

## METER AND STANZA FORMS

**Meter:** Meter is the recurrence, in regular units, of a prominent feature in the sequence of speech sounds of language. It is determined by the pattern of stronger and weaker stresses on the syllables composing the words in the verse line; the stronger is called "stressed" syllable and all the weaker ones the "unstressed" syllables.

**Foot:** A foot is the combination of a strong stress and the associated weak stress or stresses which make up the recurrent metric unit of a line.

**Iambic:** an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

**Trochaic:** A stressed followed by unstressed syllable.

**Spondaic:** two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses.

**Pyrrhic:** a foot composed of two successive syllables with approximately equal light stress.

**Anapestic:** Two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

**Dactylic:** A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

**Amphibrachic:** A foot composed of three syllables in sequence Unstressed-stressed-unstressed.

A 'metric line' is named according to the number of feet composing it.

Monometer: One foot

Dimeter: Two feet

Trimeter: Three feet

Tetrameter: Four feet

Pentameter: Five feet

Hexameter; Six feet (Alexandrine)

Heptameter: Seven feet

Octameter: Eight feet

For example, if the feet are iambs, and if there are five feet to a line, then it is called a iambic pentameter. If the feet are primarily dactyls and there are six to a line, then it is a dactylic hexameter.

**Sprung Rhythm:** G.M. Hopkins's Sprung Rhythm is a variant of strong-stress meter: each foot, as he describes it, begins with a stressed syllable, which may either stand alone or be associated with from one to three (occasionally even more) light syllables.

**Blank Verse:** (*non-rhyming iambic pentameter lines.*) It consists of lines of iambic pentameter (five-stress iambic verse) which are unrhymed - hence the term 'blank'. It was introduced by Earl of Surrey

in his translations of Book 2 and 4 of Virgil's *The Aeneid* (about 1540). By the end of the century it became a very prestigious form, being frequently used for example in Elizabethan drama. Some of Shakespeare's most famous tragedies use blank verse extensively. Milton used it in *Paradise Lost* (1667); Wordsworth in his *Prelude* (1805), and Tennyson in *Idylls of the King* (1891).

*And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,  
With many recognitions dim and faint,  
And somewhat of a sad perplexity,  
The picture of the mind revives again;  
While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years. And so I dare to hope ...*

(From: Wordsworth, *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey*)

**Free Verse:** is sometimes referred to as "open form" verse, or by the French term *verse libre*. It is unrhymed and metrically irregular. Hence the lines are unequal in length. T.S. Eliot used it in much part of his *Waste Land* (1922), and Whitman used it in *Leaves of Grass*.

## STANZA FORMS IN POETRY

In poetry, a stanza is a grouped set of lines in verse.

**Couplet:** It's a pair of rhymed lines that are equal in length. It can be rhymed couplet or an unrhymed couplet. The French call rhymed couplets *rimes plates* or *rimes suivies*.

**The Heroic Couplet:** Lines of iambic pentameter, which rhyme in pairs: *aa, bb, cc*, and so on. The adjective "heroic" was applied in the later 17<sup>th</sup> century because of the frequent use of such couplets in heroic (epic) poems and in *heroic dramas*. It was introduced by Geoffrey Chaucer in *the Legend of Good Women*. John Keats used it in *Endymion*.

The heroic couplet may be of two kinds **closed** or **run on**. In the closed couplet the sense is completed with each couplet and each thus forms a complete sentence, a unit in itself. In the run-on variety, the sense runs on from one couplet to another till it is completed.



It was first used by the late 14<sup>th</sup> century poet, Geoffrey Chaucer (the first great master of accentual syllabic verse in English poetry). The largest part of the *Canterbury Tales* was written in heroic couplets. Because of the changes that took place in the English language between Chaucer's time and the Modern English period (from the 16<sup>th</sup> century), later readers of Chaucer's poetry did not realize that he used this form. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, the form had to be reinvented. When it was reinvented it was first used to indicate closure (as in the English sonnet form or at the end of the acts of a play) but then began to function as a form on its own right. When George Chapman published his translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in this form (1614-15), the heroic couplet became closely associated with heroic poetry and was established as the English equivalent of the hexameters of heroic Greek and Latin poetry. Throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the form experienced a glorious career. It was the standard form of late 17<sup>th</sup> century heroic tragedies, it was the form of John Dryden's translations of Virgil and Ovid, of Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's epics and of a great number of original poems by Dryden, Pope, Oliver Goldsmith, Samuel Johnson and others. Because of the Romantic preference for blank verse, the heroic couplet became less prestigious and influential in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but some distinguished poets still used it in some of their major poems (e.g. George Gordon Byron in his verse tales and in his 'English Bards and Scotch Reviewers').

