THE SONNET

The sonnet is a form of poetry. The term comes from the Italian word *sonetto*, meaning “a little song” or “a little sound.” Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, with a very particular rhyme scheme and thematic structure. There are two basic sonnet forms: the Petrarchan sonnet and the Shakespearean sonnet. Other types of sonnets exist, however they are based on these two forms.

**Petrarchan Sonnet**

The Petrarchan sonnet is named after the fourteenth century Italian poet Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch), often referred to as the “Father of Humanism.” The Petrarchan sonnet contains 14 lines, divided into two stanzas: the first eight lines are called an **octave**; the next six lines are called a **sestet**. The octave presents a question or argument or observation. The direction of the poem generally shifts in line eight or nine. The shift is called a **volta**. The remaining lines of the poem resolve the argument or observation presented in the beginning lines of the poem. The rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet is abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd.

**Shakespearean Sonnet**

The second major type of sonnet is the Shakespearean, also called the English sonnet, named after the sixteenth century English poet and playwright William Shakespeare. It is comprised of three quatrains of four lines each, followed by a couplet of two lines. The couplet usually states a conclusion or even a reversal of the ideas presented in the three quatrains. Typically the theme of the poem is stated in the couplet. Sometimes there is a shift (a volta) in the third quatrain. The rhyme scheme is abab, cdcd, efef, gg.

**octave**: an 8-line stanza of poetry  
**sestet**: a 6-line stanza of poetry  
**quatrain**: a 4-line stanza of poetry  
**couplet**: a two-line stanza of poetry  
**volta**: a shift or turn of direction in a poem’s argument or idea  
**rhyme scheme**: the pattern or rhyme used at the end of each verse or line of poetry  
**meter**: a poetic device that creates the rhythmic sound structure of a poem or a line of poetry  
**foot**: the formative unit of poetry, made up of stressed and unstressed syllables in a combination of two or three syllables  
**iamb**: a foot of poetry consisting of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable (think: “ba-BOOM”)  
**iambic pentameter**: a meter of poetry, where each line consists of a total of 10 syllables, made up of 5 pairs of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (think: “ba-BOOM/ba-BOOM/ba-BOOM/ba-BOOM/ba-BOOM”)

**Example:** *If mu/sic be /the food /of love,/ play on.* [from Shakespeare’s play *Twelfth Night*]
Sonnet XVIII (18)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed,
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course untrimmed:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st,
   So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
   So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Sonnet LXV (65)

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea,
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?
0, how shall summer's honey breath hold out
Against the wreckful siege of battering days,
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,
Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays?
0 fearful meditation! where, alack,
Shall Time's best jewel from Time's chest lie hid?
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?
   0, none, unless this miracle have might,
   That in black ink my love may still shine bright.
Sonnet CXXX (130)

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red, than her lips red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:  
I grant I never saw a goddess go,  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground:  
    And yet by heaven, I think my love as rare,  
    As any she belied with false compare.

Sonnet XXIX (29)

When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes  
I all alone beweep my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself, and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man’s art, and that man’s scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts my self almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven’s gate;  
    For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
    That then I scorn to change my state with kings.
In-class Group Activity: Compose a Shakespearean Sonnet

Before attempting to write your sonnet, review the following useful tips.

**Pay attention to word choice.** Your words have to fit a particular rhyme (abab, cdcd, efef, gg) and a particular rhythm (iambic pentameter), so you have to choose wisely.

**Listen to the sound of your words.** Poems are meant to be read aloud. Use words that sound interesting together.

**Present ideas logically.** The set of three stanzas is not just pleasing to the eye, it’s pleasing to the brain. The progression from topic to point to counterpoint is a tried and true method for constructing a solid argument.

**Come to a conclusion.** The form of the sonnet is laid out specifically to force the writer to make a point. The turn and the final couplet are in place to ensure that all that explaining in the previous three stanzas is actually going somewhere. It makes you write a strong ending.

Now create your sonnet:

1. Choose a scribe for your group. This person will write the lines down as group members suggest them.

2. Write the rhyme scheme for a Shakespearean sonnet on a piece of paper, vertically, numbering the lines. Your page should look something like this:

   1a
   2b
   3a
   4b
   5c
   6d
   7c
   8d
   9e
   10f
   11e
   12f
   13g
   14g

3. Choose a theme for your sonnet.
4. For the first quatrain: Agree on two pairs of rhyming one-syllable words (e.g. day/dark pray/spark) and place them at the ends of the first 4 lines. Now your page will look something like this, with different pairs of rhyming words, of course.

5. Next compose iambic pentameter lines to precede each of the end rhymes. At first the lines may be nonsense, but as you continue to work, you can tweak them into making sense. You may find that you want to change your end rhymes as your composition moves along.

6. Follow the same process to create the second quatrain.

7. Follow the same process to create the third quatrain.

8. Follow the same process to create the couplet.

9. Once you’ve composed 14 lines, read your sonnet aloud. Verify that you have correctly used iambic pentameter in each line.

10. Verify that you have followed the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet.

11. Do your quatrains present a coherent idea?

12. Is there a turn?

13. Does the couplet express a conclusion?

14. Edit your sonnet if necessary.

15. Share your group’s sonnet with the class.