

HOW TO WRITE A SONNET

The sonnet is a fourteen-line lyric poem. “Lyric” means the poem expresses a person’s emotions, as opposed to, say, telling a story. The sonnet form developed in Italy in the Renaissance, where the poet Petrarch used the form to write a famous series of poems about his love for Laura. Since Laura was married to someone else, Petrarch couldn’t tell her he loved her, so he used the sonnets as a way to express his secret feelings. Petrarch’s sonnets make elaborate and extravagant comparisons to describe Laura’s beauty and his own despair at loving someone who could not return his love.

The Renaissance English poet Thomas Wyatt introduced the sonnet form into English, both translating Petrarch’s sonnets into English and composing sonnets of his own in a style similar to Petrarch’s. By Shakespeare’s time, the style of Petrarchan love sonnets had become familiar enough for Shakespeare to parody or joke about. Shakespeare wrote the most famous series of sonnets in English, but he and other Elizabethan poets modified the nature of the poem, changing the Italian form to make it easier to compose a sonnet in English. Later English poets have used the sonnet to write about whatever was on their minds--from religious experiences to political affairs. Even though poetic styles have changed greatly since the Renaissance, the sonnet is still popular at the end of the Twentieth Century, five hundred years after it came into our language.

Form.

There are two main types of sonnets in English, the Italian or Petrarchan form, and the English or Shakespearean form. The difference starts in the rhyme scheme, but affects the kind of thoughts expressed in the poem.

The Italian sonnet is a two-part poem, consisting of one eight-line part, the octave, and one six-line part, the sestet. The rhymes in the octave are closely linked in the pattern abbaabba.

For example, here is the octave of the sonnet John Milton wrote when he turned twenty-three in 1631:

How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,	A
Stol'n on his wing my three and twentieth year!	B
My hasting days fly on with full career,	B
But my late spring no bud or blossom show'th.	A
Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth,	A
That I to manhood am arriv'd so near,	B
And inward ripeness doth much less appear,	B
That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.	A

The entire octave is devoted to posing a problem: Milton says he really hasn't accomplished much for his age, and despite his grown-up appearance, he isn't as mature as some other people (the timely-happy spirits) at the age of twenty-three. This is how the octave in an Italian sonnet is supposed to work: the octave sets up a problem of some sort, which the sestet then resolves. Here's the sestet in Milton's birthday poem:

Yet be it less or more, or soon or slow,	C
It shall be still in strictest measure ev'n	D
To that same lot, however mean or high,	E
Toward which Time leads me, and the will of Heav'n;	D
All is, if I have grace to use it so,	C
As ever in my great task-Master's eye.	E

Milton solved the problem by concluding that being a late bloomer is no problem; the passage of time is not important to God, who controls Milton's destiny, since all time is eternity ("as ever") to God, Milton's great task-Master.

The rhyme scheme in the sestet is not as strict as that in the octave, and varies greatly from poem to poem.

The Italian sonnet, especially the octave, demands that the poet use a lot of words that end with the same rhyme. For instance, four lines have to end with the "a" rhyme, and four with the

“b” rhyme. This is harder in English than in Italian, because our language has fewer words that rhyme with each other. Shakespeare modified the sonnet form to require fewer words with the same rhyme, but in doing so, he also modified the kind of meaning or argument that the poem would convey. Shakespeare’s rhyme scheme uses three groups of four lines, or quatrains, and one concluding group of two lines, or a couplet. Rather than posing a single problem and solving it, this organization lends itself to a three-part argument and a conclusion, or maybe three illustrations of the same problem, and a comment on the problem. Here’s the three-illustration type:

Sonnet 73

That time of year thou mayst in me behold	A
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang	B
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,	A
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.	B
In me thou see’st the twilight of such day	C
As after sunset fadeth in the west;	D
Which by and by black night doth take away,	C
Death’s second self that seals up all in rest.	D
In me thou see’st the glowing of such fire,	E
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,	F
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,	E
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.	F
This thou perceiv’st, which makes thy love more strong,	G
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.	G

Shakespeare gives three illustrations of what’s bothering him: he feels old and exhausted. He compares himself to the season of winter, to the twilight of the day, and to a dying fire that will be choked by the ashes of the wood that once fed it. Rather than devoting a whole sestet to resolving his problem, Shakespeare has only two lines left to comment on his problem. He quickly notes that his friend loves him all the more because he sees Shakespeare will not be

around forever. This is called an epigrammatic close, because the last couplet has to be so dense and pithy.

Meter.

