Elements of Poetry: Rhyme, Meter, and Form

As an English major (or very invested student from another field), you are required to master the two worlds of writing: prose and poetry. Prose is easy enough; most of what we read every day takes this form. Your textbooks, novels, even the articles you read for news are all prose. Poetry, on the other hand, is different both in how we write and when we choose to write it. How often do we use poetry outside of an emotional or artful context? Not often. Because poetry is so much less familiar than prose, it may seem intimidating at first. But not to worry! When broken down, it really isn’t that bad.

This webtext offers a comprehensive resource on the essential elements of poetry: meter, rhyme, and form. Whether you use it to supplement your professor’s instructions or to explore the topic on your own, this article will teach you what you need to recognize, write, and analyze poetry.

Rhyme

Ask any student to contrast prose and poetry and they will probably mention the prevalence of rhyme in poetry. “Rhyme” is a name for an auditory (and sometimes visual) phenomena where sounds on the ends of or inside of words are similar.

Why use rhyme? Rhyme can serve as a memory aid and simply makes poetry more pleasurable to hear. What’s one reason children enjoy nursery rhymes? It’s right there in the name: rhymes!

Throughout early history, poetry was spoken orally and to others. Rhyme makes it easy to remember and easy to be repeated and passed on from generation to generation.

Although we usually think of rhyme as identical sounds occurring at the end of a word, there isn't just one type of rhyme; there are six. Here we will discuss the different types of rhyme and how they are used in poetry.

End Rhyme

The first kind of rhyme that will be discussed is called an end rhyme. An end rhyme is defined as a type of poetry that has words that end in a rhyme. For example;

Lilly and Jane were as close as they can be
They spent hours with each other under the tree

This rather simple type of rhyme is the most popular and most widely known. It is generally used in children's poetry books because it creates a rhythm that other types of rhyme can not do. Songwriters also use this type of rhyme frequently because it helps the audience remember the lyrics and songs tend to be catchier.

Internal Rhyme
**Internal rhyme** is when two words within the same line rhyme with each other. There are three types of internal rhyme:

- Two or more rhyming words occur within the same line
- Two or more rhyming words will appear in the middle of two separate lines or sometimes in more
- A word at the end of a line rhymes with one or more in the middle of the following line

An example of the three internal rhymes:

*Same line:*

He kicked the **ball** and took a **fall**

(Hiba Wilson, *original poem*)

“Once upon a midnight **drear**y, while I pondered, weak and **weary**”

(Edgar Allen Poe, *The Raven*)

*Separate line:*

After working a very long shift at the **store**/ Max does not think he can do his job any **more**

The fat cat was known all around **town**/ it was almost royalty, just without the **crown**

The sky looked oh so **blue**/ if it were to rain I hope it is not **true**

*Rhymes at the end of the word and in the middle:*

The new car was one of a **kind**/ Jane did not **mind** if her brother used it regularly

**Rich Rhymes**

**Rich Rhymes** (also called rime riche) are a type of rhyme that uses two different words that happen to sound the same. They are often spelled differently but sound like each other. Flour and flower sound like the same word when spoken out loud but when spelled they are have a completely different meaning. This is called a **homophone**. Some of these words might not be homophones depending on an individuals geographical region and accent/dialect.

There are many homophones in the English language, but here are just a few examples:

- Plain/Plane
- Gene/Jean
A line using rich rhyme would sound like this:

Pay is **higher** when there is greater competition to **hire** people

### Slant Rhyme

**Slant rhymes**, sometimes called half or lazy rhymes, use similar-sounding but not identical words to complete the rhyme. The two words must share a constant sound (such as “calm” and “on”) and almost rhyme but do not. Emily Dickinson is a master when it comes to slant rhymes. This type of rhyme did not become popular until the 20th century. In this short passage from her poem *Yeats's 'Easter 1916.'*, the use of slant rhyme is prevalent:

> 'I have met them at close of day  
> Coming with vivid **faces**  
> From counter or desk among grey  
> Eighteenth-century **houses**.' (1-4)

As shown above, “faces” and “houses” sound like they could rhyme but they do not.

### Eye Rhymes

Eye rhymes  and rhymes that use words that look the same but are pronounced differently. In the Last Rose of Summer by Thomas Moore, the words alone and gone are almost spelled identically and even look as if they can rhyme but when pronounced they do not.

