

# Meow Ruff: A Story in Concrete Poetry

By Joyce Sidman



## Reader's Guide

*These suggestions are for grades K-4*

### PREDICTIONS

*Questions to ask before reading.*

1. After reading the title and looking at the cover of the book, what would you guess this book is about?
2. Look closely at the front cover: how are the words arranged differently than other book covers you have seen?
3. Look at the back cover and read the words in the grass: have you ever heard the term "concrete poetry"? Do you understand what it is?

### SUGGESTIONS FOR READING ALOUD

*This book cannot be "read" in a traditional way. The story is conveyed in two ways: through the art, and through a series of concrete poems that change from page to page. Here are a couple ways to share this book with your group.*

**Sharing with Non-Readers:** Examine each page with your group: what do the students notice? Ask them what they think is going on, and have them tell you the story. Read what each character is saying (crows, dog, cat, ladybugs, etc.), but only read specific concrete poems if they ask about them.

**Sharing with Readers:** Use similar technique as above, but ask your group to pick out all the text on the page. Assign a different reader for each object: one for the clouds, one for the grass, one for the tree, etc. This may take some time and may bog down oral reading, so consider stopping on the "KABOOOM!" page. Encourage readers to read the rest on their own.

### WRITING ACTIVITIES

*Kids love to write concrete poems. There are many ways to approach constructing them. Here are several for different age levels.*

#### Younger (age 6-8)—Concrete Animals

1. Begin by sharing the book with your group. Then say, "What would happen if we tried to make the crow into a concrete poem?" On the board, use anatomical words to "build" a poem in the shape of a crow as a model (wing, feather, body, beak, claw, etc.). You can use each word as many times as needed to create a shape. See Last page for a full-page example done by a second grader.
2. Make three columns on the board: Head, Body, and Feet. With your group, brainstorm all the animal "parts" words you can think of—snout, antenna, talon, mane, scales, gills, etc.

3. Ask each child to think of an animal they want to “build” out of words. Have them lightly sketch their animal on a piece of unlined paper. Then have them fill in their animal with appropriate words from the board (or others). Words can be used more than once!

### **Older (age 9-11) #1—Water Cycle Poems**

*This exercise can be tied into many science units*

1. After sharing the book with your group, focus on the “water” aspects of the book: the clouds and the rain. What metaphors are used in these poems?
2. On the board, brainstorm all the different forms of water on earth your group can think of: fog, mist, ice cubes, glaciers, lakes, puddles, etc. On another part of the board, brainstorm “water” words: splash, wave, drip, sparkle, salty, clear, etc.
3. Have students write a poem about their favorite form of water, in ordinary format. Encourage them to use words from the board, and to think of their own metaphors.
4. Then have them envision their poem as a concrete poem. Using a sheet of unlined paper, have them rewrite their poem in the shape of whatever they’re writing about.

### **Older (age 9-11) #2—The Poem Changes!**

1. After sharing the book, focus on one object that appears many times: the clouds, tree, grass, etc. Read the poems from just that object, and discuss how they change.
2. Have your group think of a physical object, either outside or inside—for example, the moon. Think about this object in two different settings—say, the moon at night and the moon during the day. Discuss how the moon is different in each setting; jot down words that belong to each situation. As a group, write two different poems about the moon, one during the day, and one at night (refer back to two tree poems from the book—the beginning tree and the tree on the “CLOUDBURST” page).
3. Have each child think of their own object to write about in two different ways (a chair in an empty room, a chair with a child sitting on it; a fir tree in winter, a fir tree in summer). Have them think about what shape they will use for their poems, then let them write!

## **ART ACTIVITIES**

### **Discussion for Art Students**

This book combines art and text in unusual ways. Examine several pages with your group, picking out places where there is text and places where there is just art. Let them know that in the original version of this book, there was NO ART—it was all just words. The dog was made of words (the words he’s speaking), etc. Discuss with your group why art was added, how color enhances the text, etc. Read to your group, *How This Book Began*, on the MEOW RUFF page of Joyce Sidman’s website (go to “Books”, then click on MEOW RUFF book cover and scroll down). Discuss further.

### **Creating Art from Concrete Poems**

After any of the above writing activities are completed, these concrete poems can be used to create either individual art or mural art.

*Computer literate students* can attempt to format their poems onscreen, using text boxes and various fonts. This can be frustrating but is ultimately a blast to work on!

*Hand-lettered or computer-printed poems* can be cut out in shapes and used in a larger work of art that provides background color and detail (use book as example). Students can use various art mediums to enhance/illustrate their concrete poems: collage, paint, etc. Space should be left for the poem, which can be pasted on at the finish.

A *concrete poetry mural* is fun to make, using a variety of student-generated concrete poems. For instance, students could construct a "Water Cycle" mural by cutting out their concrete water poems and pasting them on mural-sized paper, then illustrating around them.

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