

Notes: Shakespearean Sonnet Basics

Sonnet Characteristics

A **sonnet** is simply a poem written in a certain format. You can identify a sonnet if the poem has the following characteristics:

14 lines: All sonnets have **14** lines which can be broken down into four sections called **quatrains**.

The first three quatrains contain four lines each and use an alternating **rhyme scheme** (ABAB / CDCD / EFEF). The final quatrain consists of just two lines which both rhyme (GG).

First quatrain: This should establish the *subject* of the sonnet.

Second quatrain: This should develop the sonnet's *theme*.

Third quatrain: This should *round off* the sonnet's theme.

Fourth quatrain: This should act as a *conclusion* to the sonnet.

Shakespeare's sonnets are written predominantly in a meter called **iambic pentameter**, a **rhyme scheme** in which each sonnet line consists of ten syllables. The syllables are divided into five pairs called **iamb**s or **iambic feet**. An iamb is a metrical unit made up of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable. An example of an iamb would be "good -BYE". A line of iambic pentameter flows like this:

baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM / baBOOM.

Here are some examples from the sonnets:

When I / do COUNT / the CLOCK / that TELLS / the TIME (Sonnet 12)

When IN / dis GRACE / with FOR / tune AND / men's EYES
I ALL / a LONE / be WEEP / my OUT/ cast STATE (Sonnet 29)

Shall I / com PARE/ thee TO / a SUM / mer's DAY?
Thou ART / more LOVE / ly AND / more TEM / per ATE (Sonnet 18)

Shakespeare's plays are also written primarily in iambic pentameter, but the lines are unrhymed and not grouped into **stanzas**. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is called **blank verse**.