem, these would be the ingredients: word sounds, rhythm, description, feeling, memory, rhyme and imagination. They can be put together a thousand different ways, a thousand, thousand... more” (p. 17). Poetry naturally focuses little ears on the sound, rhythm, and rhyme of our language. These fundamental elements of poetry support the processes of learning to read: connecting the sounds and meanings of our language with the print on a page. Additionally, not only does poetry help young learners, but Rasinski, Rupley, and Nichols (2008) suggest that older readers will benefit because “the use of rhyming poetry on a regular basis...can have a significant and positive impact on students’ word recognition and reading fluency” (p. 259). So, it seems poetry has lasting influence on literacy development.

How does the poet make the magic of rhyme, rhythm, and meaning happen? Well, peak inside a poet’s studio and see how it happens! Take it away, David!

## Inside the Poet’s Creative Space

Mary Jo and I thought it might be useful for me to walk you through the way I wrote the blend (*cr*) poem that we are using in this article as our sample. You can view the brief video made in my office by clicking [here](#). Please note that I cleaned off my desk just for you!



Photo: Cindy Carroll

Arranging meter and sound into structured language are core characteristics of rhyming verse, and rhyming verse is easier to remember than any other linguistic construction. No other form of English expression provides as many opportunities to see, read, hear, and practice phonemes. Not only that, children like poetry. Learning something and enjoying it is a recipe for fun that is hard to beat.

A problem in using poetry to support phonemic awareness, though, is in finding a particular phoneme needed for a current classroom lesson by searching through poems, jump rope chants, nursery rhymes, and songs. I opened Prelutsky's (1999) anthology of favorite poems for children, *The 20th Century Children's Poetry Treasury*, in search of poems with the rime sound *ack*. The first one I came to was in the 11th poem, "Mosquito," by Valerie Worth. This is a wonderful poem filled with imagery, assonance, and rhyme. Kids love it! However, it might take the teacher a while to help students discover the one and only *ack* sound in the poem because it appears at the end of line 5 in the second stanza. (See the sidebars for more resources.)

Valerie Worth was not charged with writing poems that focused on a list of phonemes. Few poets ever have been, but such poems can be created.

## Connect to Some Great Poetry Sites!

- David L. Harrison: [www.davidlharrison.com/teachers.htm](http://www.davidlharrison.com/teachers.htm)
- Kristine O'Connell George: [www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry\\_aloud.html](http://www.kristinegeorge.com/poetry_aloud.html)
- Scholastic: [teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/jack\\_home.htm](http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/poetry/jack_home.htm) and [www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/poetry-printables](http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/lesson-plan/poetry-printables)

I begin mine by making a list of words that feature a common phonemic/phonological element, such as the blend *cr*:

|           |          |        |
|-----------|----------|--------|
| crab      | crave    | creep  |
| crane     | credit   | croak  |
| crayon    | cried    | cross  |
| crib      | croon    | crow   |
| crocodile | cradle   | crowd  |
| crack     | crawfish | crown  |
| crash     | creek    | crumb  |
| crazy     | critter  | crunch |
| cricket   | crop     | crust  |
| crook     | craft    | cry    |
| cracker   | crawl    |        |

Once we have a list of words that are unrelated except for a particular sound they all share, the fun begins. Not only is there a poem hiding somewhere among those words, but there are also many poems! After reading the list a few times, connections begin to form. For example, what if a crocodile and a cricket fell in love? He, a carnivore, and she, a vegetarian, would have to settle some basic philosophical differences, wouldn't they? Another visit to the list showed a juicy bunch of crunchy croc food. The poem was taking shape.

The opening lines wrote themselves: "A crocodile and a cricket / fell in love." So, how do I get to the source of their problem? I decided to let them vow their undying love in ways that would quickly uncover their differences: "I wuv you more than cracker / Crumbs, my pet." Read on...

### Croc and Cricket

by David L. Harrison

A crocodile and a cricket

Fell in love.