> 'Tis the last rose of summer,  
> Left blooming **alone**;  
> All her lovely companions  
> Are faded and **gone**;

### Identical Rhyme

Lastly, an identical rhyme is a rhyme created by the repetition of a word. An example to showcase this type of rhyme is in Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could not Stop for Death”:
We paused before a House that seemed
    A Swelling of the **Ground**—
The Roof was scarcely visible—
The Cornice—in the **Ground**—

**Rhyme scheme**

is the repetition or pattern of rhyme within a poem. The use of the English alphabet (usually A, B, C, D and so forth) is used to mark the pattern of rhymes. The first set of lines that rhyme at the end of a poem are marked with the letter A, the second with B and the third with C. It keeps going until the pattern is over. In a poem with the rhyme scheme ABAB, the first and third line rhyme and the second and last line of the poem rhyme with each other. Another example would be the rhyme scheme ABCB. The second and last line of the poem rhyme whereas the first and the third line do not. The easiest way to explain this is using the A B A B C C example shown below:

```
I wandered lonely as a **cloud**
    That floats on high o'er vales and **hills**,
When all at once I saw a **crowd**
    A host of **golden** **daffodils**;
Beside the lake, beneath the **trees**,
    Fluttering and dancing in the **breeze**.
```

**A**

**B**

**C**

**Meter**

Thanks to William Shakespeare, most students who have taken an English class focusing on meter will recognize the words “iambic pentameter”. It’s an easy go-to phrase to sound like you know what you are talking about. But what does it mean? **Meter** is the rhythm of poetry; it is measured by stress and number of feet. A **foot** is a unit of two linked syllables in a line of poetry. Breaking down the words “iambic” and “pentameter”, we can get to the heart of the matter at hand.

An “iamb” is a type of foot in which the stress is unaccented then accented. The phrase “I see” follows this form. The “ic” is a suffix placed after a noun, such as “iamb”, that makes it an adjective. Other examples of this are “fantastic”, “magic”, and “hyperbolic”.
Looking at “pentameter”, the first part—penta—is the Greek word for “five”, as seen in the shape of a pentagon. It refers to how many feet are in a line. This leaves “meter”. Meter, as mentioned before, is the underlying rhythm of a poem, song, etc.

Thus “iambic pentameter” is a five footed line of syllables that are unstressed then stressed. Where can we find a good example of this? An astute student of Shakespeare would give you the line:

“But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?”

This line comes from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Here young Romeo speaks of his love in the poetic style of iambic pentameter.

**How to Mark**

When reading poetry, you can denote the stress of a word by marking it. A “/” represents stressed syllable, one with greater emphasis placed on it, and a “-” represents an unstressed syllable.

These are useful to know when reading through poetry or any text with meter. Try analyzing the following poem, looking for the stress of syllables (and even analyze for rhyme scheme if you feel up to it).

Twinkle twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are.
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.
Twinkle twinkle little star,
How I wonder what you are!

This is how you could mark the poem using the slashes and dashes method (the rhyme scheme is A A B B A A):

```
/ - / - / - / - /
Twinkle twinkle little star,
/ - / - / - / - /
How I wonder what you are.
/ - / - / - / - /
Up above the world so high,
/ - / - / - / - /
Like a diamond in the sky.
/ - / - / - / - /
Twinkle twinkle little star,
/ - / - / - / - /
How I wonder what you are!
```
Prosody

Marking poetry is nice, but why bother? Depending on how you have marked the poem, you can see what kind of poem it is. The line from Romeo and Juliet was iambic pentameter, but there are five other ways of stressing words in addition to iambic. They all make up the study of patterns of rhythm and sound in poetry, also known as Prosody. The types of feet stressors are as follows:

- Anapestic (unaccented/unaccented/ accented)
- Trochaic (accented/unaccented)
- Dactylic (accented/unaccented/unaccented)
- Spondaic (accented/ accented)
- Pyrrhic (unaccented/unaccented).

Here is a list of representative feet for each of the aforementioned feet stressors.

- - /  
  Anapestic: can we go?
/ -  
  Trochaic: goodbye
/ - -  
  Dactylic: look at me
/ /  
  Spondaic: I know
- -  
  Pyrrhic: to a

After choosing one of these stressors (different than the stress you feel trying to learn all of this), you then must denote how many feet are in the line. Feet range from one footed “monometer” to eight footed “octameter”. Anything more than eight is rarely seen. Romeo could have exclaimed, “she is lovely!” and spoken in trochaic dimeter. See the diagram below for a complete breakdown of how to name meter.
Use of Meter

Why did Shakespeare waste time making his lines fit into certain patterns of poetry? Why bother forming lines that have a nice rhythm? Typically it is easier to remember information when it has meter. We hear it differently and are able to store it for a longer in our accessible memory. A recent study done by Zumbansen, Peretz, and Hébert (2014) showed that patients undergoing speech therapy showed marked improvement when spoken to in speech that was melodic and had meter. This study supports the theory that meter affects the way we hear and take in information. Shakespeare knew this intuitively and that is why he bothered to make sure that his plays followed a nice meter. He wanted people to hear, enjoy, and remember.

