

Write a Sonnet

A sonnet is a poem that expresses a single, complete thought, idea, or sentiment. A sonnet must consist of 14 lines, in iambic pentameter with the rhymes arranged according to one of several definite schemes.

Vocabulary

1. Argument: The idea that the sonnet is trying to prove
2. Iambic: An "iamb" is a variety of the rhythmic unit called a foot. It has a single unstressed syllable followed by a single stressed syllable. Examples of words that naturally follow this pattern include:
 - today
 - myself
 - because
 - unless
 - toward
3. Pentameter: This refers to the need to repeat the iamb five times (pentameter). Keep in mind that the iambs don't need to be perfectly built into two-syllable words; they can also stretch out across separate words or even repeat within a single word provided that the stresses still work. Examples include:
 - Today/ I know/ I'll find/ my oth/er shoe
 - The man/ I love/ is quite/ illit/erate
4. Quatrain: A four line stanza of a poem with a rhyme scheme.
5. Rhyming couplet: Two consecutive lines that must rhyme.
6. Turn: The point in the sonnet where the speaker changes tone or idea (a shift, *volta*)

Tips

- Use iambic pentameter consistently throughout each line. This stresses every other syllable and sounds like your heart: "da-DUM, daDUM".
- Since there are ten syllables in each line, five will always be emphasized.
- Don't be afraid to change the word order to better suit the rhythm. For example, "When I look at myself in the mirror" doesn't quite work because the natural emphasis in the word "mirror" is in the first syllable (mirror), not the second. To work around this, you might change the line to "When in the mirror I myself do see".

Methods

When writing a sonnet, there are some techniques that will help you plan and write:

- On a piece of paper draw a straight line. Divide it into five even portions. Each of those portions can then be filled with one unstressed, one stressed syllable until you reach the end of the line. You should find this gives you 10 syllables in iambic pentameter. Continue this process for every line of the sonnet to create a consistent rhythm.
- To count your syllables: try clapping to the rhythm of a word or putting your hand under your chin to count each time that your jaw drops.
- Whenever you're trying to use a word or concept that upsets the syllables, use a thesaurus to find a synonym that works better.
- Use an online rhyming dictionary.

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- Read other poets' sonnets for examples and inspiration. Many poets have written in this style, including Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, William Wordsworth, John Milton, P.B. Shelley, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Pablo Neruda, and more. Many of these sonnets are available online.

Rhyme Scheme and Form

The Shakespearean style is three quatrains with a specific rhyme scheme followed by a couplet. Extra attention should be paid to the couplet at the end, which is usually a very strong rhyme to provide a sense of closure. (For this reason, it is sometimes called a "heroic couplet.")

Structure and rhyme scheme (Each letter stands for the ending sound of the line):

1. ABAB
2. CDCD
3. EFEF
4. GG

The Argument

Writing lines that conform to the sonnet rhyme scheme isn't enough; for a true sonnet, remember that each quatrain usually represents a different stage in the development of an idea (or argument). The couplet sums up the essential premise of the poem. Much like a plot line, this structural development should "build up" by presenting an argument that is resolved by the end. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the breakdown is usually as follows:

- Quatrain 1: Express the main theme and/or the main metaphor.
- Quatrain 2: Expands both; be imaginative, provide an example perhaps.
- Quatrain 3: Adds a twist or a conflict which may begin with a word, like "but"; this is often in the ninth line.
- Couplet: Resolves the theme and leaves the reader with a new way of looking at things, or a "discovery."

Theme

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