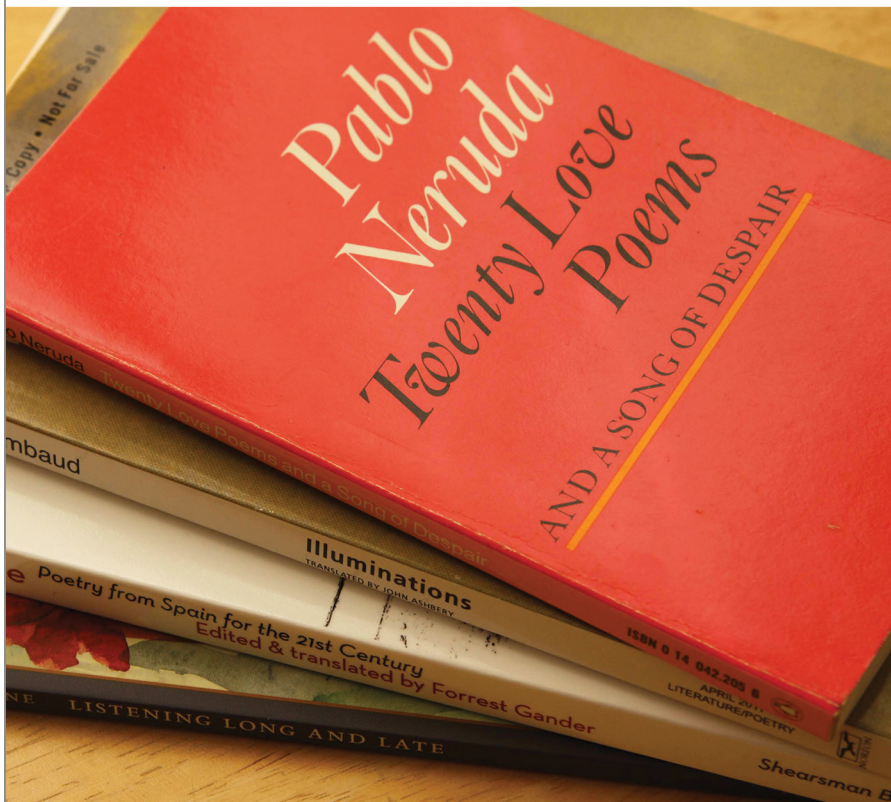


What is poetry?



What is poetry?



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Introduction

This course introduces common techniques underlying free verse and traditional forms of poetry, and how it is necessary to use these techniques in order to harness what T.S. Eliot called the 'logic of the imagination' (Eliot, 1975, p. 77). We discuss the possibility of using your own experience, but also the power of imagination, and of utilising different personae in your poems. You are also introduced to the basic terminology and practical elements of poetry – the line, line-breaks, stanzas, couplets, tercets, quatrains and other stanza lengths, rhyme, rhythm, caesura and metre. As you work through the course, the key terms we discuss are highlighted in bold. Definitions for these terms are provided in the glossary at the end of the course.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 1 study in [Arts and Humanities](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the common techniques underlying free verse and traditional forms of poetry
- identify personal experiences that can be used when writing poems
- understand the basic terminology and practical elements of poetry.

1 What is poetry?: an introduction

Poems, unlike crosswords, don't have a straightforward solution. In fact, a careful examination of the clues laid by the poet may lead to more questions than answers. Let's start this course, then, with a question: is poetry simply about expressing feelings? People do turn to poetry in extremis. Prison inmates, often famously, have expressed loneliness and communicated with absent loved ones through poetry. Maybe this accounts for the egalitarian view often held of poetry – a view which doesn't seem to apply in the same way to opera-singing or carpentry, for example. If I sing, does that make me an opera singer? Certainly if I nail together a few pieces of wood that doesn't mean anyone would want to hire me to build their house. With poetry, as with any other craft, there are skills to be mastered. There is a need for ideas and a need for the poet to meditate on what might be termed his or her **muse**. But there is also a need for persistence and hard work.

A common description of the writing process is '10% inspiration, 90% perspiration'. The muse, expert at inspiring, may be lousy on the technical side. The art of poetry resides in the technical detail more than one might like to believe. The writer artfully uses technique with the express purpose of getting you to feel what he or she wants you to feel. The poet manipulates emotions just as a composer may write a piece of music to evoke a particular mood. The composer orchestrates not only the instruments but also the listener. This is the case in poetry too.

Activity 1

Listen to Track 1, 'The purpose of poetry'. Note down some of the things that Jackie Kay and W.N. Herbert say about what poetry is for them. How do their ideas compare with your own notions of what poetry might be? Try to articulate not just *what* you believe, but *why* you believe that, and what supports your opinion.

Click below to listen to track 1.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[The purpose of poetry](#)

2 Forming the form

By and large, readers tend to agree whether a **poem** ‘works’ or not, even if it’s not clear how or why it works. The best poems retain a certain mystery, but subsequent analysis invariably reveals various techniques the writer has employed to key into this commonality. The form a poem takes, whether it be free or traditional, reflects those techniques, and is itself vital in the unlocking of ‘the logic of the imagination’.

The form a poet chooses for any one poem is partly dependent on process. A writer needs to have at his or her disposal a whole system of strategies and techniques. These will be supplied in part by historical example, by what writers in the past have tried to do. But techniques are also arrived at through the poet’s own exploration of these elements.

Poets may choose to write in a traditional form – say a **ballad** or a **sonnet**. Alternatively they may choose to write in what is often called ‘free verse’, ostensibly liberated from the restrictions of tradition. Yet, traditional forms of poetry can sometimes liberate. In testing the boundaries of a form you might find that you break rules. Similarly, you may find that writing free verse necessitates some new conventions and rules. While taking liberties, free verse still uses formal elements to establish things like rhythm and meaning, for instance. There are a variety of intrinsic techniques that span both traditional and free verse approaches. In this course we will look at those techniques, the basic foundations on which you will build all your poems.

We learn to write by imitating, and, importantly, by reading. We absorb something about the poetic sensibility by listening to poets read their work and talk about their process of writing. Eventually, instead of imitating, the writer assimilates this material into a new, unique voice. This is not to say that writers reach a final resting-place, from which they can safely issue their poetic declamations. Each time the poet sets pen to paper, in a sense he or she has ‘forgotten’ how to write and is forced to learn the process all over again. Even practised writers are humble in the face of each new poem. They don’t forget the precepts of form, but continuously shift and change the application of these elements with each new horizon. Good writers constantly renew language and conventions by renegotiating the relationship between the form and content of every new poem.