And this is just the tip of the iceberg. So many people understood this. Meter can be seen everywhere- from nursery rhymes to pop music. Oral histories, such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were able to be passed down because stories set to rhythm are easier to remember than monologuing free verse. Shakespeare, nursery rhymes, and epic poems have obviously stood the test of time proving that meter has some effect over the listener. And who hasn’t lamented that they can remember every word to *High School Musical* but cannot remember the details of the Treaty of Paris for a test? It’s not that the content of *High School Musical* is more salient than that of any of the Treaties of Paris, but words set to meter tend to stick with us for longer. The video to the side here shows the breakdown of the classic nursery rhyme “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

*INSERT VIDEO HERE*

As you can see from the video, this nursery rhyme breaks down into trochaic trimeter.

Meter is not only important because it makes a piece more memorable; in certain instances, the stress of a phrase can change its entire meaning. The sentence, “I never said he stole my money” has a different meaning depending on which syllables get a “/” over them and which get a “−”.

```
/−−−−−−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−/−−−−−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−/−−−−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−/−−−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−/−−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−/−−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−−/−−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−−−/−−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−−−−/−−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−−−−−/−−−−
I never said he stole my money
−−−−−−−−−−/−−−
I never said he stole my money
```

Meter is very important. Learning how to identify certain types of prose as iambic pentameter or pyrrhic ceptometer and fully understanding why they are called what they are called are great skills to have moving forward in your college career.
Form

The form, or category, of a poem depends on a few factors, including the two elements discussed above: rhyme and meter. However, there are even more factors at play. The number of lines, the length of lines, the subject matter, and the style of the poem also determine form. In other words, both content (subject matter and style) and structure (rhyme, meter, stanza, line lengths) can define a poem. When reading this article, consider how both contribute to the definition of the poem form.

Most of the terms used so far are likely familiar to you, but there may be some in the body of this section that are new. Before we dive into these forms, here’s some quick vocabulary:

- **Stanza**: A set or grouping of lines in a poem

  This is a stanza (an octave, to be exact)

  I would not paint — a picture —
  I'd rather be the One
  It's bright Impossibility
  To dwell — delicious — on —
  And wonder how the fingers feel
  Whose rare — celestial — stir —
  Evokes so sweet a torment —
  Such sumptuous — Despair —

  I would not talk, like Cornets —
  I'd rather be the One
  Raised softly to the Ceilings —
  And out, and easy on —
  Through Villages of Ether —
  Myself endued Balloon
  By but a lip of Metal —
  The pier to my Pontoon —

  Nor would I be a Poet —
  It's finer — Own the Ear —
  Enamored — impotent — content —
  The License to revere,
  A privilege so awful
  What would the Dower be,
  Had I the Art to stun myself
  With Bolts — of Melody!

  (Emily Dickinson “348”)

- **Tercet**: A stanza of three lines
- **Quatrain**: A stanza of four lines
- **Sestet**: A stanza of six lines
- **Octave**: A stanza of eight lines

  These terms are very useful in describing structure. Think of a stanza as similar to the paragraphs you use for organization in prose writing.
There are many types of poem and if we listed them all, this article would go on for miles. In the interest of space (and not boring you to death!) we’ll list just a few of the more common ones with varying degrees of complexity. Note that new forms of poetry are created all the time; after you finish this article, can you think of a type of poem you might like to create?

**Couplet**

A couplet is often a part of a larger poem, but it can also be a poem by itself. As the name implies, a **couplet** is a pair of rhyming lines. Below is an example:

```
While the pretty bird *sings*,
The hawk spreads its *wings*.
```

That is a **“closed” couplet**; a couplet that forms a complete grammatical unit. In this case, a sentence. An **“open” couplet** does not form a sentence or independent clause and tends to be part of a poem rather than a standalone piece.

Though not a strict requirement, the two lines often have the same meter, or at least the same number of syllables. A **heroic couplet** is a couplet written in iambic pentameter; 18th century poet and thinker Alexander Pope wrote many of his famous witticisms in this format, like the one below:

```
“Good nature and good sense must ever join;
To err is human, to forgive, divine”
```

(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*)

The couplet is a purely structural form; you can write a couplet about anything from your favorite condiment to the starry night sky and still be within conventions.