Heroic couplets can be used to achieve widely differing effects. However, their most typical use is to be found in 18<sup>th</sup> century poetry. Each couplet, in this 18<sup>th</sup> century use of the form, is a separate unit of sense, which makes a very clearly structured, lucid and controlled communication of ideas possible. 18<sup>th</sup> century heroic couplets often achieve epigrammatic precision and conciseness, the ultimate crystallization of the idea they express. Thus several 18<sup>th</sup> century heroic couplets, especially those of Alexander Pope, have become proverbial in English.

The following lines from the beginning of Dryden's *The Hind and the Panther* are an example of iambic pentameter couplets (Heroic couplets):

*A milk-white Hind, immortal and unchang'd,  
Fed on the lawns, and in the forest rang'd;*

without unspotted, innocent within,  
 She fear'd no danger, for she knew no sin  
 Nor had she oft been chas'd with horns and bounds  
 And Scythian shafts, and many winged wounds  
 And as her heart, was often forc'd to fly,  
 And doom'd to death, tho' fated not to die.

**Octosyllabic Couplet:** In the end, mention may also be made of the Octosyllabic Couplet. It differs from the Heroic Couplet, in as much as each line in it consists of eight syllables or four feet and not of ten syllables or five feet. It is a difficult measure to handle, and its use in long narrative poems tends to grow mechanical and tiresome. However, in the Restoration era (1660-1700) Samuel Butler used it with great success for his satirical poem *Sir Hudibras* (published in three parts in 1663, 1664 and 1678). Another famous use of this form is to be found in Milton's *Il Penseroso* where it acquires a more serious tone. In the romantic age, Coleridge used it successfully for his *Christabel* (1816). The following lines from Milton's *L'Allegro* (1645) illustrate iambic tetrameter couplets, sometimes called octosyllabics:

Then to the well-trod stage anon,  
 If Jonson's learned sock be on,  
 Or sweetest Shakespeare fancy's child  
 Warble his native wood-notes wild,  
 And ever against eating cares,  
 Lap me in soft Lydian airs,  
 Married to immortal verse  
 Such as the meeting soul may pierce  
 In notes, with many a winding bout  
 Of linked sweetness long drawn out.

**Tercet/Triplet:** It's a stanza of three lines bound by a single rhyme aaa. Many poems are written in this form, such as the Latin epigram:

"Now I know everything!" so cries  
 The foolish youth. But when he sighs  
 "Al! I know nothing," he is wise.

Other examples of tercets are Louis Untermeyer's "Long Feud," Alfred Kreymborg's "The Ditty the City Sang" and, except for the last stanza, John Masefield's "A Consecration."



**Terza Rima:** It is a variation of the Tercet and its rhyme scheme is aba, beb, cde, ded, and so on. Dante (who invented it) used this form for the entire *Divine Comedy*. Other examples are - Shelley's *The Triumph of Life* and *Ode To the West Wind*.

*O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing  
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes! O thou  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed*

*The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow*

*Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odors plain and hill.  
(From *Ode To the West Wind*)*

**Quatrain:** Quatrain is a stanza of four lines. It may have various rhyming patterns abab (cross-rhyme), abba (envelope-rhyme) aaaa (mono-rhyme).

Usually, however, all the lines of the quatrain are rhymed; the first line is rhymed with the third, the second with the fourth. This book contains countless examples of this form of quatrain, notably Elinor Wylie's "Sea Lullaby", Robert Frost's "Blue-Butterfly Day," Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy," Oscar Wilde's "Requiescat," W. E. Henley's "Invictus," and Richard Hovey's "Unmanifest Destiny," which ends:

*I do not know beneath what sky  
Nor on what seas shall be thy fate;  
I only know it shall be high,  
I only know it shall be great.*

Another form of the quatrain in which all the lines rhyme is composed of two couplets. It rhymes in pairs (a-a-b-b), as in Paul Laurence Dunbar's "A Coquette Conquered," Elizabeth Coatsworth's "A Lady Comes to an Inn," Robert Louis Stevenson's "Romance," A. E. Housman's "The Carpenter's Son," and Edwin Markham's "Outwitted":

*He drew a circle that shut me out -*

*Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout  
But Love and I had the wit to win;  
We drew a circle that took him in!*

Another interesting quatrain form, also with all lines rhyming, is known as "enclosed rhyme" (a-b-b-a); the first and last lines seem to bracket, or enclose, the inner pair of rhymes. Recent examples are Robert Frost's "The Pasture", William Butler Yeats's "When You Are Old," and W. H. Davies's "Days Too Short," which begins:

*When primroses are out in Spring,  
And small blue violets come between;  
When merry birds sing on boughs green,  
And rills, as soon as born, must sing.*

There are still other variations of the quatrain form, the best of which is the so-called "Omar Stanza" because it was popularized by Edward FitzGerald in his *Rubāiyāt of Omar Khayyām*. Three of the four lines are rhymed, but not the third (a-a-x-a). For example:

*The moving finger writes; and, having writ,  
Moves on; nor all your piety nor wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it.*

**Ballad Stanza** Most of the ballads in the English language have been written in Quatrains, so it is also referred to as the **Ballad-stanza**. Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* and Keats' *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* are known examples.