In trying to define poetry, we often end up thinking archaically. We think of the work of writers such as Keats or Shakespeare, for instance, as in some way defining what poems should be like. Their way of writing poetry appears dogmatically to be the ‘right’ way to do it. We mistakenly assume that true poetry always involves a special, elevated vocabulary, as if this will earn us our stripes. It is surprising how strongly such misconceptions endure. Language and its conventions are not static. In fact, it is part of the poet’s job to locate and help define the conventions of his or her era.

Activity 2

Now listen to Track 2, in which W.N. Herbert, Paul Muldoon and Jackie Kay talk about getting started.

Click below to listen to track 2.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Getting started](#)

Is poetry about the expression of feelings? One common misconception is that its function is simply this. Poetry, it is believed, is able and honour-bound to tell the absolute, journalistic truth. In reality poetry works quite differently. Our personal lives and history may inform our work, but the poem transforms or exchanges the one sort of truth – biographical truth – for another: poetic truth. A poem is more than a simple expression of feelings, more than what ‘really’ happened.

3 What is poetry?

We can possibly best define what poetry is by saying what it isn't. For one thing, poetry, unlike prose, cannot be paraphrased. If you could sum it up succinctly in any other fashion you wouldn't write the poem. One can talk about the theme of a poem, for instance, but it's the poem itself which conveys the ultimate effect. A poem is the best possible expression of what the poet wants to say. Some might say that the form and content of art, in this case poetry, is untranslatable.

Let's now look at a poem which directly addresses some of these issues, albeit in a humorous way.

Sports pages I: Proem

From ancient days until some time last week
Among the poet's tasks was prophecy.
It was assumed the language ought to speak
The truth about a world we've yet to see;
Then in return for offering this unique
And eerie service, poets got their fee:
And yet, what any poem has to say's
Bound up with all the vanished yesterdays.
Imagination lives on memory:
That's true of love and war and thus of sport:
The world we love's a world that used to be.
Its sprinting figures cannot now be caught
But break the flashlit tape perpetually,
Though all their life's a yellowing report.
Forgive me, then, if speaking of what's next,
I make the past a presence in my text.
For me it starts in 1956,
The Test against the Indians at Lords
As Roy runs in to bowl and Hutton flicks
A long hop to the crowded boundary-boards.
Or did he miss? Or hammer it for six?
But I don't care what *Wisden's* truth records.
When I dream back, the point is not the facts
But life enlarged by these imagined acts.
Forgive, then, the large licence I assume:
What I know's not the truth but what I like.
The Matthews final found me in the womb
But still I went to Wembley on my bike.
When Zola Budd sent Decker to her doom
The gods had aimed their wishes down the pike.

This isn't just a question of my bias:
All members of my tribe are bloody liars.

Sean O'Brien

In the lines: 'When I dream back, the point is not the facts/But life enlarged by these imagined acts', the speaker is extricating poetry from the clutches of fact and history, even as he apologises for the licence that he takes. When he says that 'Imagination lives on memory', he means not that it exists within memory, but that it depends on it. The inadequacy of memory may be a virtue, in the poetic realm. Yet there's a hard edge to his final rejoinder: 'All members of my tribe are bloody liars'.

Sean O'Brien's work is weighty and unrelenting, and politics permeate every corner of it. He is both a social and a literary writer and critic, sometimes associated with a group of poets from a northern working-class tradition: Tony Harrison, Douglas Dunn and, latterly, Don Paterson and Paul Farley.

Activity 3

Consider what has been said so far, the comments of Jackie Kay, Paul Muldoon and W.N. Herbert and your own views of what a poem might be. Write down your thoughts on the following remarks, by poets past and present, about what poetry is and how it works.

If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry.

(Dickinson, 2002, p. 2)

... emotion recollected in tranquillity.

(Wordsworth, 1974, p. 85)

The blood jet is poetry. There is no stopping it.

(Plath, 1968, p. 83)

... that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

(Coleridge, 1983, p. 6)

No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.

(Frost, 1966, p. 55)

Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde both said that all art aspires to the condition of music. They were both wrong. All bad literature aspires to the condition of literature. All good literature aspires to the condition of life.

(Raine, quoted in Sansom, 1994, p. 41)

Answer

- Wordsworth and Plath seem to say opposite things. Do you agree or disagree with either of them? (Plath refers to the passion behind the poem; Wordsworth

describes the detachment the writer has to experience, before they can see the whole picture, and when the internal editor or censor gets to work.)

- Coleridge uses religious terms about faith and belief in describing poetry. Why do we need to suspend disbelief? How do we do that? (We willingly suspend disbelief when we watch a play or film, entering another world as if it were real – which it is, while we are there.)
- What do you think Frost's dictum might mean? (Writers don't always recognise exactly what they are doing. Frost's remark accounts for the vicissitudes of the creative process as well as warning us not to be imprisoned by the dictates of form.)

Activity 4

Now read Fleur Adcock's [Fleur Adcock's](#) 'The prize-winning poem' which comments comically about poetry writing.

Answer

Adcock's ironic and comical take on the act of writing a poem touches on many of the mistaken approaches to poetry discussed so far. For instance it talks of archaisms – using an old, supposedly poetic diction. In warning against such things the poem seems truly authentic and detailed, as if the poet has judged many, many poetry competitions in which the contributors have been so misguided. It also includes misconceptions that have not yet been covered in this course: for instance, the use of inversions. This is when the natural word order is changed, usually solely to achieve a rhyme. It is illustrated in the same line where inversions are mentioned – 'will not their fate bemoan'. Here the verb is put at the end of the line just to get the rhyme. It might have read 'will not bemoan their fate'. Such inversions are considered largely archaic now and are only usually used, as here, in a parodic or comic fashion.

4 Impersonation and imagination

Activity 5

Listen to Track 3, where Jackie Kay, Paul Muldoon and Jean 'Binta' Breeze talk about the importance of autobiography to their poems as well as the importance of using the imagination to harness other people's voices.

Click below to listen to track 3.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[The importance of autobiography](#)

Choosing or inventing another voice immediately changes how we write something. Immediately, the known and familiar is altered or invented anew by this change of perspective. Distancing yourself from what you are and who you know can be both a liberating and an enlightening experience. Using your imagination and specifically your powers of impersonation can be a powerful way of making your poems more interesting. We can often get stuck in our writing because we forget how limitless the possibilities are. The imagination won't tolerate rules, even if its expression is bound by them. Isn't it convenient that writers can impersonate anyone they like without getting arrested? In fact, writers almost have a duty to entertain different perspectives, by imagining not just what but how others think and speak. By taking a different perspective you can get a broader view of the possibilities.