**Haiku**

The haiku is a Japanese poem, often a favorite among non-poets because they’re supposedly so simple to write. Typically, schools in the United States teach a **haiku** as a three line poem with five, seven, then five syllables for each line. Like so:

```
Some say it takes
Five, seven, five syllables
To make a haiku
```

However, this description misses the bigger point of the poem. Traditionally, the **content** of a haiku is most important, with the syllable count often being broken. (Indeed, haiku use a division called “on,” that, though similar to a syllable, is not the same thing.)

The typical haiku juxtaposes two conflicting elements in nature (winter and summer, a lake and the sun, etc.) and contains a **“cutting word”** that links them. Haikus today may discard the focus on nature, but the essences of “cutting” and contrast are still central to the art form.


**Limerick**

The **limerick** is another rather simple poem, consisting of five lines with an AABBA rhyme scheme. Often the first, second, and fifth lines are similar in length and rhythm, while the third and fourth may be shorter. There are no strict rules governing content, but limericks tend to be humorous, possibly in a dirty or outrageous manner. If you prefer to steer from serious or lovey-dovey topics in poetry, the limerick is probably for you.

Though obviously not a requirement, many limericks begin with the line “there once was a man from Nantucket” or a variation thereof. One of the earliest limericks with this beginning is below:

“There once was a man from Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket.
But his daughter, named Nan,
Ran away with a man
And as for the bucket, Nantucket”


As you can see, the Nantucket line became popular in part for its pun potential, fitting with the limerick’s tendency towards humor. When writing a limerick, don’t seek to replicate this line exactly, but consider the merits of similar lines.

**Sonnet**

We enter more complex forms of poetry with a sonnet. Doubtless, most people who have taken a high school English class have encountered sonnets. These poems have a defined structure and tend to focus on themes of love and passion for their content. Love them or hate them, sonnets are a staple of poetry classes.

There are two main types of sonnets, distinguished by differing structure: the English (Shakespearean) and the Italian (Petrarchan). There are even more variations and off-shoots, but these are the most common.

- **English Sonnet**: Most readers will likely be more familiar with the **this form of the sonnet**. It is a poem in iambic pentameter consisting of three quatrains followed by a couplet. The rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

- **Italian sonnet**: This is the older of the two sonnets. It consists of an octave and a sestet. It also uses iambic pentameter when written or translated into English, but this type of meter is not common in Italian language poetry. For the octave, it employs an ABBAABBA rhyme scheme. The rhyming pattern for the sestet varies; it can have one or two rhymes, resulting in CDCDCD or CDECDE schemes or some other combination. Unlike the English sonnet, it does not usually end with a couplet.

Note that the names of these two forms will not always refer to the language in which they are written but to their origins. The alternate names, **Shakespearean** and **Petrarchan**, do not refer to their inventors but to their most famous practitioners.
In addition to stanza, meter, and rhyme restrictions, sonnets have additional elements that define them. All sonnets have a “volta” or “turn.” This is an aspect of the content; the volta signifies a change in the argument or subject matter. In the English sonnet, the volta often occurs at the beginning of the last quatrains or in the couplet. In the Italian sonnet, the octave usually presents a question or conflict. The volta arises at the end of the octave or beginning of the sestet, and the resolution of or response to the conflict is then in the sestet. For a simple example, the bulk of the sonnet may be spent exploring the question “does she love me?” then the volta may transition to the conclusion “no, she prefers Steve.”

An example of an English sonnet is Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 12” (possibly called by its first line: “When I do Count the Clock that Tells the Time.”) An example of an Italian sonnet is Petrarch’s “Soleasi Nel Mio Cor.” Look at these poems and other sonnets. Try to find the volta in each one and classify the subject matter. Because they tend to have regular meter (though every poet cheats occasionally), sonnets are also great practice for scansion.

Both of those examples provided above are part of sonnet sequences. A sonnet sequence is a long series of sonnets on the same idea or subject, though usually each sonnet can be read separately. Often, though not always, the subject is a love interest of the poem’s voice, or love in general. Examples are Spenser’s “Amoretti” and Petrarch’s “Canzoniere.”

Villanelle

Perhaps similar to a haiku, a villanelle began as a poem defined by its content. Today, it is defined by a strict form of lines and rhyme, with content being incredibly flexible.