Most English sonnets use lines made up of five groups of syllables, known as “feet.” The foot commonly used is the “iamb”, which consists of one weak syllable followed by one strong syllable. Since there are five iambs in a line, the meter is called “iambic pentameter.” We’ve already seen some good examples:

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Or

That I to manhood am arrived so near

Iambic pentameter gives a long enough line so that the poem doesn’t sound sing-song, yet is not so long that we lose track of the rhymes. You will notice that many of the sonnets have some irregularities in the meter. Perhaps one of the feet might have the strong syllable first or even two strong syllables. For instance, “Bare ruined choirs” would probably not be read pronouncing “bare” as a weak syllable. This is nothing to worry about, and, in fact, a little variation from the established meter can lend importance to a particular line.

Subject matter.

As we’ve seen, the sonnet started out as a love poem, often portraying hopeless love for a lady who would never return the poet’s love. There were conventional subjects, such as elaborately cataloguing the lady’s beautiful traits or offering to immortalize the lady by writing poems about her. By the time Shakespeare wrote his sonnets, these subjects had become so trite that he was able to use their very triteness to make a poem:

Sonnet 130

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:
I grant I never saw a goddess go,--
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.
 And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
 As any she belied with false compare.

Shakespeare's joke is in pointing out how excessive other sonnet writers' comparisons have been in describing a real woman. Parody, or making a joke by imitating the form of a poem with an unsuitable subject, would be an easy place for a beginning sonnet writer to start. Do you love your dog or cat? Could you catalog her qualities the way Petrarchan poets catalogued their mistresses' beauties? Is her barking like music, her breath like perfume, etc.?

After the Elizabethan age, sonnet writers began using the sonnet form for many subjects other than love poems. John Milton used the form to work through his frustration at going blind during the prime of his life.

Sonnet XIX

When I consider how my light is spent
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide¹
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent

¹Milton refers to the parable in which a slothful servant entrusted with a talent (a coin) buries the talent instead of investing it and earns only his master's condemnation. Matthew xxv, 26.

To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest he returning chide,
“Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?”
I fondly² 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 oe’r land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.”

Milton starts the poem with a bitter expression of anger with God for denying him eyesight. The octave climaxes with Milton asking God a sarcastic question-- which Milton knows is very dangerous ground and which shows us that Milton is almost out of control. He uses the sestet to work through his anger by trying to see himself through God’s eyes as part of God’s plan. This poem shows how the sonnet can play a therapeutic role as the poet first expresses a powerful emotion in the octave, then reflects on that emotion in the sestet.

John Keats used the sonnet form to say how he felt when he read a poem that moved him. Keats couldn’t read Greek, and when he finally found a good translation of Homer, this is how he felt:

On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer

Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies

²Foolishly.

When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific³-- and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise--
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats doesn't really mean that he has traveled extensively, but rather that he has read a lot of wonderful poetry, which he compares to lands held in fealty to Apollo, the god of poetry. Keats first sets up the comparison between poetry and geography in the octave. His sestet continues the comparison but by adding the new element of discovery-- he has just seen something as boundless and full of possibility as the Pacific was to the first Europeans who saw it. His convincing portrayal of the amazement of those early explorers is all we need to show what he thinks of Homer. Have you ever had the experience of being taken by surprise by something wonderful-- a book, a piece of music, maybe the feeling of skiing or flying in an airplane? Can you compare that feeling to something else?

Conclusion.

Once you have the kernel of an idea for a poem, the sonnet form itself can help you develop that idea into an octave and sestet, or quatrains and a couplet. Most lyric poems work by developing comparisons, or metaphors, to describe intangible feelings by bringing to mind tangible images. The sonnet form encourages you to go beyond describing your feelings by providing you a space for commenting on the images or feelings you have evoked in the first part of your poem.

Scorn not the Sonnet; Critic, you have frowned,

³Keats mistakenly thought Cortez discovered the Pacific ocean, when it was really Balboa. It's a poem, not a history lesson.

Mindless of its just honours; with this key
Shakespeare unlocked his heart; the melody
Of this small lute gave ease to Petrarch's wound;
A thousand times this pipe did Tasso sound;
With it Camoens soothed an exile's grief;
The Sonnet glittered a gay myrtle leaf
Amid the cypress with which Dante crowned
His visionary brow; a glow-worm lamp,
It cheered mild Spenser, called from Faery-land
To struggle through dark ways; and when a damp
Fell round the path of Milton, in his hand
The Thing became a trumpet, whence he blew
Soul-animating strains-- alas, too few!

William Wordsworth, 1827