Activity 6

Now read 3 poems in which the writer takes on or entertains the idea of another persona:

'Song of the African boy' by Leland Bardwell (Item 3)

'Selling Manhattan' by Carol Ann Duffy (Item 4)

'Cow' by Selima Hill (Item 5)

Consider what the effect of this impersonation is and what you think the poet intended in each case.

Click on the link below to read the poems.

[Song of the African boy, Selling Manhattan and Cow](#)

Answer

All these impersonations may reflect one side of the author's writing personality. They may be role-playing or entertaining the possibility of an alternative destiny. In many respects this questioning of possibilities, continually asking 'what if', is an essential fuel for the writing of poetry. Poems are preoccupied to a large extent with perspective and gaining a refreshingly new view of the world.

Activity 7

Jot down some of your own ideas for 'role-playing' – personae you can borrow. This may be simply the voice of someone you know, your 'other self', or the voice of a character: a policeman, a child, or a historical character, etc.

Answer

All writers keep notebooks, as W.N. Herbert says. The writer might jot down ideas, snatches of overheard conversation, odd stories; anything which sets him or her thinking. You should do the same: a word or a phrase, anything. You don't know what might be useful later. This is especially true in the context of impersonation and using your imagination to explore different personae. Sometimes you may hear just a few seconds of a conversation. This is enough for you to go on and ask questions of the character or characters. Sometimes you will know certain details about a historical figure. You can go on to ask more about the aspects of their lives that aren't generally known.

As we proceed to look at some poetic terms, tricks and devices – the sorts of techniques that underlie all poems – try to keep in mind all the ideas of what poetry might be, as well as some of the ideas about what poetry shouldn't be.

5 Poetic techniques

5.1 Lines and line-breaks

Poets are skilled at noticing things, and one of the things we should learn to notice is how other poets employ the various devices at their disposal. All poems, even those which don't conform to a pre-existing model or form, use technical elements, even if these may not be immediately apparent. In the next few sections we are going to study, discuss and try out certain technical aspects of poetic writing, starting with lines and line-breaks.

Is something poetry only if it rhymes and has 'proper' line-breaks? Is the following a poem?

I go back to May 1937

I see them standing at the formal gates of their colleges,
I see my father strolling out
under the ochre sandstone arch, the
red tiles glinting like bent
plates of blood behind his head,
I see my mother with a few light books at her hip
standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks with the
wrought-iron gate still open behind her, its
sword-tips black in the May air,
they are about to graduate, they are about to get married,
they are kids, they are dumb, all they know is they are
innocent, they would never hurt anybody.
I want to go up to them and say Stop,
don't do it – she's the wrong woman,
he's the wrong man, you are going to do things
you cannot imagine you would ever do,
you are going to do bad things to children,
you are going to suffer in ways you never heard of,
you are going to want to die. I want to go
up to them there in the late May sunlight and say it,
her hungry pretty blank face turning to me,
her pitiful beautiful untouched body,
his arrogant handsome blind face turning to me,
his pitiful beautiful untouched body,
but I don't do it. I want to live. I
take them up like the male and female
paper dolls and bang them together

at the hips like chips of flint as if to
 strike sparks from them, I say
 Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it.

Sharon Olds

This poem seems to break the rules about the whole purpose of a line-break. Who ever heard of breaking a line after 'I' or 'its' or 'the'? In a free verse poem like this, the line-breaks vary, and are individual to that poem.

Unorthodox line-breaks may propel the poem forwards, as in the earlier section of the above poem, but other line-breaks might be considered with reference to the ideas. For example, to finish a line with 'Stop' has a dramatic impact, made more so when we consider that the narrator is helpless to stop the past, as framed by a photograph. The line that finishes with 'I' seems appropriate to the poem, when we consider the theme, and the concluding statement of intent that 'I' makes, which is about the very poem itself.

On the simplest level, we might place an imaginary frame around the line of a poem, in order to enclose or focus that line's thought, idea or image. When a line is divided in an unorthodox way, tipping the weight and sense down into the next line, we call this **enjambement**. Use of this device affects how the reader experiences the line, and where the emphasis is put. John Hollander, in *Rhyme's Reason*, explains these effects by example:

A line can be *end-stopped*, just like this one,
 Or it can show *enjambement*, just like this
 One, where the sense straddles two lines: you feel
 As if from shore you'd stepped into a boat.

John Hollander

In order to make decisions about line-breaks, you'll want to assess the direction the poem is taking, and where you want it to go. These may be two different things. Line-breaks can:

- effect a juxtaposition of like or unlike things, within a single line or divided across two lines
- evoke a sensation (freedom, discomfort, excitement, etc.), perhaps by breaking the line in an unnatural place
- impel the narrative drive forward
- create room in which to expand a train of thought or idea
- subvert or challenge existing conventions, if this suits the theme of the poem.

Activity 8

Read the following poem.

The sky is blue

Put things in their place,
 my mother shouts. I am looking
 out the window, my plastic soldier
 at my feet. The sky is blue
 and empty. In it floats

the roof across the street.

What place, I ask her.

David Ignatow

Consider the reasoning behind the line-breaks in 'The sky is blue/and empty' and 'In it floats/the roof across the street'.

Answer

Some of the line-breaks in this poem suggest the rationale of a child, who might perceive sense in what an adult regards as nonsense. The roof seems to have detached itself from the house on the ground to become part of the sky. The sky is otherwise empty. A simple question of 'place' for a child, in this context, introduces ideas of visual and intellectual perspective.

Let's start building another kind of house:

The house that Jack or Jill might build

We know that poems
are made of lines
and lines need line-
breaks ...

We'll keep coming back to the building works on this 'house' as the course progresses. The following poem seems to be about line-breaks, but in fact it is about something else. The reader might deduce from the line-breaks, rather than just from the content, what that 'something' is.

The literal and the metaphor

Lover
or not of poetry,
you rehearse an impressive show as a lover
of women,
and you're a natural with your line
in line-
breaks.

Eva Salzman

Humour might be seen to be masking a more serious message about the nature of relationships. In this way all the technical elements contribute to the message. The poem's brevity reiterates ideas about the transitory nature of love. It is divided into two sections, the first offering a situation and the second amplifying this situation. Somewhere in between, the penny drops. Remember Frost's surprises for both reader and writer? This poem, ostensibly about form, discovers and makes connections between seemingly unrelated things.

