



Sonnets



What's a Sonnet?

A sonnet is a fairly short poem with vivid images and cheeky rhyming. Usually, sonnets express a single idea (most often languishing love), which the poet examines from different angles.

Historians believe a 13th century Italian notary, Giacomo da Lentini, invented the sonnet. The word comes from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning a little sound or song. In the 14th century, the scholar Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch, made sonnets famous. He penned 317 sonnets in a collection entitled *Il Canzoniere*. These primarily deal with the topic of unattainable love for a mysterious woman named Laura, who didn't love him back. From Italy, sonnets traveled to England and were translated into English in the 1530s, where William Shakespeare and, later, John Donne composed many famous examples.

How is A Sonnet Structured?

Classic sonnets follow some specific guidelines:

- They contain 14 lines organized into a pattern: 4 lines, 4 lines, 4 lines, 2 lines.
- The last 2 lines of the poem, sometimes called “the turn,” provide the reader a concise conclusion, often from a different perspective and with a different tone.
- A very precise rhyme scheme governs the 14 lines: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.
- Finally, each line's rhythm is an iambic pentameter, which is said to mimic the flow of natural speech. An iambic pentameter is the most common English meter; a meter is the rhythm a poem uses—the way it sounds—when it is read aloud.

Let's dig further to figure out iambic pentameters:

- An iambic “foot,” or unit, is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (or short-long) when spoken, such as “Shall I.”
- The word “pentameter” is five metrical feet (“pent” = five, and “meter” = metrical).

Five iambic feet together make the pentameter, or rhythm, of each line of a sonnet, such as “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?” (that's from Shakespeare's Sonnet 18). When you read it out loud, you'll feel and hear the alternating short-long syllables that occur five times in this phrase. In this line of 10 syllables, there are 5 paired syllables, or 5 iambic feet.





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Here's an Example

Before writing your own sonnet, it will help to read (out loud, if possible) an example or two. Let's look at a sonnet by Shakespeare. Here are a few things to notice:

- For clarity, there are breaks in the text to indicate grouped lines.
- There are 14 lines organized into the prescribed rhyme scheme (this is labeled below).
- Shakespeare formed each line's rhythm from 5 sets of short-long syllabic pairs—10 syllables (in other words, he wrote in iambic pentameter).
- The possible meaning is suggested in the right-hand column.

Overall, the reader certainly feels a great emotional longing throughout, as if the author was alone, dreaming about a love and needing to express intense feelings.

"Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" by William Shakespeare

Stanza 1	<p>A Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? B Thou art more lovely and more temperate; A Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, B And summer's lease hath all too short a date;</p>	<p>The poem opens with a question "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" Then Shakespeare compares and contrasts his heart-throb with attributes of a perfect summer day. Line 2 states that the love interest is both more lovely and more moderate in mood than summer, since that season tends to have lots of weather extremes and is short, only three months. Additionally, his love is more beautiful than summer, and her beauty lasts longer.</p>
Stanza 2	<p>C Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, D And often is his gold complexion dimm'd; C And every fair from fair sometime declines, D By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;</p>	<p>This section notes that every beautiful part of nature changes. For example, trees' leaves wither as the summer changes to autumn (see "every fair from fair sometime declines").</p>
Stanza 3	<p>E But thy eternal summer shall not fade, F Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st; E Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade, F When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;</p>	<p>However, this section observes that unlike summer, the love's beauty will last forever ("thy eternal summer shall not fade...").</p>
Stanza 3	<p>G So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, G So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.</p>	<p>The final two lines (the turn) present related matter—that the poem itself will preserve for posterity the memory of the beautiful love ("as long as men can breathe or eyes can see"). It's almost as if someone else is making these final observations.</p>





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Items you will need:

- Paper and pen/pencil
- OR a computer

How do I write my own sonnet?

Now follow these steps to write your own sonnet. Perhaps you'd like to share ideas of love or even tell someone you admire them. Valentine's Day is a perfect time to honor a friend with a gift from your heart!

Remember to read your poem aloud as you write for flow and rhythm. If you need inspiration, read other sonnets by Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Edna St. Vincent Millay, William Butler Yeats, Sylvia Plath, or more contemporary poets such as June Jordan, Zakia Henderson-Brown, Hoa Nguyen, Jack Agueros, and others.

1. Choose a person to write to (or about), and a type of love to write about. Maybe you want to write about someone you have a crush on who seems out of reach, like someone far away or a movie star. You might also want to experiment with a sonnet about a different type of love, such as remembering first love, the love of a friend or pet, or the love of a family member or teacher.
2. You might want to draw, paint, or find a picture of the person you chose to write for or about. Keep the image near you for inspiration as you write. This could be.
3. Make a list of all the wonderful attributes of this person: their looks, the things they do, their personality, Include details of how you feel when you think about loving this them. Use colorful, descriptive language.
4. Begin to create word pictures by using similes, metaphors, and/or fancy descriptions of the person. Similes are statements that say someone is like something else, and metaphors are statements that claim someone is something else.
5. Finally, group your word pictures together into 4-line sections, each expressing one clear idea.
6. Let the poem sit for a few hours or days. Keep reflecting on it and rereading it. Is there anything you want to change or add? Keep polishing it until you're satisfied. Let your sonnet sing!





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Don't worry too much about the rhythm. While your language will flow naturally in iambic pentameter (short-long, short-long), the fun and musicality of rhyming takes the sonnet out of regular speech into the poetical. And this is not a rigid form—you may find it necessary to vary from iambic pentameter occasionally to use your favorite, most meaningful words. Just remember that too many changes can confuse the reader's ear, and the rhythmic personality, or underpinning, might be lost.

For related fun:

- Write your sonnet on a heart-shaped card and send it through the mail.
- Chalk your sonnet on the sidewalk outside the house of someone you admire.
- Write your sonnet on a doily or interesting paper and post it on a bulletin board to intrigue all who wander by.
- Ink your sonnet on special paper and send it anonymously.

