

Shakespeare's Sonnets

What is a sonnet?

A sonnet is a 14-line verse written to a very particular pattern and rhythm. It is written in four parts - three groups of four lines known as 'quatrains', and a closing rhyming couplet (two lines that rhyme with each other).

The lines themselves also have a set pattern – they all have TEN syllables.

On top of that, they must have pairs of syllables (not always in the same word) where the second syllable is stressed and the first is unstressed: just like the words compare, decline, possess, forlorn, release.

So the pattern of the words in each line goes: unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed.

It gives each line a drive and rhythm when you say it. The syllables and the pairs of sounds all together in a line is called an 'iambic pentameter'.



Here is the pattern shown with Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 - the letters show which lines rhyme.

| | Rhyme pattern | |
|-----------------|---------------|---|
| First quatrain | a | Shall I compare thee to a Summer's day? |
| | b | Thou art more lovely and more temperate: |
| | a | Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, |
| | b | And Summer's lease hath all too short a date: |
| Second quatrain | c | Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines, |
| | d | And oft' is his gold complexion dimm'd; |
| | c | And every fair from fair sometime declines, |
| | d | By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd: |
| Third quatrain | e | But thy eternal Summer shall not fade. |
| | f | Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest; |
| | e | Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade, |
| | f | When in eternal lines to time thou growest: |
| Couplet | g | So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, |
| | g | So long lives this, and this gives life to thee. |

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Writing your own sonnet

So, following the rules you now know, here is a grid to help you write your own sonnet.

Good luck – and to use some of Shakespeare's phrases – sonnet writing is not for the 'faint-hearted', but it doesn't take 'forever and a day'. So, 'break the ice', be 'fancy-free' and 'the game is afoot'.



This grid has extra help as it is also split into syllables.

| | Rhyme pattern | (Each line must contain TEN syllables where the even numbered syllables are stressed.) | | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| First quatrain | a | | | | | | | | | | |
| | b | | | | | | | | | | |
| | a | | | | | | | | | | |
| | b | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Second quatrain | c | | | | | | | | | | |
| | d | | | | | | | | | | |
| | c | | | | | | | | | | |
| | d | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Third quatrain | e | | | | | | | | | | |
| | f | | | | | | | | | | |
| | e | | | | | | | | | | |
| | f | | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Couplet | g | | | | | | | | | | |
| | g | | | | | | | | | | |

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|-----------------|---------------|--|
| First quatrain | a | |
| | b | |
| | a | |
| | b | |
| Second quatrain | c | |
| | d | |
| | c | |
| | d | |
| Third quatrain | e | |
| | f | |
| | e | |
| | f | |
| Couplet | g | |
| | g | |