Such self-reflexive poems, about form itself, clearly illustrate how form and content are integrated. The structure is neither arbitrary nor irrelevant. In a way, the Sharon Olds poem you read in [Section 5.1](#), 'I go back to May 1937', was also about itself – its own history. Poems about poems generally work better if they are about something other than

just themselves – or at least seem to be. Good poems usually work on more than one level: the literal level (ground level) and the deeper level (the basement). Furthermore, these ‘houses’ may have several floors.

Activity 9

Still considering lines and line-breaks, is the following a poem?

‘We were so poor... ’

We were so poor I had to take the place of the bait in the mousetrap. All alone in the cellar, I could hear them pacing upstairs, tossing and turning in their beds. ‘These are dark and evil days,’ the mouse told me as he nibbled my ear. Years passed. My mother wore a cat-fur collar which she stroked until its sparks lit up the cellar.

Charles Simic

Answer

You’re probably thinking that this is very prose-like, and indeed this is a **prose poem**. Countless writers and academics have enjoyed arguing about the merits of this form, but many established writers nevertheless practise it. Most poems, whether traditional forms or free verse, establish a sort of pattern on the page, however irregular. The prose poem is characterised by having few or no line-breaks, and is most akin to a vignette or snapshot. It is frequently descriptive and can make unexplained correlations. In fact, this poem’s chain of logic does seem to lack some vital links, which the reader must supply. This lack of complete narrative logic is perhaps what defines this as a poem, rather than a story, for instance.

Activity 10

Even allowing for creative line-breaks, can the following possibly be a poem?

On going to meet a Zen master in the Kyushu mountains and not finding him

(For A.G.)

Don Paterson

Answer

Er, is that it, we might think? But there’s no poem to go with the title! When you stop to think about it, though, the question ‘Is that it?’ seems perfectly apt in a poem about Zen Buddhism. We could call this a one-horse poem, because it hinges on a single idea. This poem, while sounding like a mere title, seems peculiarly modern and ironic. It offers the occasion for discussion about the search for truth and absolutes – which may be, at least in part, its point. Such a poem certainly raises questions about the nature of existence – not to mention the nature of poetry.

5.2 Free verse

Although we can't make rules about what constitutes a poem, we can see that even when writing **free verse**, where lines and line-breaks may be irregular, form is still important. Free verse still makes use of technical effects: rhythms, grammatical structures, sound effects, etc. Also, it invariably still makes grammatical sense. Free verse, with its infinite elasticity, can recreate form anew in each poem, inventing a one-off organising principle which explains that particular poem.

Too much freedom, though, can be both exciting and nerve-racking. Writing less formally, says the poet Hugo Williams, gives the illusion of helplessness, of being out of control (Williams, 2003). That is one of its characteristics, but this doesn't mean the writer actually is either helpless or out of control while they are writing it. Some people have misconceptions about free verse, or open-form poems, and see them as less rigorous. Peter Sansom puts another slant on this idea: 'Writing free verse is "easier" than using a fixed form, in that it takes less effort to write bad free verse than a bad **villanelle**' (Sansom, 1994, p.83).

Activity 11

Find two or three sentences of prose from a book, newspaper or magazine. Now transform this prose into poetry, by inserting line-breaks in the text in order to highlight whatever you consider most important or interesting. A line can be as short or as long as you want. You can change the original order of the sentences, but not the order of the words of any one sentence. As a mercy, you can repeat one line once. You are allowed to cut out words, but not add any.

- One of the lines, or a word from one of the lines, could be the title.
- Order the lines to direct the reader's attention.
- Does any particular line immediately suggest itself as an opening or final line?
- What strikes you as the most important section? This should be your focus. Let the words tell you what the poem is about.

Answer

Space around a word or phrase highlights or emphasises its meaning. Line-lengths can vary. Why not have a one-word line? The next line might be much longer. The brevity or length of a line should correspond to its meaning. Analyse your motives for line-breaks. This way, you can discover something about words, about poetry, about your own thought processes and imagination.

5.3 Stanzas and verse

The poem '**The literal and the metaphor**', which you read in [Section 5.1](#), was divided into two sections. We call these **verses** or **stanzas**, and they are the poetic equivalent of paragraphs, but with more shape, weight and focus than the prose equivalent. Stanzas are like islands encircled by shores. Or, since we have been talking about houses, let's use another image for these stanzas. James Fenton tells us that 'The Italian word *stanza* means a room' (Fenton, 2002, p. 61).

So, how many rooms should a poem have? Well, it depends. A stanza concentrates attention on a particular area of thought or image. The reasons for dividing a poem into stanzas or verses may vary from poem to poem, and might develop from the reasons for the line-breaks that we introduce, with the stanzas or rooms constituting the macro-structure of the poem and its larger purpose.

Line-breaks and stanzas, accentuated by punctuation, can be used to establish a pace, to push the poem onwards and develop the theme. The pattern they form contributes to the total effect of the poem.

Activity 12

Now take your 'instant poem' from [Activity 11](#) in [Section 5.2](#), and divide it into stanzas. You may change your mind about line-breaks now, and you may also add or take away words, if this helps. This time you may want to repeat another line or a word.

- Can you locate a meaningful transition between the first and second stanzas, or the second and third?
- A stanza can be as long or as short as you'd like, but make the length of the stanza appropriate to what's contained within.
- Try to free yourself from expectations about how it 'should' go. Instead, experiment, and see what ideas arise from the structure itself.

Answer

Articulate why you chose a particular point to break the stanza. Or why you rejected a different structure. Perhaps the poem works best as one stanza. The poem's central element may reside in a single idea or image, as with the following:

Fan-piece, for her Imperial Lord

O fan of white silk,
clear as frost on the glass-blade,
You also are laid aside.

Ezra Pound

Great emotion is wrapped inside the formal diction of this poem. We may surmise that the fan was given by the Imperial Lord to an ex-mistress, now cast aside. Even a short poem can evoke a whole scenario, without being explicit. We should file away this idea – that less can be more.

This is how far we have got with the building of our poetic house.

The house that Jack or Jill might build

We know that poems
are made of lines
and lines need line-
breaks,

which we've already discussed.

These lines can, in turn, then be grouped together or divided in creative ways

into equal

or unequal sections

- poetic paragraphs called stanzas or verses ...

