

On Writing an Original Sonnet

If you're writing the most familiar kind of sonnet, the Shakespearean, the rhyme scheme is this:

Every A rhymes with every A, every B rhymes with every B, and so forth. You'll notice this type of sonnet consists of three quatrains (that is, four consecutive lines of verse that make up a stanza or division of lines in a poem) and one couplet (two consecutive rhyming lines of verse).

Ah, but there's more to a sonnet than just the structure of it. A sonnet is also an argument — it builds up a certain way. And how it builds up is related to its metaphors and how it moves from one metaphor to the next. In a Shakespearean sonnet, the argument builds up like this:

- **First quatrain:** An exposition of the main theme and main metaphor.
- **Second quatrain:** Theme and metaphor extended or complicated; often, some imaginative example is given.
- **Third quatrain:** Peripeteia (a twist or conflict), often introduced by a "but" (very often leading off the ninth line).
- **Couplet:** Summarizes and leaves the reader with a new, concluding image.

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

One of Shakespeare's best-known sonnets, Sonnet 18, follows this pattern:

*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.*

*Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed;*

*But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest.*

*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

The argument of Sonnet 18 goes like this:

- **First quatrain:** Shakespeare establishes the theme of comparing "thou" (or "you") to a summer's day, and why to do so is a bad idea. The metaphor is made by comparing his beloved to summer itself.
- **Second quatrain:** Shakespeare extends the theme, explaining why even the sun, supposed to be so great, gets obscured sometimes, and why everything that's beautiful decays from beauty sooner or later. He has shifted the metaphor: In the first quatrain, it was "summer" in general, and now he's comparing the sun and "every fair," every beautiful thing, to his beloved.

- **Third quatrain:** Here the argument takes a big left turn with the familiar "But." Shakespeare says that the main reason he won't compare his beloved to summer is that summer dies — but she won't. He refers to the first two quatrains — her "eternal summer" won't fade, and she won't "lose possession" of the "fair" (the beauty) she possesses. So he keeps the metaphors going, but in a different direction.

And for good measure, he throws in a negative version of all the sunshine in this poem — the "shade" of death, which, evidently, his beloved won't have to worry about.

- **Heroic couplet:** How is his beloved going to escape death? In Shakespeare's poetry, which will keep her alive as long as people breathe or see. This bold statement gives closure to the whole argument — it's a surprise.

And so far, Shakespeare's sonnet has done what he promised it would! See how tightly this sonnet is written, how complex yet well organized it is? Try writing a sonnet of your own.

Poets are attracted by the grace, concentration, and, yes, the sheer difficulty of sonnets. You may never write another sonnet in your life, but this exercise is more than just busywork. It does all the following:

- Shows you how much you can pack into a short form.
- Gives you practice with rhyme, meter, structure, metaphor, and argument.
- Connects you with one of the oldest traditions in English poetry — one still vital today.

Source: <http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/writing-a-sonnet.html>

Write your own sonnet!

You know the rhythm.

If you're a native English speaker, the chances are good that you've read more sonnets than any other form of poetry. The 14-line, 10-syllable-per-line structure is embedded in your memory, as is the *ababcdcd-efefgg* rhyme scheme. Because it's familiar to you, writing a sonnet may come quite naturally.

When thinking about how to approach your first sonnet, don't worry about developing true rhymes and consistent rhythm for your work. Incorporating slant rhyme (similar, but not identical, sounds) or occasionally repeating the same word will make the task so much easier, as will the use of an irregular rhythm. As you're getting acquainted with writing a sonnet, try keeping to 9-11 syllables per line, forming half of those syllables into iambic feet (an unstressed syllable, followed by a stressed syllable). And if you're a perfectionist who wants to get the sonnet as tight as those of the traditional sonneteers, write a draft first and go back and revise your language accordingly.

Now that we've loosened the rules on the form of the sonnet, look to an expert sonneteer like Christina Rossetti as a guide to how to work the content of a sonnet. Rossetti was half of one of the 19th century's great family writing duos (her brother, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was a poet and translator). Christina Rossetti and Elizabeth Barrett Browning brought women's desires and emotions into the sonnet, adding further depth to the form.

Set your intent.

In "Remember," Rossetti anticipates her own death, and clearly conveys a wistful yet romantic tone as she starts writing:

*Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by the hand,
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.*

Her syllable count is impeccable – 10 syllables per line as she twists the rhyme scheme into *abbaabba-cddc-gg*. Yet, it's easy to lose count as she sweeps us into the poem.

