

**EXTERNAL SCAFFOLDING**  
(apart from meaning)

The “English” or Shakespearean” sonnet consists of 14 **lines** of **iambic pentameter** (you can easily speak one line in one breath) with the line end-rimes in a pattern of abab-cddc : efef-gg. Each set of four lines is a **quatrain** and the last two lines are called a **couplet**, indented in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. The first two quatrains is the **octave**; the last six lines is the **sestet**.

An **iamb** is a set of two syllables the first of which is unstressed and the second stressed. **Pentameter** is a line of five **feet**. (A unit of rhythm in poetry is called a foot from poetry’s early association with dance; a line of poetry is like a measure of music.) Thus a line of iambic pentameter sounds

da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM**.

To avoid monotony and to support or illustrate the meaning, most sonnets vary the rhythm. A natural pause within a line is called a **caesura**, in which case the rhythm might be indicated by a vertical slash (/) in scansion:

x / x / x / x / x / x /  
*All this the world well knows; yet none knows well*  
(Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129:13)

A line with a complete unit of meaning or grammatical boundary is **end-stopped**. If it continues to the next line, it is **enjambéd**.

Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, is generally credited with developing the usual English rime scheme (above) which Shakespeare adopted in most of his sonnets. It employs seven end-rime sounds; the Italian sonnet uses fewer in two quatrains: abba-abba for the octave and two **tercets** such as cde-cde or cdc-cdc. Edmund Spenser’s scheme was often abab-bcbc:cdcd-ee.

**INTERNAL STRUCTURES**  
(pattern of meaning)

Within the external sonnet form, William Shakespeare (WS) draws his themes in various ways.

**A.** The same idea is presented in three quatrains, each with a different metaphor, a different angle on the same theme, followed by a couplet, as in WS 73 (**dying day, dying year, dying fire, love now**) and my 30.



**B.** The octave presents a theme, the third quatrain summarizes it, and the couplet condenses it once again, as in WS 55 (**you live in my lines**) and my 15.



**C.** Often considered the normative internal structure, the matter in the octave undergoes a *volta*, a turn, in the sestet, as in WS 29 (**lonely, comforted**) and my 14.



**D.** Some sonnets expose their themes by beautifully meandering within the external form.

**THE VOLTA**

The *volta*, “turn,” is a feature of Italian (Petrarchan) sonnets in which, at line 9, a different perspective, voice, or tone is presented, often beginning with *Yet* or *But* or *While*. In Shakespeare, sometimes the *volta* isn’t made until the couplet.

This page is for those with a technical interest in the Shakespearean sonnet form.

**How to Read a Sonnet**  
in Shakespearean form  
which means reading aloud



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## What is a Sonnet?

Often about the experience of love, a sonnet (“little sound”) is usually a 14-line poem, in iambic pentameter rhythm — da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM** da **DUM**. The line end-rime scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet is *abab-cdcd : efef-gg*. Often a *volta*, a turn of thought, occurs after the 8th line.

DETAILS ON LAST PAGE.

A poem is not the way we ordinarily speak. W H Auden calls it a “verbal contraction”: —“A poem is a rite; hence its formal and ritualistic character. Its use of language is deliberately and ostentatiously different from talk.” Just as a dancer may beautifully and skillfully move across a space in ways beyond the usual gait, so the poet often employs words in strange ways.

The pleasure of poetry is, in part, seeing how the structure and the matter of the poem create each other — as I say explaining the cover of my book:

*The poetic form does not merely contain a sentiment as a glass contains water. Rather speak of the grail containing wine; the meaning of each is intensified by the other. In poetry the form and the sentiment are as intimately related as body and soul.*

The fixed form sets up each sonnet’s secret inner rules, and discovering how each contraction works within the 700-year tradition can be thrilling.

To be moved by a Beethoven symphony, you don’t have to

know about sonata allegro form. You don’t have to know how to score a gymnast when you see something amazing. You don’t have to be a horticulturist to appreciate a garden’s appeal. You don’t have to be able to paint to be awed by Velásquez. You don’t have to be a master chef to enjoy a delicious meal.

Still, knowing a little about an art form greatly enhances one’s pleasure. The devices of a sonnet can, in 14 lines, compress and reveal a world of meaning. *Art is the body language of the soul.*

The Hebrew Scripture presents God through sounds rather than images (forbidden in the Decalogue). God *spoke*, not *wrote*, to create the world. God’s voice may be heard many ways, including “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12).

The word *sonnet* derives from “little-sound,” so unspoken words on a page do not make a sonnet, which begins with sounds, even the groans through which the Spirit may plead for us (Romans 8:26-8). A sonnet is to be heard, not seen, just as a musical score is not realized until it is performed. (A particular example in my book is 13 “Cowboy Krishna Plays his Flute.”)

For me, writing a sonnet is like prayer. Specifically, the collect’s five parts lead me to sonnet structure C (next page), where the octave (1) invokes and (2) describes the Deity — and the sestet presents (3) the petition or praise. The concluding couplet may suggest the completion of (4) “in Christ, our Lord” and (5) “Amen.” The clearest example in my book is the controversial 118 “Collect.”

Of course most sonnets don’t call on God and some call on no one, but whatever the subject in sonnet structure C, the sense of shift (*volta*) from the octave to the sestet may parallel the sense of shift from collect (2) to (3). This shift is why I find writing a sonnet like praying.

*Something happens.* It is like describing someone and then speaking directly to him or her; or a shift, as when Jesus, in the final crisis, said, “May this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will” (Matthew 26:39).

## HOW TO READ A SONNET

0. Review the facing page. There is no right way to read a poem, only different ways.
1. How is the sonnet set in print? — Indentations and stanza breaks may be cues for the voice.
2. Which lines end with a complete unit of meaning (often one breath)? Capitalization and punctuation can also suggest how to breathe.
3. **Read the sonnet aloud**, perhaps several times, as you continue the next steps. A sonnet is a lyric, but read it dramatically. Vary your volume, speed, and pauses as the theme develops.
4. Relish the sound-play — repetition and contrasts in rhythm, phrasing, alliteration (consonant sounds), assonance (vowel sounds), words, internal rimes (but don’t overplay end rimes).
5. Do you find paronomasia — punning and word-play? (Because of pronunciation changes since Elizabethan English, we sometimes fail to spot them in Shakespeare, but many of mine are pretty obvious; for example, my 23 “Examination.”)
6. Are images and conceits (far-fetched comparisons) fresh and effective? How do they structure the poem?
7. Does the thought, speaker, situation, metaphor, or story-line change direction?
8. What theme or “thoughts of the heart” arise?
9. Where is theme’s center? Let the voice transform any information into the theme.
10. Is this sonnet a universe of meaning in a nutshell? How can that be displayed and conveyed through the voice?

See Vern Barnet’s *Thanks for Noticing: The Interpretation of Desire*, pages 31-48, for an explanation of general poetic devices and the sonnet form. The book is available from the KC Public Library and at local bookshops — see **VernBarnet.com**.  
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