The next aspect to consider in more detail is the fact that stanzas may be composed of varying numbers of lines, and there are names for different kinds of stanzas. This one is a **couplet**:

In couplets, one line often makes a point

Which hinges on its bending, like a joint.

John Hollander

Activity 13

Read the following poem and consider the way the form – the use of couplets – is connected to the content.

Helen's sister*

Once they know I'm beauty's twin
 at the party door, I'm in,
 if only so they can compare
 roses to hips hardened by winter air.
 Nine months perfectly in tune
 with the sharer of our mother's womb –
 you'd think that beauty's shadow would earn
 one brief victorious public turn.
 In Sparta, I'd be second-rate,
 without a date,
 and if in my part of Athens
 nothing much happens
 (even the migrating birds
 like euphemistic words
 or an air-blown lover's kiss
 – false and paltry – give this part of town a miss)
 still, I'm a big fish in a tiny pond,
 twin to a natural blonde
 but at least a reference for men's desire,
 the heat of the missing fire.
 While our strong and handsome brothers
 wrestle with each other
 on top of Ulysses' mast
 (male ego, vanity and brass!)
 it's Helen's Fire completes the sum,
 for she's the portent of the worst to come.

She's the corposant which starts
the charge between all lovers' parts.
If beauty's an affliction,
then men and women love addiction.
Here, the evening creeps
across the place where my lovers sleep
then rise to leave me instead
once daylight steals the Helen that I'd had them bed.
When it comes to beauty, the world knows best
and the Trojan war's the test.
Any woman would slay a thousand soldiers
not to get older.

Eva Salzman

* In classical mythology, Castor and Pollux were the twin sons of Jupiter and Leda, just as Helen of Troy is the daughter of Zeus and Leda in Greek legend. Castor and Pollux were also the names given by Roman sailors to St Elmo's Fire, or the corposant phenomenon, when the flame effect on the mast of a ship appeared double. This indicated that the worst of the storm was over. A single flame, called Helen's Fire, signified that the worst of the storm was yet to come.

Answer

'Helen's sister' is comprised of rhyming couplets. In it, Helen of Troy's sister finally gets the opportunity to present her version of events. As a sideshow to history and myth, the speaker offers a different perspective on beauty and gender – on the events themselves and how they are usually presented. The couplet form is appropriate to the theme of two sisters.

Activity 14

Now choose a person from history or mythology and write a few couplets in that person's voice. Feel free to rhyme, but at this point pay more attention to your ideas, as laid out in two-line patterns. Don't worry about the 'missing' poem, or a more complete poem that might have been. Frequently writers scrawl notes without necessarily having yet composed the poem in which they belong. In fact, they may not use certain lines as originally intended at all. The most important thing here is to work in couplets.

This person may be a politician, movie star, explorer, etc. Perhaps they are famous, or perhaps they are simply associated with the famous person. For example, they might be a queen's handmaiden rather than the queen herself. You could jot down a list of several people, and come back to it later to try out other characters.

Answer

Were all your couplets self-contained, or did some run over into the next couplet? Try to vary the lines, so they don't all start with 'I' or 'She'. Did yours rhyme? If they did, try to write another version that doesn't rhyme. If they didn't, try to write some couplets that do. Notice that in 'Helen's sister' some of the rhymes are not exact – e.g. mast/brass; soldiers/older. This near rhyme is more common in modern verse methods.

5.4 Tercets

The following poem is written in **tercets**.

There's no one here at the moment

It happens once, in his absence.
 The bright hall rings, rings and, mid-ring,
 clicks back over into silence.
 It leaves two isolated sighs,
 hers, momentarily frozen
 before an ocean of blank space
 that by nightfall he'll come across
 and save against the backdrop of
 a Friday evening office;
 give up on; rewind to and play
 more times than makes sense; tomorrow,
 or the day after, wipe away.

Conor O'Callaghan

Activity 15

Now write a poem with the same title – 'There's no one here at the moment' – consisting of two tercets, rhymed or unrhymed.

Think about what happens between the first and second stanza. This may comprise the point or heart of your poem.

The following poem is in tercets with a rogue line at the end.

Spilt milk

Two soluble aspirins spore in this glass, their mycelia
 fruiting the water, which I twist into milkiness.
 The whole world seems to slide into the drain by my window.
 It has rained and rained since you left, the streets black
 and muscled with water. Out of pain and exhaustion you came
 into my mouth, covering my tongue with your good and bitter milk.
 Now I find you have cashed that cheque. I imagine you

slipping the paper under steel and glass. I sit here in a circle
of lamplight, studying women of nine hundred years past.
My hand moves into darkness as I write, *The adulterous woman
lost her nose and ears; the man was fined*. I drain the glass.
I still want to return to that hotel room by the station
to hear all night the goods trains coming and leaving.

Sarah Maguire

The chosen stanza form is appropriate to the theme of an erotic triangle, with a third party suggested by the 'women of nine hundred years past', not to mention the disparity between the punishments for women and for men involved in adultery.

5.5 Quatrains

The following poem is comprised of four **quatrains**.

Desert places

Snow falling and night falling fast, oh, fast
In a field I looked into going past,
And the ground almost covered smooth in snow,
But a few weeds and stubble showing last.
The woods around it have it – it is theirs.
All animals are smothered in their lairs.
I am too absent-spirited to count;
The loneliness includes me unawares.
As lonely as it is that loneliness
Will be more lonely ere it will be less –
A blanker whiteness of benighted snow
With no expression, nothing to express.
They cannot scare me with their empty spaces
Between stars – on stars where no human race is.
I have it in me so much nearer home
To scare myself with my own desert places.

Robert Frost

The neatness and regularity of the quatrains emphasises the smooth evenness of a landscape blanketed with snow; the form thus reiterates the theme. The poem's effect comes from a simple yet formal accumulation of landscape detail.

In this poem, each stanza moves the theme forward, by developing or extrapolating from the previous stanza. The initial stanza sets the scene, with natural description. We infer the narrator has been walking near fields silenced by snow.

The first line of the second stanza introduces a new level to the poem, since we can't be completely sure what the narrator means by: 'The woods around it have it – it is theirs'.

The narrator might not have known either, at first, but by the end of the stanza, he is beginning to understand, just as we are.

In the third stanza we begin to realise that the blank expression of the snow and the loneliness perhaps apply to the narrator as well as to the landscape.