**The Heroic Quatrain:** It's a four line stanza in iambic pentameter rhyming abab e.g. Gray's "*Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*"

**Chaucerian Stanza or Rime Royal:** The Chaucerian stanza is so-called because it was introduced by Chaucer in *Troilus and Criseyde* (1380's). It is also called Rhyme Royal because it was used by King James I of Scotland in the 15th century for his well-known poem "*King's Quair*".

**The Chaucerian Stanza** is a stanza of seven Iambic Pentameter lines. The rhyme-scheme is - a b, a b b, c c. Shakespeare used it for his "*The*



Rape of Lucrece" and "A Love's Complaint."  
 A plain without a feature, bare and brown,  
 No blade of grass, no sign of neighbourhood,  
 Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,  
 Yet congregated on its blankness, stood  
 An unintelligible multitude,  
 A million eyes, a million boots in line  
 Without expression, waiting for a sign.  
 (From: Auden, *The Shield of Achilles*)

**Ottava Rima:** This stanza-form was first used in England in the early 16th century by Sir Thomas Wyatt. Shelley used it for his "*The Witch of Atlas*", Keats for his "*The Pot of Basil*", and Byron for his "*Don Juan*".  
 Ottava Rhyma is a stanza of eight iambic Pentameter lines. The rhyme scheme of the stanza is - a b, a b, a b, c c. The most famous use of the stanza form in English poetry was made by Byron in *Don Juan*, who skillfully employs the stanza form for comic effect; in the following example the last line renders the slightly pompous lovesickness of the first seven lines quite ridiculous.

"And oh! if e'er I should forget, I swear  
 But that's impossible, and cannot be  
 Sooner shall this blue ocean melt to air,  
 Sooner shall earth resolve itself to sea,  
 Than I resign thine image, Oh, my fair!  
 Or think of anything, excepting thee;  
 A mind diseased no remedy can physie"  
 (Here the ship gave a lurch, and he grew seasick.)

**Spenserian Stanza:** The stanza is so-called because it was first used by the poet Spenser for his romantic epic, "*The Fairy Queen*". It is a stanza consisting of eight iambic Pentameter lines and an Alexandrine or a line of twelve syllables at the end (iambic hexameter). The rhyme scheme is - a b a b, b c b c, c. It was used by Byron for his *Child Harold*, by Keats for (*The Eve of St. Agnes* 1820), by Shelley for *The Revolt of Islam* and *Adonais* (1821), and by Tennyson for *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832). The following example is from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*:  
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 Directs her course unto one certaine coast,

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*Some of many a summer wandle and tide,  
 Just when it her winged speed is let and crost,  
 And she her scullie on surging surges tost;  
 As making many a barge, and many a bay,  
 Still without war, we both her compass lost:  
 Right so it fares with me in this long way,  
 Whose course as often staid, yet never is astray.*

**Villanelle** (The word *villanelle* derives from the Italian *villanella*, referring to a rustic song or dance, and which comes from *villano*, meaning peasant or villen) is a nineteen-line poetic form consisting of five tercets followed by a quatrain. There are two refrains and two repeating rhymes, with the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately until the last stanza, which includes both repeated lines. The villanelle is an example of a fixed verse form. The word derives from Latin, then Italian, and is related to the initial subject of the form being the pastoral. "Do not go gentle into that good night" by Dylan Thomas is probably the best-known villanelle in English.

**Sestina**: The sestina has six six-line stanzas. The final words of the initial stanza are repeated in each subsequent stanza by using the last word in the previous stanza to end the first line, then the first line of the previous stanza, the second-to-last line, the second line, the third-to-last line, and the third. Six repetitions results in using every combination of last lines. Most sestinas end with a three line closing stanza, where all six words are used in any order (three at the end of the line and three in the middle of the lines).