He crooned, "I'm crazy about you,  
Wuvvy-dove."

The cricket cried, "I'm lucky  
That we met!

I wuv you more than cracker  
Crumbs, my pet."

## Reading List for Phonemic Awareness Enrichment

"I wuv you more than crabs,"  
Her lover cooed.  
She said, "My darling, eating  
Critters is rude."

But snooky-wookums," he said,  
"I crave my meat!"  
She whispered, "Honey-bunny,  
You're so sweet."

He croaked, "No crow or crane  
To crunch and crack?"  
"Not even," she said, "a crispy  
Crawfish snack."

To give the croc credit,  
He didn't fight  
But he did insist on ice cream  
Every night.

(From Fresch & Harrison, 2013a, p. 39)

One easy step in paying attention to the sounds in a poem is to ask students to do sound matching:

- "Which are the same at the beginning: *crabs*, *lucky*, *critters*? *Cried*, *crave*, *night*? *Cream*, *crumbs*, *snack*?"
- "Which are the same at the end: *met*, *said*, *pet*? *Crack*, *sweet*, *snack*? *Fight*, *fell*, *night*?"

Next, we challenge students to isolate particular sounds:

- "What are the first sounds in *crabs*, *cried*, *cream*, and *crave*?"
- "What other words start with /cr/?"

You can spend a day or two with just sound matching and sound isolation.

On another day, ask students to blend sounds:

- "What word is /cr/ /e/ /m/? What word is /cr/ /a/ /b/?"

- Bodecker, N.M. (1983). *Snowman Sniffles and other verse*. New York: Atheneum.
- Dotlich, R.K. (1996). *Sweet dreams of the wild: Poems for bedtime*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Esbensen, B.J. (1984). *Cold stars and fireflies: Poems of the four seasons*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Florian, D. (1998). *Insectlopedia*. San Diego, CA: Voyager.
- Harrison, D.L. (2003). *Farmer's garden: Rhymes for two voices*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Harrison, D.L. (2005). *Farmer's dog goes to the forest: Rhymes for two voices*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Harrison, D.L. (2007). *Bugs: Poems about creeping things*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Harrison, D.L. (2009). *Vacation: We're going to the ocean*. Honesdale, PA: Wordsong.
- Levy, C. (1998). *A Crack in the Clouds and other poems*. New York: Margaret K. McElderry.
- Prelutsky, J. (Ed.). (1999). *The 20th century children's poetry treasure*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Worth, V. (1996). *All the small poems and fourteen more*. New York: Sunburst.

Notice that we keep the /cr/ together because the poem "Croc and Cricket" emphasizes that consonant blend. (If you need help with phonics terms, check out the National Literacy Trust's phonics glossary: [www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/practical\\_resources\\_info/1032\\_resource-phonics\\_glossary](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/resources/practical_resources_info/1032_resource-phonics_glossary).)

On the next day, ask the students to do segmentation the sounds by stretching the words just as you did in sound blending:

- "What sounds make up *crave*?"

We often give students help in this activity by telling them we say the word as slow as a snail moves: *ccrrraaavvv*. Or, we pretend that we are stretching a piece of bubble gum out; as we pull, we make each sound. Whichever way makes the most sense to your students is the one to use. Just ask them to s-t-r-e-t-c-h the word. Remember, this is about the sounds in the word, not the letters. If I stretch the word *night* or *knight*, I should have the exact same three sounds: /n/ /i/ /t/.

Finally, we really challenge the students' phonemic awareness when we do sound substitution activities. This time, we give students a word, such as



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*crab*, and ask them to substitute or change the first sound(s) to /t/ to make a new word (*tab*):

- What word would I make if I change /cr/ to /br/ in *crave*? What if I change /cr/ to /dr/ in *cream*?

If students are ready, you can also begin to connect sounds to print by writing these sound substitution exercises on a board or chart paper.