The name “villanelle” hints at its origins. According to The Academy of American Poets, “villanella” and “villancico” are names for Spanish and Italian peasant songs, often accompanied by dancing and focusing on rustic themes. The villanelle poem was likely created by French authors and sought to replicate those pastoral subjects of the villanelle and villancico.

The exact origin of the current villanelle is unclear, but one thing’s for sure: the structure is rather complicated. As described by writing teacher Alberto Rios, the skeleton of the villanelle is 5 tercets followed by a quatrain. Alluding to its origins in song, the key part of the villanelle is the refrain: two rhyming lines repeated throughout the poem. The first line of the refrain is the first line of the first tercet; the second line of the refrain is the third line of the first tercet. The first line of the refrain ends the second and fourth tercets while the second line of the refrain ends the first, third, and fifth tercets. The two lines of the refrain end the quatrain and the poem.

Confused? An outline will probably help. Below is Sylvia Plath’s “Doomsday” with the rhyme scheme and refrain marked:
The sheer number of rhyming words needed adds to the challenge, especially for the rhyme chosen for the refrain lines.

Though not a basic requirement of the form, some poets choose a regular meter for a villanelle as well. A popular favorite among English writers is (once again) iambic pentameter.

The villanelle is an interesting example of form on two fronts. First, it began as an almost purely content-defined form and became a highly structure-defined form. Second, its structure alone is very complex and requires attention to meter, rhyme, and repetition.

Villanelles are certainly challenging, but the end result can be very rewarding, especially thanks to the impact from the refrain. The repetition of those two lines can add to their impact or evolve their meaning as the poem continues. The villanelle form has been used to great effect in poems such as Dylan Thomas’s “Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night” and the example above, Sylvia Plath’s “Doomsday.”

**Free verse**

In poetry, even the lack of strict structure is conspicuous. Free verse poetry follows no set rhyme scheme or meter and does not have strict divisions for stanzas. When opting for free verse poetry, don’t assume that all rules can simply be thrown to the wind. Just as an essay shouldn’t be written as one whopping paragraph or section, you should still break a poem into stanzas to make it more digestible for readers.
Remember that free verse is not necessarily “easier” than other forms of poetry; writing in free verse should be a conscious decision about what will work best for the message. While it may be less work to simply scribble away, think about the possible rhetorical effects that can be achieved with the techniques discussed in this webtext. Might a sudden pair of rhyming lines in the midst of free verse provide an important idea with more impact? Could a single line in regular meter do the same? Such things are important to consider when writing in free verse. With great flexibility come great opportunities!

To see what other authors have done with free verse, check out works like Walt Whitman’s “The Wound-Dresser” and Emily Dickinson’s “I Would not Paint a Picture” (or “348”).

**Lyric poetry**

Lyric poetry often overlaps with structural forms of poetry; like a few forms on this list, it is a content restriction that defines a poem and so deserves a place here. That said, lyric poetry is a much more flexible categorization than others. If the descriptor “lyric” makes you think of music and songs, that impression is not far off. In terms of style, **lyric poetry** is consciously crafted to sound beautiful and flow well (it may even be put to music!). The subject matter tends to focus on emotions and feelings; in this area, lyric poetry often overlaps with sonnets. Indeed, some of the most famous examples of lyric poetry are sonnets, such as William Shakespeare’s “Sonnet 18” (“May I Compare Thee to a Summer’s Day”).

Of course, this does not mean all sonnets are lyric poetry nor that all lyric poems must be sonnets. William Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven” is based on the ballad form.

As in the above examples, lyric poetry often uses elements like imagery and figurative language to contribute to the vivid emotions of the piece. **Imagery** is language dealing with the five senses, most often sight. **Figurative language** is an umbrella term for language and descriptions that use comparison rather than literal words for description, like simile or metaphor.

**Conclusion**

When broken down into its three basic elements, poetry isn’t all that bad. Meter and rhyme affect the sound and rhythm of the poem, offering emphasis to certain parts and subtly affecting possible interpretation. The form a poem takes tells us in advance the context and expectations surrounding the piece. Whether the piece conforms to these expectations or subverts them can cast a new light on its words. When analyzing poetry and when writing it yourself, you will have a much easier time if you keep all of these elements in mind.

Just like prose, it is important for students of English and writing to be “poetry literate” and become fluent in the vocabulary surrounding poetry. You will certainly encounter poetry at some point in your studies, and perhaps may want to dive into it more deeply. For that, you will need to do some of your own digging. However, this piece should have you equipped with the necessary tools and understanding to do so.
References:


http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/poetic-form-villanelle
