

How to Write a Sonnet

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The sonnet is a difficult form to write in precisely because it has a set form, and also because its association with lofty Shakespearean stuff tends to bring out either saccharine melodramatics or affectations of Renaissance diction (Example of both: “Oh, dost thou murder me with kindly looks?”). However, once you let go of “thee” and “thou” and don’t hold yourself to idealizing some distant lover, then the sonnet can prove a robust vehicle accommodating an infinite variety of contemporary subjects and approaches.

But you have to know the form well, both for its pleasures and dangers.

Length. The sonnet is always 14 lines long. However, it is more useful to think of the sonnet in terms of its internal units, stanzas, which can vary (see rhyme).

Rhyme. The rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet is ABAB/CDCD/EFEF/GG. However, it’s nice to try an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, which uses fewer rhymes and has variations: ABBA/ABBA /CDE/CDE (the last two stanzas can combine CDE in almost any way). A recent favorite of mine has been ABBA/CDEEDC/ABBA. One advantage to the Petrarchan form is that its lack of a final couplet can keep it from sounding corny.

Volta. This means “turn” and has to do with the fact that in many Petrarchan sonnets there was a change in direction after the first eight lines (the “octave”). The last six lines (“sestet”) have often been structured as an answer to the problem put forth in the octave, or some other kind of redirection. In the English sonnet, that turn is often delayed until the final two lines, the couplet, though it can also appear elsewhere. For example, in Shakespeare’s sonnet #130 (“My mistress eyes are nothing like the sun”) the volta comes in the final couplet, which takes a new direction from the apparent mocking the narrator has been doing of his lover’s looks: “And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare / As any she belied with false compare.”

Meter. English sonnets are typically written in a poetical meter known as iambic pentameter. That’s five feet (or units) of iambs (an unstressed-stressed pattern): “Paralysis among the colored stones” (Can you hear the alternating rhythm of unstressed followed by stressed syllables?: “ParALySIS aMONG the COlored STONES”). Some people can hear this rhythm readily; others cannot. It helps to say it aloud. See **Additional Help on Meter**, below.

Enjambment. Enjambment is when a sentence does not end with the end of a line of poetry but carries on to the next line of the poem. There is no rule for how much enjambment needs to be in a sonnet, but it’s a fair bet that poems in which the end of every line corresponds to the end of every sentence will sound jilted or artificial. Enjambment will help a sonnet flow, and usually helps the tone sound more natural.

Of all of the formal elements, the ones students attend to most are usually length and rhyme; the ones most important to a successful sonnet tend to be rhythm and enjambment. If you spend all your time making sure your rhymes come out, you’ve tended to the more obvious but less important formal aspects of this poetry.

Where do I start?

- Read sonnets before writing sonnets both for content ideas and for possible approaches.
- Don’t start a sonnet on the basis of some abstraction (“love” “death” “democracy”). Start a sonnet based on an image or a rhythm that you like.
- Consider writing an imitation of another poem or of a scriptural passage.
- Read your drafts aloud, and listen to the sound—does the rhythm flow, does the rhyme work?

Additional Help on Meter

Because getting the meter right is one of the most important, yet troubling aspects of composing in the sonnet form, it helps to understand a few principles that govern it:

Many words can scan in more than one way.

With some words the number of syllables in them is flexible: “wandering” can be scanned as two syllables, “wan-dering,” (like “wan-dring”) or as three syllables, “wan-der-ing,” depending on what is desired. Other words, often past participles with “-ed” endings, can through poetic license be lengthened a syllable. This is done by emphasizing the “-ed” sound that is normally made part of the preceding syllable. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet #116 a line reads “O no, it is an ever fixèd mark.” Note that within the word “fixèd” there is a descending accent on the last vowel to indicate that this syllable is voiced, turning this one-syllable word into a two-syllable word. That trick can sound a bit affected or quaint nowadays, so if you can get by without it, do so.

Just as the number of syllables may vary, so can where the accent falls on certain words depending upon variable pronunciation or regional dialect. Thus, “laboratory” will have its first syllable stressed when pronounced by Americans, whereas in the UK this word is accented on its second syllable.

Monosyllabic Words: Accent by Position

Words of one syllable can scan as accented or as unaccented depending upon a couple of factors. In this line from Shakespeare’s sonnet #138, the word “some” receives an accent:

That she might think me some untutor'd youth — — — —

However, the same word is clearly *not* accented at the beginning of the first few lines of Shakespeare’s sonnet #91:

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill, — — — —
Some in their wealth, some in their body’s force,

The accent of single-syllable words depends upon position. If the word ends a line of iambic pentameter (as “skill” or “force” do in the two lines just quoted), we expect it to be accented. If the word begins a line of iambic pentameter, we expect it to be unaccented (as “That” in “That she might think me some untutor’d youth”). We also expect a one-syllable word to be unaccented if the word (or syllable) that precedes or follows that word is clearly accented. This is why polysyllabic words can serve as an anchor for figuring out meter.

