

The “Swamp Beat” - Rhythm in Verse Lesson Plan

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Your students can learn about rhythm in verse using Kristyn Crow’s picture book, Bedtime at the Swamp. *Feel the Swamp Beat!*

Student Level: K – 4 (Can be adapted for almost any elementary school grade)

Purpose of the Activity: In language, rhythm is a cadence produced by a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Rhythm occurs in all forms of language, but is particularly important in poetry and verse. This lesson could supplement a beginning poetry curriculum, but works well with any kind of language or reading instruction. A study was conducted in London which found that children with dyslexia and other reading delays often had difficulty perceiving rhythm in words and sounds. The “Swamp Beat” activity can help strengthen a child’s ability to hear rhythm patterns in written text. It’s fun and engaging, and it promotes interest in reading. Some children are hands-on active learners, and this suits their learning style.

Required Materials: Bedtime at the Swamp, a picture book by Kristyn Crow, illustrated by Macky Pamintuan, published by HarperCollins, 2008. (Purchase/Order from Amazon.com, Borders, BookSense, Barnes and Noble, etc.) Children may use rhythm sticks, shakers, drums, tambourines, crow sounders, rain sticks, or just their hands and feet to make the rhythm sounds. If Kristyn Crow visits your school, she will provide all the rhythm instruments for your class to use and she’ll direct the activity! *Heads-up:* There will be some noise!

Time: 30 Minutes

Lesson Activity: Read Bedtime at the Swamp aloud to the students, having them “echo” the refrain in the book. Read it a second time, having the students clap a steady beat. Explain to the children that the rhythm they hear is also called METER. Ask students to raise their hand if they play a musical instrument at home. Just as there is meter in music, language, especially poetry, also has meter. Then pass out rhythm instruments (optional), guiding the children first in keeping a steady beat to the book’s text, and then breaking into “parts” for the refrain. For example:

BEDTIME AT THE SWAMP: (Rhythm is highlighted in first stanza)

I was **sittin’** by a **swamp** just **hummin’** a **tune**

With the **fireflies** **dancin’** ‘neath the **fat** gold **moon**

When **off** in the **distance** was a **splashin’** **sound**

So I stood on my tippy-toes and looked around.

I heard:

Splish Splash	(Shakers, tambourines, or finger snaps)
Rumba-Rumba	(Crow sounders, sand blocks, noise makers, or feet stomping)
Bim Bam slapping)	(Hand drums, claves, triangles, rhythm sticks, or desk/thigh)
BOOM!	(Tom Toms, Conga drums, cymbals, or claps)

(Repeat)

More Suggestions for Teachers: For preparation or additional practice, read verse to the class and have them clap or snap to a steady beat. Start by singing the words as the children clap, then speak the same words *without* singing. Have the students keep the tempo by clapping in regular intervals (not on every syllable). Here are some examples (the first stanzas show the rhythm with highlights):

Ding Dong! The Witch is Dead:

Ding Dong!

The Witch is dead.

Which old Witch?

The Wicked Witch!

Ding Dong!

The Wicked Witch is dead.

Wake up –
sleepy head,
rub your eyes,
get out of bed.
Wake up,
the Wicked Witch is dead.

(Question: On what line does the meter change from two beats to three?)

I Went to the Animal Fair:

I went to the Animal Fair

The birds and the beasts were there.

The big baboon by the light of the moon

Was combing his auburn hair.

You should have seen the monk
He sat on the elephant's trunk
The elephant sneezed and fell on his knees
And that was the end of the monk
The monk, the monk, the monk.

(Question: On what lines does the meter change from three beats to four?)

Old Dan Tucker:

Old Dan Tucker was a mighty man.

He washed his face in a frying pan.

He combed his hair with a wagon wheel, and he

Walked with a toothache in his heel.

Get out the way, old Dan Tucker.
Get out the way, old Dan Tucker.
Get out the way, old Dan Tucker.
You're too late to eat your supper.

(Question: Does the meter ever change from four beats per line?)

Here's verse from another rhythmic picture book, by Margaret Mahy:

17 Kings and 42 Elephants

Seventeen kings on forty-two elephants

Going on a journey through a wild wet night,

Baggy ears like big umbrellaphants,

Little eyes a-gleaming in the jungle light.

Seventeen kings saw white-toothed crocodiles

Romping in the river where the reeds grow tall,

Green-eyed dragons, rough as rockodiles,

Lying in the mud where the small crabs crawl.

Supplemental Activities: For older students, write lines of verse on the board (or pass out handouts) and have the students draw an “X” over the words/syllables where they hear a beat, or emphasis. Explain that these are stressed syllables, and those without an “X” are unstressed. How many beats do they hear per line? You could also help them determine the stressed syllables in their spelling words or their names. Sometimes it helps to demonstrate how funny it sounds when the wrong syllables are stressed. Older students can also be asked to write a structured poem with two, three, or four stresses (beats) per line, or it may be easier to write a poem to the rhythm of a familiar song, like Old MacDonald. For very young students, just helping them find the beat in different samples of verse is a good exercise.

Advanced Students: Have students write three (3) examples of each rhythm unit below.

In the English language, the most common units of rhythm are:

The **iamb**, consisting of two syllables, only the second accented (as in "good-bye")

The **trochee**, two syllables, only the first accented (as in "window")

The **anapest**, three syllables, with only the third stressed (as in "Halloween")

The **dactyl**, one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed (as in "beautiful")

The **spondee**, two consecutive syllables that are both stressed (as in "not now")

