

CHOOSING YOUR POETIC FORM

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There are two main categories that we use to define poems. A poem either follows a structured (fixed verse) or unstructured (free verse) form.

A. Structured Forms

Many poets approach the act of writing by following a strict, well-defined set of rules associated with a structured form of poetry. Structured forms can give poets both direction and a challenge. Although some of these styles can be seen as “old-fashioned”, they are a great place to start writing poetry.

- **Villanelle**

The villanelle form contains 6 stanzas, a strict rhyme scheme, and quite a bit of repetition. You may have encountered villanelles in school, if you studied Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” (1951). Although this form can be difficult to follow given its many rules, if you like puzzles and are finding it difficult to come up with ideas, this may be a good option.

Tips and tricks for getting started:

- a) Check out the style requirements at the [Academy of American Poets](#) and see if they peak your interest.
- b) If you’re struggling with an idea, take a word and put it into a rhyming dictionary. List all of the associated words that rhyme and see if these spark any ideas. If you find less than 7 words that could fit in the same poem, try a different word.

Look up “Mad Girl’s Love Song” by Sylvia Plath (1953) and “Alzheimer’s Villanelle” by Leontia Flynn (2017) for other interesting examples of the form.

- **Sonnet**

There are two forms of sonnets: the more common Shakespearean sonnet and the less popular Italian sonnet. The Shakespearean form contains 14 lines, which are split into 3 quatrains and a couplet. You may be familiar with at least one of the 154 sonnets Shakespeare composed. This form can be good, if you like rhyming but don’t like the repetition required for a villanelle, or if you want to write a medium-length poem.

Tips and tricks for getting started:

- a) Check out style requirements and writing tips outlined by "[How to write a sonnet](#)".
- b) Read a few sonnets so you can really find the sound of the meter. Sonnets are a form that sound “right” when the stressed and unstressed syllables add up to the correct iambic pentameter. If you’re struggling with the meter, the best way to understand how it works is research.

To read a twenty-first century example of a Shakespearean sonnet, check out “As Is” by Nicholas Friedman, or [Grossman's article](#) which features 5 pop songs converted into sonnet form, including Ariana Grande’s “Problem” and Will Smith’s “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air”.

- **Haiku**

Originally written in Japanese, the English equivalent of a haiku is a form you’ve likely come across, whether from watching *Avatar: The Last Airbender* or reading Ezra Pound. This poem is only 3 lines, with 5 syllables in the first, then 7, then 5. As this is a very short form with fewer formal requirements (no rhyming or repetition necessary!), it can be a good way to start writing. Most haikus revolve around nature themes, so this is a great form if you like being outside.

Tips and tricks for getting started:

- a) Check out the style requirements and history of haikus at [Poetry Foundation \(haiku\)](#).
- b) The length of haikus can be a bit of a disadvantage when submitting assignments, as there is less on the page to mark. If you want to work with a haiku for a class, consider submitting a set of haikus on a linked theme or topic.

To read recent examples of haikus, look up any of Gabriel Rosenstock’s Irish-language haikus or visit the [Irish Haiku Society](#) website where they publish a variety of English-language haikus.

- **Sestina**

A sestina is one of the most complicated poetry forms without rhyming. Sestinas contain 6 stanzas of 6 lines each and a final tercet. This form is perfect for someone who really enjoys wordplay (as there is a lot of repetition and it can be good to choose words that have multiple meanings). Sestinas can also be fun if you already have part of a poem (at least 6 lines) and don’t know where to go next with it.

Tips and tricks for getting started:

- a) Check out the style requirements at [Poetry Foundation \(sestina\)](#).
- b) If you do have a first stanza, take your end words and lay them out in the proper order for the next stanza, and try to work backwards to fill in the lines.
- c) Consider using a theme that works for a lot of repetition, such as seasons, technology, or your own daily routine.

For examples of a sestina, check out [Jason Schneiderman's](#) "The Buffy Sestina" where he turns an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* into poetry, or "Two Lorries" by Seamus Heaney (1996).

- **Other Structured Forms to Consider**

If none of these forms strike your fancy, consider trying:

- a) For the comedian: a limerick.
- b) For the musician: a ballad or an aubade.
- c) For the speedy writer: a tercet.
- d) For the whimsical writer: an acrostic.
- e) For the love poet: a ghazal.
- f) For those who enjoy a challenge: a pantoum.

B. Unstructured Forms

Now you might be thinking, "Wait! But I don't like following all these rules, they seem really stuffy for poetry. I want to write like my favourite poet, [insert Rupi Kaur, Tupac Shakur, Maya Angelou, Ocean Vuong, Allen Ginsberg or other]". Maybe your poem doesn't need or want end rhyme, pre-set repetition, or a specific number of stanzas. Maybe you prefer to make up your own unique form, or you want less strict expectations from your form (such as a spoken word poem). This might call for you to use an unstructured form, also known as free verse.

An unstructured form is exactly what it sounds like: a form that doesn't align to a particular poetic template, or, more particularly, doesn't use a set meter. However, under this heading, poems can be further classified based on certain loose formal elements or themes.

- **Free Verse**

Free verse is the catch-all term for unstructured poetry. Technically, prose poems (see below) are also free verse poems, as free verse style includes any poetry that doesn't align to a set meter. This is a great choice of form if you prefer poetry that sounds more conversational, and you enjoy using poetic devices such as imagery, repetition, alliteration and enjambment (the way a line breaks if not at the end of an idea) to create your poetry. Examples of free verse poems could be "Accent" by Rupi Kaur, "The Crickets Have Arthritis" by Shane Koyczan, or "And Soul" by Eavan Boland.

- **Prose Poem**

A prose poem might be a good choice for you if you're just beginning to write poetry or have more experience in writing fiction. Many prose poems are laid out on the page using full sentences and can be formatted on the page as one or more paragraphs. What differentiates a prose poem from fiction is often attention to detail, strong imagery, and a focus on the way the lines sound. Some

examples of prose poems include Claudia Rankine's "You are in the dark, in the car..." and "Ama de Casa" by Nidhi Zak.

- **Other Unstructured Forms to Consider**

Other types of poems that fall under free verse are often thematically assigned subcategories of poetry, such as elegies (poems about death; different from an 'elegiac stanza' which is structured) and pastoral poems (which focus on landscapes or rural existence).

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