In the last stanza we rocket upwards into the vast loneliness of space, which is nothing to the loneliness the narrator can feel on Earth. There is no actual menace in this landscape, although we can sense a certain momentary terror that the utter loneliness described, once elucidated and emphasised by the place, cannot be ignored, even in the busiest of places. There is no awful deity or devil with an agenda. On the contrary, this is all there is, and this is simply the way things are. The narrator has read into this place the isolation of his very mind, itself snowed in.

Activity 16

In the following poem, the movement of the quatrains represents movement of time and place. Where does the poem speed up? And how is that pacing relevant to the images employed, and to the theme of the entire poem? How does the poem progress in each stanza?

Soap suds

This brand of soap has the same smell as once in the big
House he visited when he was eight: the walls of the bathroom open
To reveal a lawn where a great yellow ball rolls back through a hoop
To rest at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child.
And these were the joys of that house: a tower with a telescope;
Two great faded globes, one of the earth, one of the stars;
A stuffed black dog in the hall; a walled garden with bees;
A rabbit warren; a rockery; a vine under glass; the sea.
To which he has now returned. The day of course is fine
And a grown-up voice cries Play! The mallet slowly swings,
Then crack, a great gong booms from the dog-dark hall and the ball
Skims forward through the hoop and then through the next and then
Through hoops where no hoops were and each dissolves in turn
And the grass has grown head-high and an angry voice cries Play!
But the ball is lost and the mallet slipped long since from the hands
Under the running tap that are not the hands of a child.

Louis MacNeice

Answer

When a poem shifts in time like this it must do so with absolute clarity. In the first stanza, a simple activity reminds the narrator of a past time and place, to which he is neatly delivered, along with the croquet ball moving backwards, to rest 'at the head of a mallet held in the hands of a child'. The second stanza's description spills over into the third stanza, when the powerful voice of the adult, saying 'Play!', and the 'crack' and the 'great gong' suddenly cast a sudden pall over this sunny childhood scene.

Now the pace becomes frenetic, helped by the lack of punctuation in the third and fourth stanzas and the string of 'and's. The croquet ball, speeding through the hoops, fast-forwards us in time, the grass 'grown head-high'. The breathless quality of these lines halts temporarily with the second 'Play!', by which time the ball has completed its cinematic journey, returning us to the present, to the soap suds and to the narrator as an adult, whose past has been lost. Line-breaks, punctuation and stanzas power this time-travel machine.

5.6 Other stanza lengths

Other stanza lengths include the **sestet**, and the **octave**.

We've looked at how poems utilise line-breaks and stanzas to evoke a landscape, develop ideas and to present different elements, the juxtaposition of which suggests an argument. We've looked at poems which are about themselves – *about* line-breaks or poetry itself – and found that they are also about something else. Poetry doesn't always move in a linear fashion, following a single idea or event. It can jump around, moving laterally, thus making unexpected connections and doing several things at once. Poets are the ultimate multi-taskers.

Let's check on how the building works are going:

The house that Jack or Jill might build

We know that poems

are made of lines

and lines need line-

breaks,

which we've already discussed.

These lines can, in turn, then be grouped together or divided in creative

ways

into equal

or unequal sections

- poetic paragraphs called stanzas or verses ...

These lines

may contain rhymes ...

6 Rhyme

Activity 17

Now listen to Track 4, on which Jackie Kay and Paul Muldoon talk about rhyme. Click below to listen to track 4.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Rhyme](#)

So-called purists sometimes claim that unrhyming poems aren't poems at all. But Anglo-Saxon poetry didn't rhyme in the way that we usually think of rhyme. Even English **epic** or dramatic poetry from the last few hundred years needn't rhyme. Nevertheless, many teachers like to hammer into impressionable young heads the notion that proper poems rhyme. The assumed alternative is anarchy: a disregard for form and history.

Because **rhyme** is very seductive, we need to be careful not to use it for its own sake, if this practice doesn't suit the poem. A light-hearted poem might rely on strong rhyme (and a dum-de-dum rhythm). However, a more facile rhyme won't suit a more contemplative poem, for example.

If we impose rhyme too early in the process, we risk sacrificing the content to the form, before we've even discovered the theme of our poem. When we write, we're panning for gold. We often find we're not actually writing the poem we think we're writing! The ability to recognise our true theme, and to go beyond our first impulses or ideas, is partly what distinguishes a competent poet from a good one.

Rhyme creates echoes which refer you to other portions of the poem. Rhyme can reiterate an image or idea, making it memorable, even when used in a subtle way. What else? Of course rhyme is pleasurable and satisfying:

The basic rhymes in English are masculine, which is to say that the last syllable of the line is stressed: 'lane' rhymes with 'pain', but it also rhymes with 'urbane' since the last syllable of 'urbane' is stressed ... With feminine rhymes it is normally the penultimate syllable that is stressed and therefore contains the rhyme-sound: 'dearly' rhymes with 'nearly', but also with 'sincerely' and 'cavalierly'.

(Fenton, 2002, pp. 97–8)

7 Other rhyming techniques

- **Near- or half rhymes** are words or combinations of words that achieve only a partial rhyme. Half rhymes can be between words with just one syllable, or between parts of words, for example where the accented syllables rhyme with each other, but other syllables in the word don't rhyme. For instance: cover–shovel; wily–piling, calling–fallen; wildebeest–building.
- **Assonant rhyme** refers to echoing vowel sounds, either in paired words at the end of lines, or as a kind of internal rhyme.
- **Alliteration**, or the echoing of consonant sounds, is often used as well. Look at these lines from Dylan Thomas' 'Fern Hill':

I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the childless land.

Dylan Thomas

- **Mosaic rhyme** uses two words in a feminine or triple rhyme. This ancient technique has a very musical quality. It was much used by Anglo-Saxon poets, and is also well used by modern poets.

Activity 18

Now click on 'View document' below to read Item 6, Anthony Hecht's poem "It out-Herods Herod. Pray you, avoid it." Look in particular at the way it rhymes.

[It out-Herods Herod. Pray you](#)

Answer

Certain set poetic forms have various **rhyme schemes** associated with them. A rhyme scheme is the pattern in which the rhymed line-endings appear in the poem. It is expressed by giving the same alphabetic symbol to each line ending in the same rhyme. So, a quatrain, for instance, may be rhymed *abab*, as in Hecht's poem, but it can also be rhymed *abba*. A quatrain followed by a couplet may rhyme *abab cc*.

Activity 19

Chart the rhyme scheme devised by the author in the following neat and witty poem, which is comprised of two pairs of quatrains and tercets.