To follow the logic of Rossetti's sonnet, view the first quatrain as establishing a problem or motive for the poem. Here, Rossetti wants her reader to remember her while also demonstrating the difficulty of letting go. This has the mark of a good sonnet, in that it takes a course dictated by logic and emotion.

Further your motive.

Rossetti plants pauses – catches of breath – in the next quatrain, while increasing the level of romance and allure.

*Remember me when no more, day by day,
You tell me of our future that you planned:
Only remember me; you understand
It will be too late to counsel then or pray.*

Is she talking about her own demise? Or about a love not allowed to blossom? Another step in writing a sonnet – constant forward movement – ripples through her work.

Turn the core.

Rossetti provides the classic sonnet closing, while keeping the poem deeply personal for all 14 lines – a vital ingredient in the sonneteer's recipe.

*Yet if you should forget me for a while
And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.*

In the beginning of the sestet, Rossetti twists the core of the poem – that of remembrance – to forgetting. She turns us toward the finish by again displaying the immediate emotion of the grieving heart, but the more detached, longer vision of a life worth remembering. While the opening octave of the sonnet is dedicated towards encouraging an immediate remembering, the sestet provides a twist to the original intent, and remembering is considered in a fresh, altered light.

As you begin writing your own sonnet, remember to use your octave to express your motive for the poem, with the closing sestet providing a reconsideration and resolution of that intent. Many sonneteers use this initial octave to display a problem, and then they use the closing sestet to resolve this issue. Whether you choose to write about love, religion, politics, or philosophy, the logical form of the sonnet will help fuel your emotional meditation.

Source: http://www.webexhibits.org/poetry/explore_famous_sonnet_make.html

Practical Steps to Writing a Sonnet

Plan it! Do your prewriting.

Shakespearean Sonnet: Approach A

(will yield three different metaphors—one for each quatrain)

1. Pick a topic for your poem.
2. Create a simile for it.
Ex. Jealousy is like a porcupine.
3. How? Extend the metaphor by brainstorming a list of characteristics of either one of the items.
Ex. Porcupine
 - a. Solitary animal
 - b. Sharp Quills
 - c. Uses them in defense
 - d. Longest quills on its rump
 - e. Body heat makes the barbs expand and they become even more deeply embedded in the animal's skin.
 - f. Nocturnal

4. Now make specific connections between the characteristics of the one to characteristics of the other.

Example:

Porcupine	Jealousy
Solitary animal	Most vulnerable when alone—no reality checks from others
Sharp Quills	Words like sharp barbs
Uses them in defense	Attack with them when threatened by another encroaching on our territory
Longest quills on its rump	(not going there)
Body heat makes the barbs expand and they become even more deeply embedded in the animal's skin.	The angry heat of jealousy embeds them deeper under the skin, expanding them to make extraction almost impossible (exceptionally painful).
Nocturnal	Jealous thoughts seek us out at night to feed on our insecurities.

5. Repeat steps 2, 3, and 4, creating a different metaphor this time.
6. Repeat step 5.

Potential Topics

- Hope
- Despair
- Birth
- Death
- Dating
- Marriage
- Divorce
- Racism or prejudice
- Jealousy
- Nature (be specific)
- Historic battle
- Depression
- A specific problem

Shakespearean Sonnet: Approach B: Extend one metaphor throughout the entire poem with each quatrain developing one specific aspect of the comparison.

Important!

- Develop your sonnet to show a progression of images/metaphors—decide how you are going to order them, and have them build to a climax.
- Resolve it, comment on it, etc. in the heroic couplet. Look at the sonnets in your packet to see how other writers used the heroic couplet to bring effective closure to their sonnets.

To Write a Petrarchan Sonnet:

- Use the same prewriting techniques but with different organization.
- Consider the structure of the Petrarchan sonnet carefully before starting:
 - The **octave** presents the topic and some question, problem, situation, issue, thoughts about it, etc.
 - The **volta** is the turn between the octave and the sestet.
 - The **sestet** answers the question, solves the problem, resolves the situation, comments on the issue (perhaps ironically), etc.
- Use the steps on the front to brainstorm metaphors and make concrete connections between your topic and the thing/s to which you compare it.
- In the octave you may use a progression of different metaphors or extend one throughout, developing tension before the volta.
- How are you going to turn (volta) in the sestet? What change in tone, thought, imagery, etc. will you develop in the sestet? How will you bring closure to your poem?