Now that we have a poem that features the blend *cr*, teachers and students can enjoy discovering /cr/ sounds in other poems. The desired sound may be a bit rare, but now it adds to the anticipation when the whole class is on the lookout for it. A fun and reinforcing game is to read poems aloud and ask students to signal each time they hear the sound that they have been practicing. Demonstrate a sign, such as imitating cracking a nut with a nutcracker, and tell them to crack the nut and shout, “/cr/,” each time they hear that sound.

That was fun playing with the words from “Croc and Cricket.” With David’s guidance, you can see how to create poems that feature special sounds with which you want your students to work. Do you remember that we said there are many poems tucked away in the cr word list? David also posted the list on his blog ([davidlharrison.wordpress.com/2013/05/14/poetry-word-list-challenge](http://davidlharrison.wordpress.com/2013/05/14/poetry-word-list-challenge)) and challenged other poets to compose poems inspired by the same words. Here are two examples from his blog that show how differently one set of words can be interpreted:

#### **Family Reunion**

by Janet Kay Gallagher

I cross the crunchy crackers off the shopping list  
We need bread crumbs for the eggplant crust  
No crabs, crawfish, or crawling, creeping critters  
For our crowd

This family craves, croons, crows and cry with joy  
When we dish up the crop from the garden  
I brought in thirty-four ears from the corn crib  
Cook the corn and green beans so they have a fresh crunch

I will crack a smile and take credit  
For the BBQ Brisket and homemade Biscuits  
Big families are fun, crazy and crafty  
But they sure leave lots of crumbs and crayon marks

(posted May 16, 2013)



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#### **Untitled**

by Sara Johnson

A crabby toddler crawled out of his crib early Sunday morn.  
This story is true—I do not fib—confessions of a mom who’s worn.

My darling son craved a cracker to the kitchen he did creep,  
Past our room and down the stairs while were fast asleep.

The cracker he did crunch and munch, leaving crumbs in a trail,  
While creeping toward the living room and his crayons in a pail.

A crazy craft he did create to make his parents proud,  
But as soon as we awoke that morn, “Not on the walls” we cried out loud!

(posted May 15, 2013)

From the same list of words we have a love affair, a family reunion, and a toddler driving his parents to distraction. Children who are learning to associate letters and combinations of letters with the sounds they stand for are not likely ready to write poems of their own independently. But they might have a good time helping their teacher figure out short combinations of subjects and verbs from the list: crawfish crawl, cranes creep, crayons crack, crows cry, crocodiles crunch. It’s the very sort of wordplay that adult poets engage in when searching for another poem hiding in the list of words.

## **Getting Started With Your Own Poems for Phonemic Awareness Play: The Poet’s Advice**

I love to compose list poems with young students. Everyone can join in. The teacher makes a list of ideas associated with a selected topic, such as sounds heard on the playground, objects in the classroom, or words with a similar sound.

There are four basic steps.

1. Brainstorm the list.
2. Arrange the elements on the list into something that resembles a poem. Look for rhyming possibilities.
3. Play with the language. Delete unnecessary words and look for a common meter when possible.
4. Read the poem aloud—with gusto—until the students can recite their masterpiece with pride.

Sticking with our *cr* words, here's how your poem might work if you begin with finding nouns on your list and add appropriate action words. First, here is the list:

1. Crawfish crawl.  
Cranes creep.  
Crows cry.  
Crocodiles crunch.  
Cradles creak.  
Critters croon.  
Crackers crack.  
Creeks cross.  
Crooks crave.

From the list, choose those combinations that might go together in a sensible group. Once you spot some rhyme words, it will help you decide how to arrange the elements on the list.

2. Crawfish crawl,  
Cranes creep,  
Crows cry themselves  
To sleep,  
Critters croon  
By the light of the moon,  
Crocodiles crunch  
Their midnight lunch.

Talk to your kids about small improvements that will make their poems easier to read, say, and echo aloud. Each time they listen to what makes their poem better, they are hearing again the subject sounds of the lesson.

