

Creating Community through Russian *Chastushki*

The *Chastushka* is a traditional Russian form of jamming and joking - a village art form where everyone has an opportunity to create their own verses and improvise dance movements with clapping and stomping. The musical dialogue takes place between two people, there is musical accompaniment (usually balalaikas and/or accordions) and a crowd gathers to encourage the participants.

The name originates from the Russian word часто (*chasto*) “often” and частить, (*chastit*) “to speak rapidly.” Usually humorous, satirical or ironic in nature, this genre of traditional Russian poetry, *Chastushka* (частушка), is a single *quatrain* in *trochaic tetrameter* with an *abab*, *abcb* or (less frequently) *aabb* rhyme scheme.

Trochaic tetrameter:



"Peter, Peter, pumpkin-eater"

or, from Macbeth (Shakespeare):

**Double, double, toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.**

Chastuski (plural: частушки) cover a wide spectrum of topics, from lewd jokes to political satire, including such diverse themes as love songs and Communist propaganda. During Soviet times, the government even published large collections of "ideologically correct" *chastushki*.

After each *chastuska*, there is a full musical refrain without lyrics to give the listeners a chance to laugh without missing the next one. It gives the participants time to think up the next rhyme, too! Originally *chastushki* were a form of entertainment, not intended to be performed on stage. Sometimes they are used as a medium for a back-and-forth mocking contest. Improvisation is highly valued during *chastuska* singing.

The last *foot* of a *chastushka* line is often a single stressed syllable rather than a full trochee, but no other structural variations are generally allowed. Due in part to this rigid structure, the tune used to sing them is standardized, but varies among different regions of Russia.

(adapted from <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chastushka>)

Write your own *Chastushka*

Names (of partners or team members) _____

Work with a partner to create your own *chastuska*. Think of it as just a story in couplets. It is supposed to be humorous, satirical or ironic. It could also express something you are angry about or something you want to make fun of.

Step 1 - Choose a subject for your *chastuska*. It could be about your life, a friend, a sport, or anything else that interests you.

Step 2 - List pairs of rhyming words. oak - spoke, heard - bird

Step 3 - Write sentences about your topic that end with the rhyming words from Step B.

A **wise** old **owl** sat **in** an **oak**,
The **more** he **heard** the **less** he **spoke**;

Step 4 - Following the rhyme scheme of a *chastuska* (trochaic tetrameter), write two stanzas with four lines each. The verses should be call/ response, or question/answer. Your rhyme scheme can be *abab*, *abcb* or *aabb*

A **wise** old **owl** sat **in** an **oak**
The **more** he **heard**, the **less** he **spoke**;
The **less** he **spoke**, the **more** he **heard**,
Why **aren't** we **all** like that **wise** old **bird**?

Step 5 - Listen to the balalaika or accordion ostinato. Or practice the Orff instrumental accompaniment. Study the tempo, beat and meter to see how your rhymes fit the melody. During the interlude, the treble instruments can improvise. Find an ending to the song.

Step 6 - Create some dance steps for the interlude.

Step 7 - Perform your *chastuska* with your partner. Alternate singing the verses with with improvised dance movements in between. Create a larger form by linking with other duos.

Chastushki

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The musical score is written for a group of performers. It consists of nine staves, each with a label on the left. The time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score is divided into two systems of four staves each, with a double bar line between the two systems. The first system includes the Alto, Tenor, SG, and AM staves. The second system includes the AX, BX, Wood Block, and Treschotki staves. The third system includes the Buben staff. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Alto
Tenor
SG
AM
AX
BX
Wood Block
Treschotki
Buben