Write Your Own Sonnet Handout

1. How to Write a Sonnet

While you may not be the next Shakespeare, that doesn’t mean you can’t write a great sonnet. An exacting and rhythmical poem, the sonnet has a long tradition behind it, with many great poets crafting their own sonnets. For general guidelines as well as instructions for Shakespearean, Spenserian, and Petrarchan sonnet forms, follow these steps to write a sonnet you will be proud of.

General Guidelines

Understand the basic rules of a sonnet.

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

Learn the basic definitions.

Before tackling the sonnet, you’ll need to understand the meaning of some of the elements of a sonnet. They are:

• 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

• 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/her shoe
  • The man/ I love/ is quite/ illiterate

• Quatrain: A four line stanza of a poem.

• Sestet: A six line stanza of a poem.

• Octave: An eight line stanza of a poem.

• Rhyming couplet: Two consecutive lines that must rhyme.
Use iambic pentameter consistently throughout each line.

As discussed previously, this stresses every other syllable and is sometimes represented as da-DUM, da-DUM. Since there are ten syllables in each line, five will always be emphasized. The opening line of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18 is a perfect example (the stressed syllables are underlined in blue):

Iambic pentameter sample:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

mer's day

•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; it might not have as modern a feel to it, but hey, that’s a sonnet for you.

Use methods to help you.

When writing a sonnet, there are some techniques you can use to help your planning and writing:

•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.

•Whenever you're trying to use a word or concept that upsets the syllables, use a thesaurus to find a word that will work better.

•Read How to Find Rhyming Words for Poetry.

Keep writing and stay flexible in your attempts.

It will probably take you a few drafts to be happy with your sonnet, but don’t get discouraged. This style of writing is tight, precise, and very expressive with few words; and with practice, this tends to be a lot of fun for the poet. Keep a thesaurus by your side and you'll be fine.

•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 for you to read on screen.
2. The Shakespearian Sonnet

Understand the rhyme scheme.

The Shakespearan style is three quatrains followed by a couplet: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. (In The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets, Helen Vendler describes it as Q1, Q2, Q3, and C.) Each letter (A or B, for example) stands for the ending sound of the line.

• ABAB means that the first line and the third line rhyme (A with A), as do the second and fourth (B with B).

• CDCD and EFEF follow the same structure as ABAB but with two new word endings; if A and B end in “-at” and “-ey” sounds, for example, C and D might end in “-oh” and “-us,” whereas E and F might use “-en” and “-off” to avoid any overlap.

• GG means that the final two lines of the sonnet rhyme – again, using a new word ending (ex. “-ar”). 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.”)

• Let’s use Sonnet 18, “Shall I Compare Thee To a Summer’s Day,” as an example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quatrain 1</th>
<th>Sonnet 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? A</td>
<td>W. Shakespeare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thou art more lovely and more temperate. B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May. A</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And summer’s lease hath all too short a date. B</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Octave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quatrain 2</th>
<th>Sonnet 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines, C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And often is his gold complexion dimm’d; D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And every fair from fair sometime declines, C</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By chance or nature’s changing course untim’d, D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But thy eternal summer shall not fade E:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow’st, F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade, E</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When in eternal lines to time thou growest. F</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Couplet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quatrain 3</th>
<th>Sonnet 18</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So long lives this and this gives life to thee. G</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since this is an English sonnet, it’s really two “quatrains”; it is marked this way to remind you that an “octave” consists of 8 lines.

Create 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), while the couplet sums up the essential premise of the poem. In a Shakespearan 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. (See above: "But thy eternal summer shall not fade...")

• Couplet: Resolves the theme and leaves the reader with a new way of looking at things, or a "discovery."

2B. The Spenserian Sonnet

A Spenserian sonnet uses the same organizational pattern as a Shakespearian sonnet. In other words, it is also composed of three quatrains followed by a couplet. However the rhyme scheme of a Spenserian sonnet is: ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

3. Petrarchan Sonnet

Understand the rhyme scheme.

The Petrarchan sonnet consists of two quatrains (or an octave) and a closing minor group of six lines (the sestet). The rhyme pattern is usually: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE.

• ABAB means that the first line and the third line rhyme (A with A), as do the second and fourth (B with B). This four-line pattern repeats twice, using the same ending sounds each time. If A and B end in "-at" and "-ey" sounds in the first quatrain, for example, they should do the same in the second.

• CDE means that these three lines all end in sounds that are different not only from one another, but also from the endings you used in the AB lines (ex. "-oh," "-us," and "-en"). This three-line pattern repeats twice, using the same ending sounds each time.

• Note that the sestet is somewhat flexible and can also be structured as CDC CDC or CDC DEE, for example.

Create the argument.

It's not enough to follow the rhyme scheme, as a true sonnet uses its structure to develop an idea (or argument). Much like a plot line, this structural development should "build up" by presenting an argument that is resolved by the end. In a Petrarchan sonnet, the breakdown is usually as follows:

• Quatrain 1: Expresses the main theme, usually a problem

• Quatrain 2: Expands on the theme.

• Sestet: Comments on the theme and/or solves it, creating a noticeable change in tone.