**Sonnet**: Sonnets are a fourteen line form, often broken into two parts: an octave and a sestet. (Eight lines and six lines, respectively) Some sonnets are further broken into two quatrains and two tercets. There are two common rhyme schemes: the Italian or Petrarchan, abbaabba cdecde (where the three rhymes of the final sestet can come in any order) and the English or Shakespearean, ababededefeg. Generally, sonnets in English use iambic pentameter. Though other line lengths are possible, the lines should be consistent. Sonnets usually have a *volta* or turn at the beginning of the sestet, where a contrast is introduced. A strong conclusion in the final two lines often resolves the differences.



The Italian or Petrarchan sonnet is divided into an octave or octet (eight lines) rhyming abbaabba and a sestet rhyming edecde or some variation (for example edecde). Very often this type of sonnet develops two sides of a question or a problem and a solution, one in the octave and, after a turn often introduced by 'but', 'yet' or a similar conjunction, another in the sestet. In the following sonnet the speaker laments his inability to serve God on account of his blindness in the octave, but in the sestet takes courage again from the thought that God will not expect more of him than he can do and that his best servitude is to bear his lot in patience. Milton varies the form slightly by placing the turn ("but") in the last line of the octave.

*When I consider how my light is spent  
Ere half my day, in this dark world and wide,  
And that one talent which is death to hide  
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
My true account, lest he returning chide;  
"Doth God exact day-labor, light denied?"  
I fondly ask; but patience to prevent  
That murmur, soon replies, "God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts; who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly: Thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait."*

(Milton, *On My Blindness*)

The English or Shakespearean sonnet usually falls into three quatrains and one final couplet. The rhyme pattern is most commonly abab ede efef gg. In the English sonnet the turn often occurs in the concluding couplet, which operates rather like a punch line, as in the following example. The first twelve lines lament the all-powerful and destructive influence of time, but the couplet ventures to express some hope that writing poetry might in fact overcome this and preserve the poet's love forever.

*Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea  
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power;  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out*

Against the wreckful siege of battering days,  
 When rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
 Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?  
 O fearful meditation! where, alack,  
 Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?  
 Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?  
 Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
 O, none, unless, this miracle have might  
 That in black ink my love may still shine bright.  
 (Shakespeare, Sonnet 65)

An important variant of the English sonnet is the *Spenserian sonnet* which links the quatrains with rhymes: abab bcbe cded ee.

Unrighteous Lord of love, what law is this,  
 That me thou makest thus tormented be:  
 The whiles she lordeth in licentious blisse  
 Of her freewill, scorning both thee and me.  
 See how the Tyranesse doth joy to see  
 The huge massacres which her eyes do make:  
 And humbled harts brings captives unto thee,  
 That thou of them mayst mightie vengeance take.  
 But her proud hart doe thou a little shake  
 And that high look, with which she doth comptroll  
 All this worlds pride, bow to a baser make,  
 And al her faults in thy black booke enroll,  
 That I may laugh at her in equall sort,  
 As she doth laugh at me and makes my pain her sport.  
 (Spenser, *Amoretti*, Sonnet 10)

Note:

Couplet - Two Lines Stanza

Tercet/ **Terza Rima**: Three lines Stanza

Quatrain: Four lines Stanza

Sestet: Six lines stanza

Rime Royal: Seven lines stanza

Octave: Eight lines stanza

Spenserian stanza: Nine lines stanza



**FATHERS/PIONEERS/FOUNDERS IN LITERATURE**

Father of English Poetry (Literature): Geoffrey Chaucer  
Father of English Comedy: Nicholas Udall  
Father of English Essay: Francis Bacon  
Father of English Drama: Christopher Marlowe  
Father of English Novel: Henry Fielding  
Father of Modern Drama: Henric Ibsen  
Father of Science Fiction: H.G. Wells  
Father of American Literature: Mark Twain  
Father of Regional Novel: Thomas Hardy  
Father of Regional Novel (India): R.K. Narayan  
Father of Modernity in Indian-English Poetry: Nissim Ezekiel  
Father of English Criticism: John Dryden  
Father of African English literature: Chinua Achebe  
Father of Essay: Michel de Montaigne  
Father of Comedy: Aristophanes  
Father of Greek Tragedy: Aeschylus  
Structuralism: Ferdinand De Saussure  
Deconstruction: Jacques Derrida  
Oxford Movement: John Keble  
Kailyard School: James M Barrie  
Metaphysical Poetry: John Donne  
Blank Verse: Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (*Aeneid* translation)  
Free Verse: Walt Whitman  
Sonnets (English): Sir Thomas Wyatt

**NOTE:**

1. The title of "the father of English prose" has been assigned to several different men, including King Alfred the Great, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir John Mandeville and John Wycliffe. Bacon is also known as the father of Modern English Prose.
2. *Free verse* (verse libre) in English first appeared in the 1380s in the John Wycliffe translation of the *Psalms*.