

# TRAVELLING WITH EDWARD LEAR

WRITING A NONSENSE STORY IN VERSE

BY ROGER STEVENS

Using nonsense verse to encourage young writers to explore rhyme and rhythm works particularly well with Key Stage 2 and 3 students, but it can be adapted for both younger and older children.

Edward Lear loved writing and illustrating nonsense verses that tell a story. Use poems such as *The Dong with the Luminous Nose* to show the children what can be achieved using imaginary creatures that live in places with strange-sounding names. You can find full versions of some Lear nonsense poems as separate downloadable resources on the Poetryclass webpages.

Lear's stories, such as *The Owl and the Pussycat* and *The Jumblies*, usually involve a journey of some kind. Encouraging the children to use travel in this context allows them to go off the beaten track with their language and ideas.

## 1. Imaginary creatures

Ask the children to invent a creature. With any story, the most important task is to create a good, memorable and sympathetic character.

Nonsense verses work well when fantastic, surreal or downright silly elements are intertwined with the real world. Start with a real animal – a lion, an aardvark, a sloth, a chameleon or a toucan. The children will come up with their own ideas. Encourage them to give that animal an unusual characteristic such as a luminous tail, extra legs or three heads. Try combining animals – give a dog bat's wings or a tiger a crocodile's head.

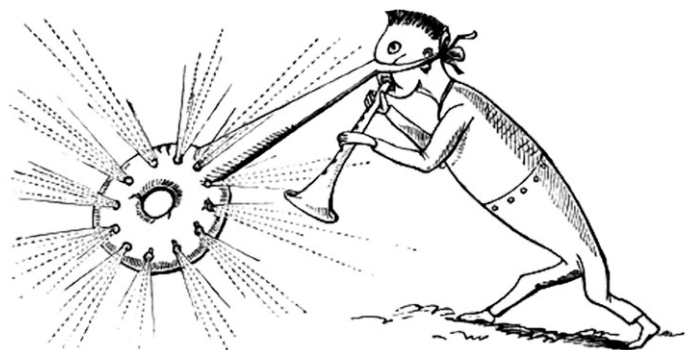
Ask them to think of a silly or amusing name. They could look up unusual words in the dictionary or you could help them to combine words: a doggbat, a tigerdile?

## 2. The journey

Introduce the idea of travel. Throw out some reasons why a character might go on a journey. Are they:

- seeking adventure in a faraway country, city, mountain or lake
- looking for something lost
- lonely and looking for a friend?

Children will come up with their own weird and wonderful reasons for a trip. Encourage them to keep the reason or the task simple – if they make the story too complicated, a poem could turn into a full-length book.



### 3. The story

Take the children through the following steps:

- Decide where the journey will begin. Where does the creature live?
- How will it travel – on something normal like a bike, a skateboard or in a balloon? Or in a more bizarre manner, like the Jumblies do?
- Where will the journey end?
- Will the character achieve its goal?
- How will it feel at the end?
- Will the story end happily ever after?

When they are plotting their creatures' journeys, children can make up some fabulous names for the places that they mention, like Lear's Gromboolian Plain or his Hills of Chankly Bore. You can use a map or an atlas to combine real names for comic effect.

Also ask children to invent some other strange characters for their creature to meet – what do they look like, how do they behave, what are they called?

### 4. Get writing

It's time for the children to write their stories as poems. Edwards Lear's verses always have strong rhythm that carries the reader along. He uses lots of rhyme and lots of repetition. It's a good idea for you or one of your best performers to read one of the Lear poems all the way through out loud. This will get the class into the right frame of mind to write.

Then tell them to go for it. This is just their first go – explain that they can improve on the verse once the first draft is written. Tell them not to worry about the rhyme – they can work on that afterwards too. They should concentrate on getting the rhythm right.

### 5. Crafting the poem

When the children have the bare bones of their poems written, remind them of the following tips:

- When writing rhymes it's a good idea to start at the end, by making sure that the last line of each verse makes sense. For example, in a four-line

verse, write Line Four so that it has a strong meaning and then go back to Line Two and make it rhyme with Line Four.

- Lear's writing does make sense – it's just full of preposterous, surreal, silly or just plain odd words and ideas. Go through your poem and see if you can improve your names or change some regular words for made-up ones.
- Does your poem have a chorus? Lear's poems have lots of repetition. Can you add an element of repetition to your poem?

### 6. Theming the activity

#### *Made-up words*

Ask the children to think of everyday situations where words are made up. Advertisers use made-up words and phrases and hope they will become common parlance and help to sell their wares, e.g. I've been Tango-ed. New technology makes new words necessary, e.g. iPad. Why else might we create words? If we've never before seen an object or experienced an emotion, then we might want to create a new word to describe what we're seeing or feeling.

#### *Travel and displacement*

Lots of the characters in Lear's verses go on journeys. Many poems describe travel. Ask the children to consider the reasons why people travel today and why some people don't like going away. Discuss whether they like travelling and have ever made a really long journey – how did they feel? Encourage them to look again at their poems and see if their own experiences of journeys could be included to improve their verse.



