

Style & Structure of Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets are written predominantly in a meter called iambic pentameter, a rhyme scheme in which each sonnet line consists of **ten syllables**.

The syllables are divided into **five pairs called iambs or iambic feet**. An iamb is a metrical unit made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. An example of an iamb would be **good BYE**. (It mimics a heartbeat.)

- A line of iambic pentameter flows like this:
- baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM.

Shall I / com PARE/ thee TO / a SUM / mer's DAY?
Thou ART / more LOVE / ly AND / more TEM / per ATE (Sonnet 18)

***Shakespeare's plays are also written primarily in iambic pentameter, but the lines are unrhymed and not grouped into stanzas.

Unrhymed iambic pentameter is called **blank verse**. It should be noted that there are also many prose passages in Shakespeare's plays and some lines of trochaic tetrameter, such as the Witches' speeches in Macbeth.

Sonnet Structure

There are **fourteen lines** in a Shakespearean sonnet.

The **first twelve lines** are divided into **three quatrains** with **four lines each**.

In the **three quatrains the poet establishes a theme or problem and then resolves it in the final two** lines, called the **couplet**.

SONNET 18

1. Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?(A)
2. Thou art more lovely and more temperate: (B)
3. Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, (A)
4. And summer's lease hath all too short a date: (B)
5. Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, (C)
6. And often is his gold complexion dimm'd; (D)
7. And every fair from fair sometime declines, (C)
8. By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd; (D)
9. But thy eternal summer shall not fade (E)
10. Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest; (F)
11. Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade, (E)
12. When in eternal lines to time thou growest: (F)
13. So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, (G)
14. So long lives this and this gives life to thee. (G)

SONNET 18 - PARAPHRASE

Shall I compare you to a summer's day?
You are more lovely and more constant:
Rough winds shake the beloved buds of May
And summer is far too short:
At times the sun is too hot,
Or often goes behind the clouds;
And everything beautiful sometime will lose its beauty,
By misfortune or by nature's planned out course.
But your youth shall not fade,
Nor will you lose the beauty that you possess;
Nor will death claim you for his own,
Because in my eternal verse you will live forever.
So long as there are people on this earth,
So long will this poem live on, making you immortal.

Sonnet Brainstorming

Below **make a list of five people or things you love**. If you write about a person, (s)he **must remain anonymous**.

Realize also that you can write about anything you love, such as your backpack, a pair of jeans, etc.

In the space provided, make a list of people or things you loathe. Again, the names of people may not be mentioned in your sonnet. And, again, things you loathe may be abstract, such as homework, school, Monday mornings, etc.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now, generate **a list of 10-15 descriptive words and phrases about one thing/person you love**.

Generate a list of 10-15 descriptive words and phrases about one thing/person you **loathe**.

Use the following rhyme scheme to compose a Shakespearean Love Sonnet. (You may choose to write this inside your Composition Notebook OR save it within this PDF.)

A
B
A
B
C
D
C
D
E
F
E
F
G
G

Use the following rhyme scheme to compose a Shakespearean Loathing Sonnet.
(You may choose to write this inside your Composition Notebook OR save it within this PDF.)

A

B

A

B

C

D

C

D

E

F

E

F

G

G

When you have completed your sonnets:

Check that each line contains five iambic feet or ten syllables and that each A line rhymes with the corresponding A line, each B line rhymes with the corresponding B line, and so forth. Check that the first half of your sonnet presents the topic or problem and the second half provides the solution. Provide a twist on line nine (*E). Finally, make sure your couplet (GG lines) rhyme.