

Shakespearean Sonnet Basics: Iambic Pentameter and the English Sonnet Style

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 iambs 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](#).

Sonnet Structure

There are fourteen lines in a Shakespearean sonnet. The first twelve lines are divided into three quatrains with four lines each. In the three quatrains the poet establishes a theme or problem and then resolves it in the final two lines, called the couplet. The rhyme scheme of the quatrains is abab cdcd efef. The couplet has the rhyme scheme gg. This sonnet structure is commonly called the English sonnet or the Shakespearean sonnet, to distinguish it from the Italian Petrarchan sonnet form which has two parts: a rhyming octave (abbaabba) and a rhyming sestet (cdcdcd). The Petrarchan sonnet style was extremely popular with Elizabethan sonneteers, much to Shakespeare's disdain (he mocks the conventional and excessive [Petrarchan style in Sonnet 130](#)).

Only three of Shakespeare's 154 sonnets do not conform to this structure: [Sonnet 99](#), which has 15 lines; [Sonnet 126](#), which has 12 lines; and [Sonnet 145](#), which is written in iambic tetrameter.

Mabillard, Amanda. *Shakespearean Sonnet Basics: Iambic Pentameter and the English Sonnet Style*. [Shakespeare Online](#). 20 Aug. 2000. (date when you accessed the information) < <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/sonnetstyle.html> >.