# TRAVELLING WITH EDWARD LEAR

Edward Lear wrote poems about weird, imaginary creatures, like *The Dong with the Luminous Nose*, that live in places with strange-sounding names. These creatures also often go on journeys – in *The Owl and the Pussycat* two animals who, in the real world, would be very unlikely friends, sail to sea and eventually marry.

**POET'S TIP**  
If you can't think of the right word for a rhyme – make a word up!

## CREATE A NONSENSE CHARACTER

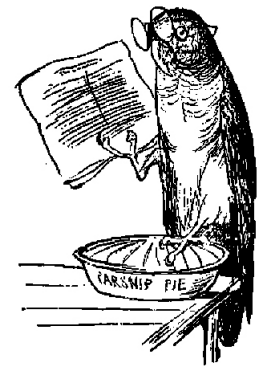
Think of a real animal .....

Now make it unusual! Give it a luminous tail or enormous eyes – or combine two animals into one

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Give it a silly name

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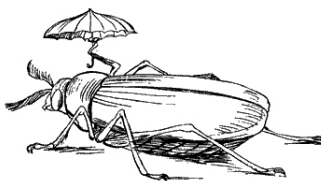
Example: A blunderbumpous, which is a cross between an elephant and a porcupine.

## WHY TRAVEL?

Why is your creature making a journey? Has it lost something that it needs to find? Is it lonely and searching for a friend? Does it seek adventure? Write the reason here...

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Example: the blunderbumpous Barry is always hungry and wants to find burbleberry ice cream.

NAME:

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## THE JOURNEY

My creature's journey starts at .....

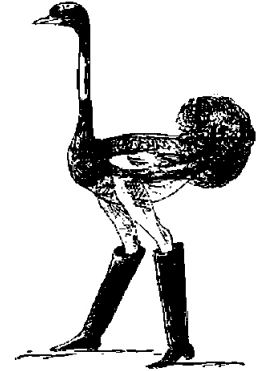
and ends at .....

My creature will travel through some strange places! Try combining place names to create some new places .....

My creature will travel by .....

At the end of the journey, my creature will feel .....

My creature will meet some strange characters on the journey. They will be called ..... and they will be .....



Now we have a story! Barry, the blunderbumpous, lives in Treacly Swamp. The ice-cream shop is on Harumphalous Hill. Barry gets a lift up the hill from the Puff Puff bird – a huge eagle-like creature that inflates like a giant balloon. The ice-cream seller is a yellow racoon called Terry.

## WRITE A POEM

Now make your ideas into a poem! Don't worry if it doesn't work, this is just your first go. Don't worry about the rhyme yet – try and focus on the rhythm. For example:

Barry, the blunderbumpous,  
One day sat down to dine.  
He was roughly the size of an elephant  
With quills like a porcupine.  
He lived in the middle of Treacly Swamp  
And every day at nine  
Barry, the blunderbumpous  
Sat himself down to dine.



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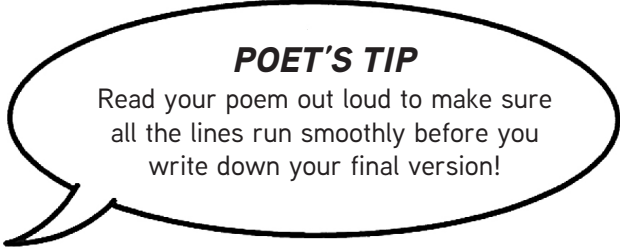
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**Now write up your poem neatly and submit it to the Young Poets Network challenge!**

Little Angel Theatre is working with The Poetry Society's Young Poets Network to challenge young writers worldwide to create their own nonsense poems inspired by Edward Lear. It's free to enter and closes 10 November 2019 – you can enter as many poems as you like! Entries will be judged by representatives from The Poetry Society and Little Angel Theatre. The winners will be published on The Poetry Society's website and win an exclusive Young Poets Network notebook, poetry books and goodies from Little Angel Theatre. Find the full terms and conditions and more resources to inspire your writing at [youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk](http://youngpoetsnetwork.org.uk)



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**To enter the competition, please clearly print in BLOCK CAPITALS:**

NAME .....

AGE ..... GENDER..... EMAIL .....

ADDRESS .....

PARENT/GUARDIAN SIGNATURE .....

*Would you like to be added to the Young Poets Network emailing list and receive fortnightly updates on our opportunities for young writers? Y / N*

**Fantastic! Now put this sheet in the red post box, hand it to a Little Angel Theatre staff member, or post it to: YPN Lear challenge, The Poetry Society, 22 Betterton Street, London, WC2H 9BX.** If you'd like to email us your poem, send it to [educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk](mailto:educationadmin@poetrysociety.org.uk) with the above details by 10 November 2019. If you have any questions, send us an email or ring Helen Bowell, Education Co-ordinator at The Poetry Society, on 020 7420 9894. Winners will be contacted by email. We can't wait to read your nonsensical creations – good luck!