The end of love

The end of love should be a big event.
It should involve the hiring of a hall.
Why the hell not? It happens to us all.
Why should it pass without acknowledgement?
Suits should be dry-cleaned, invitations sent.
Whatever form it takes – a tiff, a brawl –
The end of love should be a big event.

It should involve the hiring of a hall.
 Better than the unquestioning descent
 Into the trap of silence, than the crawl
 From visible to hidden, door to wall.
 Get the announcements made, the money spent.
 The end of love should be a big event.
 It should involve the hiring of a hall.

Sophie Hannah

Answer

The rhyme scheme runs *abba/abab/abb/aab*. The initially balanced pairings become disrupted and disjointed in a design which ties in with the author's intention and the subject of the poem. The lines can't quite rid themselves of the previous rhyme and progress to a new one. The two rhymes remain throughout, echoing the strangely irksome, irritating feeling at the end of a relationship between two people.

Many poems are written in a structure devised by the writer for that particular poem. Bear in mind you can utilise any of the technical elements you've learned – different stanza lengths, rhymes, etc. – in your own poems.

Rhymes traditionally appear at the end of lines. When they are used within a line, we call this **internal rhyme**, as in this extract from Poe's famous poem, 'The raven':

Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter...

Edgar Allan Poe

A more modern example, where the rhyme is consecutive, is this extract from T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton':

Words move, music moves,
 Only in time; but that which is only living
 Can only die. Words, after speech, reach ...

T.S. Eliot

A good way to explore rhyme is to let it develop organically, first by paying attention to all words – saying them aloud, rolling them around your tongue. What do they feel and sound like? Is there any **onomatopoeia**? The word 'clank' is onomatopoeic, because of the 'nk' – and also the quality of the 'a'. Think of more examples for yourself.

In bringing this sort of attention to the words you use, you will become more aware of language and of whatever natural rhymes you may use unconsciously. Later, you can build on this lucky accident of the unconscious, by instituting a regular pattern of rhyme, or rewriting the poem in an established form. Or you may use a rhyme scheme that is irregular. Even free verse poems are allowed to have rhymes! It is important that you have your own agenda for each poem. Some poets have even invented new forms. There isn't anything to say you can't do that, in the same way that poets can create new words. The words 'chortle' and 'galumph', for instance, coined by Lewis Carroll in his poem 'Jabberwocky', eventually came into regular usage.

Activity 20

- Chart out the rhyme schemes in some of the poems we have looked at so far: 'Sports pages – I: Proem' in [Section 3](#), and 'Helen's sister' and 'The insusceptibles' in [Section 5.4](#). Note the internal rhymes, the full rhymes and half rhymes, the dissonant rhymes, the assonance and alliteration.
- Invent some rhymes yourself: full rhymes such as freight/weight, street/sheet, cable/label; near and half rhymes such as black/block, lip/cup, puddle/riddle, weather/measure; and more outlandish concoctions such as furies/curious, timpanist/tempest, bacon/pagan. Be warned: this is an addictive game!
- Building on lines from earlier writing activities, write one couplet with full rhymes, one with near rhymes, and one with none at all.
- Now write four lines which rhyme *abab*. The lines may be of different lengths, and you may use full rhyme or half rhyme. You can work from earlier ideas, if you wish. Perhaps these lines might precede one of the couplets you produced for the question above, in which case you'll then have a whole poem, rhymed *ababcc*!

Answer

- It is not cheating to use a rhyming dictionary! On the contrary, it's a way of keeping your literary muscles in tone, by recalling or expanding your vocabulary. Try *The Poet's Manual and Rhyming Dictionary* (Stillman, 2000) or *The Penguin Rhyming Dictionary* (Fergusson, 1985). Searching for words and phrases on the internet can also take you in interesting directions.
- Many writers use a selection of reference books, in order to have as much knowledge as possible at their fingertips. Poets don't just have ideas, for which they find the words. Sometimes, the words themselves lead the way.
- Some useful reference books for poets are: a dictionary, a rhyming dictionary, a thesaurus, dictionaries of quotations and literary terms, biographical and general encyclopedia, and dictionaries of slang, place-names, myths and legends, science, inventions, etc.
- *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* is an invaluable and inspiring reference book.
- Running an internet search on a single word or phrase can lead to interesting results and new directions to explore.

Check for any unconscious use of internal rhyme in any of the lines you've written. Exploit any happy accidents. Even if you don't immediately recognise any rhymes, a word which faintly *resembles* another word might then suggest a rhyme. These kinds of rhyme-games can suggest ideas or lead in new directions. Some poets think that any one poem should be consistent with its chosen method of rhyme, half rhyme or lack of rhymes. Otherwise, it might look as if the writer has been sloppy. Theory is all very well, but the reality is that writers play freely with rhyme, and mostly what counts is the poem as a whole.

Remember the problem of inversion discussed earlier. Don't invert your sentences or twist the syntax to achieve a rhyme. Have you resorted to an archaic grammatical construction to get the right word at the end of the line? This is cheating. If a line reads unnaturally, then the seams will show. We'll notice the rhyme rather than the poem. Be assured: someone will notice!

So this is how our house is coming along:

The house that Jack or Jill might build

We know that poems
are made of lines
and lines need line-
breaks,

which we've already discussed.

These lines can, in turn, then be grouped together or divided in creative
ways

into equal

or unequal sections

- poetic paragraphs called stanzas or verses ...

These lines

may contain rhymes

and each word has a rhythm ...

with stresses, no stresses ...

So the next thing to consider is stress and rhythm.

8 Stress and rhythm

All words are comprised of **stressed** and **unstressed** syllables. Any line of poetry (or, indeed, any text) can be marked to show which syllables are stressed and which are unstressed. The act of mapping out stress patterns, usually by placing the appropriate symbols over the syllables, is known as **scansion**.

To scan a line of poetry, say it out loud, without thinking about it unduly. Listen for which syllables you naturally emphasise. The stressed syllables can be indicated with the symbol /, while U indicates unstressed syllables. So the marks for *Tum-ti-Tum* would be: /U/.

Sets of stressed and unstressed syllables can be used in various patterns, known as **feet**. Some commonly used feet are as follows:

iamb=U/=ti-Tum (e.g. about)

trochee=/U=Tum-ti (e.g. water)

anapest=UU/= ti-ti-Tum (e.g. in a box)

dactyl=/UU=Tum-ti-ti (e.g. 'happily')

spondee=//=Tum-Tum (e.g. Big Bang)

Remember that these are technical names for rhythms that happen naturally. Don't worry if you can't remember the name of a particular **rhythm**. In all likelihood you will be using it.

