

NOTES ON SONNET FORM

SONNET

A *fourteen-line* poem
in *iambic pentameter*
that follows a strict *rhyme scheme*.

IAMBIC PENTAMETER

pentameter: five feet

foot: one stressed syllable plus one or more unstressed syllables in a repeating pattern

iambic: an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: $\cup \ /$

IAMBIC WORDS

$\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$
belief arise defend prepare conceive

IAMBIC PENTAMETER LINES

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Shakespeare, Sonnet 18

$\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$
Shall I | compare | thee to | a sum | mer's day

When I consider how my light is spent. John Milton

$\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$ $\cup \ /$
When I | consid | er how | my light | is spent

IAMBIC VARIATIONS

A FEMININE ENDING

The line *ends* with an extra, unstressed syllable.

A woman's face with Nature's own hand painted Shakespeare, Sonnet 20

 ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘
A wo | man's face | with Na | ture's own | hand painted

He straight perceived himself to be my lover. Barnfield, Sonnet 11

 ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘
He straight | perceived | himself | to be | my lover.

AN INITIAL STRESS

The line *starts* with a single, stressed syllable followed by an *anapestic foot*

(two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable: ˘ ˘ ˘)

Seeing the game from him escaped away Spenser, Sonnet 67

 ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘
See | ing the game | from him | escaped | away

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for you Donne, Holy Sonnet 14

 ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘
Bat | ter my heart, | three-per | soned God; | for you

ITALIAN SONNET RHYME SCHEME

Octave 8 lines with 2 rhymes { A / B }	A	A	<i>octave</i> usually follows one of two set patterns. <i>sestet</i> may follow several different patterns. <i>turn (or volta)</i> occurs on 9th line	
	B	B		
	B	A		
	A	B		
	A	A		
	B	B		
	B	A		
	A	B		
Sestet 6 lines with 2 (or 3) rhymes { c / d / e }	c	c	c	
	d	d	d	
	e	c	d	
	c	d	c	
	d	c	e	
	e	d	e	

Dear, cherish this and with it my soul's will,	A
Nor for it ran away do it abuse.	B
Alas, it left poor me your breast to choose	B
As the blest shrine where it would harbor still.	A
Then favor show and not unkindly kill	A
The heart which fled to you, but do excuse	B
That which for better did the worse refuse,	B
And pleased I'll be, though heartless my life spill.	A
But if you will be kind and just indeed,	c
Send me your heart, which in mine's place shall feed	c
On faithful love to your devotion bound.	d
There shall it see the sacrifices made	e
Of pure and spotless love, which shall not fade	e
While soul and body are together found.	d

— Mary Wroth, Sonnet 3

ENGLISH SONNET RHYME SCHEME

	A
	B
	A
	B
	C
Three Quatrains 4 lines with 2 alternating rhymes	D
	C
	D
	E
	F
	E
	F
Closing Couplet a pair of rhyming lines	g
	g

Dear, why should you command me to my rest	A
When now the night doth summon all to sleep?	B
Methinks this time becometh lovers best;	A
Night was ordained together friends to keep.	B
How happy are all other living things	C
Which, though the day disjoin by several flight,	D
The quiet evening yet together brings,	C
And each returns unto his love at night.	D
O thou, that art so courteous else to all,	E
Why shouldst thou, Night, abuse me only thus,	F
That every creature to his kind doth call	E
And yet 'tis thou dost only sever us.	F
Well could I wish it would be ever day	g
If when night comes you bid me go away.	g

— Michael Drayton, *Idea* 37

SPENSERIAN SONNET RHYME SCHEME

	A
	B
	A
	B
	B
Three Quatrains (with interlocking rhymes)	C
	B
	C
	C
	D
	C
	D
Closing Couplet	e
	e

My hungry eyes through greedy covetize,	A
Still to behold the object of their pain,	B
With no contentment can themselves suffice:	A
But having pin and having not complain.	B
For lacking it they cannot life sustain,	B
And having it they gaze on it the more:	C
In their amazement like Narcissus vain	B
Whose eyes him starved: so plenty make me poor.	C
Yet are mine eyes so fillèd with the store	C
Of that fair sight, that nothing else they brook,	D
But loath the thing which they did like before,	C
And can no more endure on them to look.	D
All this world's glory seemeth vain to me,	e
And all their show but shadows, saving she.	e

— Edmund Spenser, Sonnet 35