### **Writing a Sonnet**

### A 14-line poem with a variable rhyme scheme originating in Italy and brought to England by [Sir Thomas Wyatt](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/thomas-wyatt) and [Henry Howard, earl of Surrey](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poets/detail/henry-howard) in the 16th century. Literally a “little song,” the sonnet traditionally reflects upon a single sentiment, with a clarification or “turn” of thought in its concluding lines. There are many different types of sonnets. The Petrarchan sonnet, perfected by the Italian poet Petrarch, divides the 14 lines into two sections: an eight-line stanza (octave) rhyming ABBAABBA, and a six-line stanza (sestet) rhyming CDCDCD or CDEEDE. John Milton’s [“When I Consider How my Light Is Spent”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=174016) and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s [“How Do I Love Thee”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=172998) employ this form. The Italian sonnet is an English variation on the traditional Petrarchan version. The octave’s rhyme scheme is preserved, but the sestet rhymes CDDCEE. See Thomas Wyatt’s [“Whoso List to Hunt, I Know Where Is an Hind”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=174862) and John Donne’s [“If Poisonous Minerals, and If That Tree.”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173365) Wyatt and Surrey developed the English (or Shakespearean) sonnet, which condenses the 14 lines into one stanza of three [quatrains](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/glossary-term.html?term=Quatrain) and a concluding couplet, with a rhyme scheme of ABABCDCDEFEFGG (though poets have frequently varied this scheme; see Wilfred Owen’s [“Anthem for Doomed Youth”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=176831)). George Herbert’s [“Love (II),”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173631) Claude McKay’s [“America,”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=173957) and Molly Peacock’s [“Altruism”](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/poem.html?id=175781) are English sonnets.

### By The Poetry Center and John Timpane from Poetry For Dummies

### Learn to write a sonnet in iambic pentameter, just like Shakespeare did. Discover the rhythm and rhyme scheme of the quatrains and couplets that make up a Shakespearean sonnet.

### Here are the rules for writing a sonnet:

### It must consist of 14 lines.

### It must be written in iambic pentameter (duh-DUH-duh-DUH-duh-DUH-duh-DUH-duh-DUH).

### It must be written in one of various standard rhyme schemes.

### If you're writing the most familiar kind of sonnet, the Shakespearean, the rhyme scheme is this:

### A

### B

### A

### B

### C

### D

### C

### D

### E

### F

### E

### F

### G

### G

### Every A rhymes with every A, every B rhymes with every B, and so forth. You'll notice this type of sonnet consists of three quatrains (that is, four consecutive lines of verse that make up a stanza or division of lines in a poem) and one couplet (two consecutive rhyming lines of verse).

### Ah, but there's more to a sonnet than just the structure of it. A sonnet is also an argument — it builds up a certain way. And how it builds up is related to its metaphors and how it moves from one metaphor to the next. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the argument builds up like this:

### •First quatrain: An exposition of the main theme and main metaphor.

### •Second quatrain: Theme and metaphor extended or complicated; often, some imaginative example is given.

### •Third quatrain: Peripeteia (a twist or conflict), often introduced by a "but" (very often leading off the ninth line).

### •Couplet: Summarizes and leaves the reader with a new, concluding image.

### One of Shakespeare's best-known sonnets, Sonnet 18, follows this pattern:

### Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

### Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

### Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

### And summer's lease hath all too short a date.

### Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

### And often is his gold complexion dimmed;

### And every fair from fair sometime declines,

### By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;

### But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

### Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,

### Nor shall death brag thou wanderest in his shade,

### When in eternal lines to time thou growest.

### So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

### So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

### The argument of Sonnet 18 goes like this:

### •First quatrain: Shakespeare establishes the theme of comparing "thou" (or "you") to a summer's day, and why to do so is a bad idea. The metaphor is made by comparing his beloved to summer itself.

### •Second quatrain: Shakespeare extends the theme, explaining why even the sun, supposed to be so great, gets obscured sometimes, and why everything that's beautiful decays from beauty sooner or later. He has shifted the metaphor: In the first quatrain, it was "summer" in general, and now he's comparing the sun and "every fair," every beautiful thing, to his beloved.

### •Third quatrain: Here the argument takes a big left turn with the familiar "But." Shakespeare says that the main reason he won't compare his beloved to summer is that summer dies — but she won't. He refers to the first two quatrains — her "eternal summer" won't fade, and she won't "lose possession" of the "fair" (the beauty) she possesses. So he keeps the metaphors going, but in a different direction.

### And for good measure, he throws in a negative version of all the sunshine in this poem — the "shade" of death, which, evidently, his beloved won't have to worry about.

### •Couplet: How is his beloved going to escape death? In Shakespeare's poetry, which will keep her alive as long as people breathe or see. This bold statement gives closure to the whole argument — it's a surprise.

### And so far, Shakespeare's sonnet has done what he promised it would! See how tightly this sonnet is written, how complex yet well organized it is? Try writing a sonnet of your own.

### Poets are attracted by the grace, concentration, and, yes, the sheer difficulty of sonnets. You may never write another sonnet in your life, but this exercise is more than just busywork. It does all the following:

### •Shows you how much you can pack into a short form.

### •Gives you practice with rhyme, meter, structure, metaphor, and argument.

### •Connects you with one of the oldest traditions in English poetry — one still vital today.

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# **Sonnet : To Eva - Poem by Sylvia Plath**

All right, let's say you could take a skull and break it  
The way you'd crack a clock; you'd crush the bone  
Between steel palms of inclination, take it,  
Observing the wreck of metal and rare stone.  
  
This was a woman : her loves and stratagems  
Betrayed in mute geometry of broken  
Cogs and disks, inane mechanic whims,  
And idle coils of jargon yet unspoken.  
  
Not man nor demigod could put together  
The scraps of rusted reverie, the wheels  
Of notched tin platitudes concerning weather,  
Perfume, politics, and fixed ideals.  
  
The idiot bird leaps up and drunken leans  
To chirp the hour in lunatic thirteens.

**Suburban Sonnet by Gwen Harwood**

She practises a fugue, though it can matter

to no one now if she plays well or not.

Beside her on the floor two children chatter,

then scream and fight. She hushes them. A pot

boils over. As she rushes to the stove

too late, a wave of nausea overpowers

subject and counter-subject. Zest and love

drain out with soapy water as she scours

the crusted milk. Her veins ache. Once she played

for Rubinstein, who yawned. The children caper

round a sprung mousetrap where a mouse lies dead.

When the soft corpse won't move they seem afraid.

She comforts them; and wraps it in a paper

featuring: Tasty dishes from stale bread.

## ****Acquainted With The Night**** by Robert Frost I have been one acquainted with the night. I have walked out in rain—and back in rain. I have outwalked the furthest city light. I have looked down the saddest city lane. I have passed by the watchman on his beat And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain. I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet When far away an interrupted cry Came over houses from another street, But not to call me back or say good-by; And further still at an unearthly height, One luminary clock against the sky Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right. I have been one acquainted with the night.

## The Unreturning *by Wilfred Owen* Suddenly night crushed out the day and hurled Her remnants over cloud-peaks, thunder-walled. Then fell a stillness such as harks appalled When far-gone dead return upon the world. There watched I for the Dead; but no ghost woke. Each one whom Life exiled I named and called. But they were all too far, or dumbed, or thralled, And never one fared back to me or spoke. Then peered the indefinite unshapen dawn With vacant gloaming, sad as half-lit minds, The weak-limned hour when sick men's sighs are drained. And while I wondered on their being withdrawn, Gagged by the smothering Wing which none unbinds, I dreaded even a heaven with doors so chained.