Multi-syllable Words as Anchors.

Because monosyllabic words can vary their accent, the way to be sure of their accent in any given line is to first find a multi-syllable word whose accents are not in question, and then to alternate stresses leading up to and away from that multi-syllable word. In Shakespeare’s sonnet #28 the first line begins with four one-syllable words, “How can I then.” Which words should be accented? Of course we expect the first word to be unaccented, but the way to be sure of their scansion is to go to first multi-syllable word in the line, “return”:

How can I then return in happy plight. — —

It is the word “return” (with unaccented and then accented syllables) that determines that the one-syllable word preceding it (“then”) must be accented, and so on alternating backward, so that the word preceding “then” (“I”) must be unaccented, and so on:

How can I then return in happy plight.

→ (working backwards from “return”, alternate accented/unaccented syllables)

Monosyllabic words: Accent by Semantic and Phonetic Value

In addition to position, another factor determines which of several monosyllabic words placed together receive the accent—semantic and phonetic value. In Shakespeare’s Sonnet #28, this line is made up of all monosyllabic words except the final one:

But day by night and night by day oppress'd

We expect a line of iambic pentameter to begin with an unaccented syllable, and so because of its position we are likely to read “But” as unaccented, then “day” as accented, etc. This is correct. But in addition to their position, the semantic values of the accented words also serve to draw the beat. Semantic value is meaning, and not all words have it. Words like “but,” “by,” or “and” are all grammatical in nature. They represent relationships; they do not have the concrete appeal of nouns and verbs. When monosyllabic words compete with each other, generally those words will draw the accent that are nouns or verbs, or that are more concrete, or that are simply longer. In the example above, “day” and “night” are both nouns; they have semantic value. But “but” and “by” are only grammatical markers, and do not.

In addition to semantic value, phonetic value also attracts the accent. Words with stronger sounds—fricatives and plosives like “k” and “b”—tend to draw the beat (“crack” or “bench”), whereas words more filled with liquids and sonorants like “l” and “y” do not draw the beat as much (“love” or “yacht”). We are naturally going to accent the more meaningful words, or the words with more dramatic or exciting sounds. In Shakespeare’s sonnet #146 we can see how both semantic and phonetic values attract the beat within an entire line of monosyllabic words. Note that the second, fourth, sixth, eighth, and tenth words/syllables (underlined) each have words with more semantic and usually more dramatic phonetic value. They clearly draw the beat:

So shalt thou feed on Death, that feeds on men.

Breaking Meter

As with other artistic forms in which a conventional pattern establishes expectations, a sonnet’s meter can be broken for artistic effect. For readers not to feel a break in rhythm as an error, breaks in meter should correspond to something happening in the meaning of the sonnet. For example, Shakespeare’s sonnet #130 (“My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the son”) is very atypical in its subject matter. Rather than praising the beauty of his love, the narrator confesses that the object of his affection lacks those elements. In other words, Shakespeare breaks with the Petrarchan love sonnet tradition in terms of content. So why not, also, in terms of form? Note how this line begins with an accented syllable, “Coral”:

Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;

Similarly, John Donne breaks the iambic pentameter quite purposefully in his famous holy sonnet, “Batter my heart, three-personed God.” He is asking for a violence from God that’s reflected in the violence he has done to the poem’s meter.

Revision

Below is a checklist I use with students in responding to their first drafts of sonnets. It captures the most common problems with sonnets:

- ☐ 1. Fix the **meter** and resubmit (with the original copy). I have marked the meter where it goes wrong.
- ☐ 2. Please avoid overly **archaic diction** (word choice): “thee” and “thou” *can* work (for example, if you are trying to parody older poetry) but this is an exception.
- ☐ 3. Please avoid **syncope** (the omission of a syllable from the middle of a word, often done to make the meter work). It can be very corny very quickly. I especially eschew “e’er” for “ever” and “o’er” for over. Get o’er it! Similarly, avoid *aphaeresis* (omission of the first syllable: “‘cause” for “because”; “‘tis” for “it is”) and *apocope* (omission of letters or a syllable from the end: “tho” for “though”).
- ☐ 4. Your sonnet lacks sufficient **concrete imagery** and relies too heavily upon abstractions or generalizations. Please substitute nouns and verbs that appeal to the senses. Remember the rule: show, don’t tell.
- ☐ 5. Please reconsider your use of **anastrophe** (the inversion of normal word order). Although this figure of speech can be used well, it is more often either awkward or too self-consciously “poetical.” Sometimes, it’s just overdone. If I marked this, your anastrophe isn’t working.
- ☐ 6. I believe your sonnet is **too obscure**. It doesn’t provide the reader enough clues to anchor it into an interpretive context. You may wish to discuss this with me before you revise.
- ☐ 7. Please reread the original instructions on **proper formatting of the sonnet**, fix it, and resubmit. There should be no title page. All lines should be left justified. The last two lines may or may not be indented to emphasize the final couplet. No fancy fonts, scanned images, all-italics, or centered justification. Please double space.

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