Activity 21

Is your name iambic? Trochaic? Say out loud your own name and the names of your friends and family. Listen to the rhythm and try to identify the rhythmic feet in each name. Does the pattern vary when you put the first name together with the last name and middle names?

Answer

Here are some samples:

U/ – maRIE (iambic)

/U – MAry (trochaic)

UU/ – mariANNE (anapestic)

/UU – MArion (dactylic)

// – MA (spondaic).

Or you might have something like:

U/U – maRIa (amphibrachic)

/U/ – MAry ANN (cretic)

These last two feet are less common in poetry in English than the first five.

Activity 22

Read Items 7–9, which are written in and are about dialect.

“No dialects please ... ” by Merle Collins (Item 7)

'Mama Dot warns against an Easter rising' by Fred D'Aguiar (Item 8)

'Them & [uz]' by Tony Harrison (Item 9)

Click on 'View document' to read the poems.

[No dialects please](#)

Answer

Notice how the poems touch on questions of nationality and class. They may seem subversive in some way as if they are challenging the status quo, but in fact they are merely stating that they have an equal right to be presented as poetry. These apparently rebellious poems even contain elements of the technique and tradition against which they are supposedly rebelling. Notice how the Harrison poem, for instance, is written in an apparently anarchic form – using initials, brackets, different typeface, phonetic spelling, etc. It seems that nothing is holding it together; even the stanzas are irregular – some sestet, couplets and some of only one line. Yet if you look a little closer you'll see it is written in rhyming couplets that bind the fragments tightly together. Harrison says of this poem that it is a larger form of sonnet.

9 Metre

As we have seen, scansion is the act of mapping out stress patterns in order to ascertain the metre (rhythm). In the **accentual-syllabic** system, the dominant tradition in English, both accents (stresses) and syllables are measured and counted. In **accentual metre**, the stresses are counted and the syllables can vary. In **syllabic metre**, the syllables are counted, while the stresses can vary.

Here is pentameter, the line of five
That English poetry still keeps alive.

John Hollander

A poet may get a rhythmic 'riff' in his or her head, much the way a musician does. T.S. Eliot wrote that 'a poem, or a passage of a poem, may tend to realize itself first as a particular rhythm before it reaches expression in words' (Eliot, quoted in Harding, 1976, p. 87). Or the impetus for a poem may be the sound of a word. Both the language and the metre contribute to the overall mood of the poem: sad, ecstatic, sober, quirky, etc. If a poem with a regular metre varies at all, it still tends to be drawn back to its 'home' – the way a piece of music is usually drawn back to whatever key it's in. Until it does that, we feel uncomfortable, as if something is not quite right.

10 Hold that space!

The **caesura** is the stress which falls at a moment of silence. It's the equivalent of a musical rest and is usually delineated by punctuation. Composers and poets recognise the importance of the space between notes.

The house that Jack or Jill might build

We know that poems
are made of lines
and lines need line-
breaks,

which we've already discussed.

These lines can, in turn, then be grouped together or divided in creative
ways

into equal

or unequal sections

- poetic paragraphs called stanzas or verses ...

These lines

may contain rhymes

and each word has a rhythm ...

with stresses, no stresses ...

constructed in a pattern we call metre

which keeps on coming back again ... keeps on coming back again

and in-between, and after and before ...

Silence.

Activity 23

Now click on 'View document' to read how 'Silence' can speak, in Mahmood Jamal's poem of that name (Item 10).

[Silence](#)

Let's finish this course with a poem about writing. In this poem, a driving instructor's teaching strategy involves likening his student's profession to the art of learning to drive. The humour comes partly from the arbitrariness of his comparison.

L

'Switch off the engine and secure the car.'

He slots his pen across his clipboard

and makes a little cathedral of his fingers

as though I were helping him with his enquiries.

'Tell me, Michael, what's your line of work?'

I tell him the truth. Why not? I've failed anyway.

'Driving and writing have a lot in common,'
he parleys, and we sit there, the two of us
blinking into the average braking distance
for 30 mph, wondering what he means.
I want to help but it's his turn to talk.
When my turn comes he'll probably look at me
instead of his hand, stalled now in mid-gesture
like a milkfloat halfway across a junction.
Look at him. What if I'd said *butcher*?
At last 'It's all a matter of giving – proper – signals'
is the best he can do. But then he astonishes me.
'I'm going to approve your licence,
but I don't care much for your ... ' Quick glance.
'*interpretation* of the Highway Code.'

Michael Donaghy

To carry on with our driving instructor's comparison, don't let the rhymes or formal elements drive the poem. You must be in the driving seat.

Glossary

Ballad	A simple narrative poem in short stanzas, usually sentimental in nature.
Caesura	A pause in a line of verse, usually in the middle.
Couplet	A stanza of two lines.
Elegy	A serious, mournful or reflective poem. Classical elegies feature either couplets of hexameter and pentameter lines, or two stanzas of four iambic pentameters, rhyming <i>abab</i> .
Enjambement	Where the sense continues over a line-break.
Envoi	The concluding stanza of poems written in certain metrical forms.
Epic	Long narrative poem that relates heroic events in an elevated style.
Free verse	Poetry that works against traditional conventions of metre, rhyme, line length, etc.
Haiku	Japanese poem with three lines of five, seven and five syllables.
Limerick	Humorous poem in a five-line form.
Metre	The pattern of groups of syllables within a poem.
Muse	The inspiration for a writer.
Octave	A stanza of eight lines.
Ode	A poem intended to be sung, often of great length and generally addressed to someone or something.
Onomatopoeia	When a word sounds like its meaning, e.g. 'hiss'.
Poem	A composition in verse.
Prose poem	A poem with few or no line-breaks.
Quatrain	A stanza of four lines.
Rhyme	Where words sound the same, usually at the ends of lines.
Rhyme scheme	The pattern of rhymed line-endings in a poem. These are described using letters, e.g. <i>abab</i> .
Rhythm	A regular pattern of sounds.
Sestet	A stanza of six lines.
Sonnet	A short poem of 14 lines, each containing 10 or 11 syllables.
Stanza	A unit, or verse, in a poem.
Tercet	A stanza of three lines.
Trope	A figure of speech in which a word or expression is used in other than its literal sense.
Verse	A unit, or stanza, of a poem.
Villanelle	A poem of 19 lines, comprising 5 tercets and a quatrain. It has two rhymes. Line 1 is repeated as lines 6, 12, and 18. Line 3 is repeated as lines 9, 15 and 19.

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