3. When crawfish crawl  
And cranes creep,

Crows cry  
Themselves to sleep.  
Critters croon  
By midnight moon  
And crows crunch  
Their evening lunch.

When your students are justifiably proud of their poem, celebrate the accomplishment!

4. Practice reading aloud. Treat other classes to your masterpiece.

## Taking the Poems Into the Curriculum

Once you have the students familiar with the words and content of the poem, try extending the experience to give you more opportunity to use the language in the poem. “Croc and Cricket” is perfect for comparing sizes. Croc is big, and Cricket is little. Ask students to find two items that they can compare as big and little. Give them some examples:

- My car is big, and my stapler is little.
- My house is big, and this block is little.
- My desk is big, and this pencil is little.

Take the activity outside so students apply the idea of big and little on the playground: “The slide is big compared with what?” “The school building is big compared with what?” These sorts of conversations help develop and extend students’ vocabulary. So, when you have a poem the students love to hear and

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recite over and over, take advantage of their interest and connect the language to content learning.

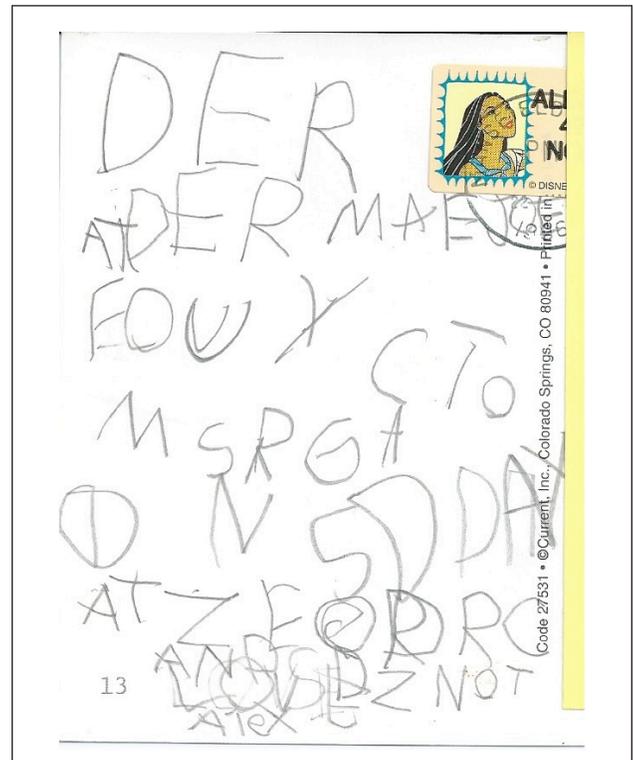
The poems can also be used to draw students' attention to the alphabet. Phonemic awareness will lead to phonological awareness, or the ability to map the sounds they hear to letters of the alphabet. All of these skills wrap around each other. Sounds help us learn our language, and then we can reproduce it ourselves. Letters represent the sounds we hear, so we can soon learn to decode, or read the words, and then we can encode, or write the words for ourselves. Phonemic awareness is put to use each time a student attempts to write a word. For instance, as you can see in Figure 1, Alex showed that what she hears and what she thinks match in the alphabet when she wrote,

Dear Aunt Mary Jo, If you can come to my soccer game on Saturday at the old rec and spend the night. Love Alex

## Conclusion

Phonemic awareness puts young learners on the road to reading and writing. It is indeed an important skill and one worth helping students develop. What better way is there to help students love language but through poetry? Engage your students, think

**FIGURE 1. Alex is well on her way to becoming a reader and writer!**



about the many opportunities you have to draw their attention to the sounds of our language, and have some fun along the way!

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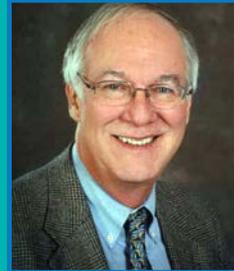
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