

Reading Guide: Forms

There are two general forms we will concern ourselves with: verse and prose. Verse is metered, prose is not. Poetry is a **genre**, or type (from the Latin *genus*, meaning kind or race; a category). Other genres include **drama**, **fiction**, **biography**, etc.

POETRY. Poetry is described formally by its foot, line, and stanza.

1. **Foot.** Iambic, trochaic, dactylic, etc.
2. **Line.** Monometer, dimeter, trimeter, tetrameter, Alexandrine, etc.
3. **Stanza.** Sonnet, ballad, elegy, sestet, couplet, etc.

Each of these designations may give rise to a particular tradition; for example, the sonnet, which gives rise to famous sequences, such as those of Shakespeare. The following list is taken from entries in Lewis Turco, *The New Book of Forms* (Univ. Press of New England, 1986).

Acrostic. First letters of first lines read vertically spell something.

Alcaic. (Greek) acephalous iamb, followed by two trochees and two dactyls (x2), then acephalous iamb and four trochees (x1), then two dactyls and two trochees.

Alexandrine. A line of iambic hexameter.

Ballad. Any meter, any rhyme; stanza usually a⁴b³c⁴b³. Think Bob Dylan.

Ballade. French. Line usually 8-10 syllables; stanza of 28 lines, divided into 3 octaves and 1 quatrain, called the *envoy*. The last line of each stanza is the *refrain*.

Versions include **Ballade supreme**, **chant royal**, and **huitaine**.

Bob and Wheel. English form. Stanza is a quintet; the fifth line is enjambed, and is continued by the first line of the next stanza, usually shorter, which rhymes with lines 3 and 5. Example is *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Canzone. Italian. Three movements of three stanzas. The first two stanzas are structured alike. Usually in 7- or 10-syllable lines. Ends with a valediction.

Carol. Originally comprised of a couplet rhymed aa, followed by quatrains rhyming bbba. Couplet could be repeated as a refrain.

Casbairdne. Irish. "A quatrain stanza of heptasyllabic lines with trisyllabic endings.

Lines two (2) and (4) rhyme, and lines (1) and (3) consonant with them. There are at least two cross-rhymes in each couplet. ... There is alliteration ... the final syllable of line four (4) alliterating with *the preceding stressed word*." Wow!

Choka. Japanese. Any form, but must be unrhymed alternating 5- and 7-syllable lines, ending with a 7-syllable line.

Choriambic. Greek line. 2 trochees, 1 iamb, 1 trochee, 1 iamb, 1 trochee, 2 iambs.

Cinquain. American. Unrhymed 5-line: 2, 4, 6, 8, 2 syllables, respectively.

- Common Measure.** Stanza usually $a^4b^3c^4b^3$ like the ballad. But iambic. (Iambic tetrameter line is called the **long measure**).
- Couplet.** Two lines acting as a unit, usually rhymed.
- Edda Measure.** Norse eddic poetry. Typically in quatrains, each line divided into two hemistiches of two stresses (the third stress alliterates with either or both of the first 2). Similar to Old English line.
- Elegiac.** Greek couplet. First line in **classical hexameter**** (first four feet either spondees or dactyls, fifth dactyl, sixth spondee); second line in **classical pentameter** (2 dactyls, 1 spondee, then 2 anapests). Rhymed or unrhymed.
- Haiku.** Japanese. Tercet of 5, 7, and 5 syllables, respectively. (Originally *hokku*, Chinese, the first three lines of a **regna chain**.)
- Heroic.** Iambic pentameter blank verse. A distich is **heroic couplet**, and a quatrain is **heroic stanza**. Traditionally the epic form.
- Kyrielle.** French. Quatrain stanza of octosyllabic lines; last line of each stanza is a refrain. Usually rhymed.
- Lai.** French. Nine-line stanza, each line 5 syllables. Rhymed *aabaabaab*. B lines are 2 syllables long.
- Limerick.** Originally French (or English descendant of **Madsong stanza**). Quintet rhyming *aabba*. Lines 1, 2, 5 run : iamb, 2 anapests; lines 3 and 4 are either iamb+anapest or 2 anapests.
- Lyric.** Subgenre of poetry, means “song” (from Gr. lyre, or harp).
Alba (Aubade). Song to the morning.
Anacreontic. In praise of wine, women, and song.
Catch or Roundelay. Lyric with a refrain.
Canzone. Song about beauty and Love (e.g. “To His Coy Mistress”)
Chantey. Work song.
Dithyramb. Honors revelry.
Elegy. Serious meditation, usually on death. Like **obsequy**, **dirge** or **threnody**.
Epithalamion. Martial or marital song.
Lament. Complaint.
Blues. Modern complaint.
Madrigal. Sung, and about love.
Paean. Praise to the gods.
Panegyric or Encomium. Praise of particular men or women.
- Ode.** Serious lyric, usually in three movements.
Pindaric Ode. (After Pindar, Greek 5th C B.C.). Comprised of *strophe* (or turning), *antistrophe* (or counter-turn), and *epode* (or after-song). The strophe presents the complex metrical and syntactic structure, mirrored in the antistrophe.
English Ode. (Also Keatsian, after Keats). 3 x 10-line iambic pentameter stanzas, rhyming *ababcdecde*, each stanza with independent rhymes.
Horatian Ode. (Also **homostrophic ode**). Irregular number of similar stanzas.
- Ottava Rima.** Octave stanza in iambic pentameter, rhyming *abababcc*.
- Poulter’s measure.** English, rhymed couplet, alternates Alexandrine with **fourteener**, a line of 14 syllables in iambs with a caesura after the 3rd.
- Rime Couée.** French, sestet. Couplet, short line, couplet, short line—short lines rhyme.
- Rime Royal.** English-Scottish, septet. Iambic pentameter, rhymes *ababbcc*.

- Rondel.** French. 13 lines: 2 quatrains, 1 quintet. First line same as 7th and 13th. 2nd same as 8th.
- Roundel.** English. 11 lines: 1 quatrain, 1 tercet, 1 quatrain. First line same as 4th and 11th, 1st line rhymes internally with 2nd.
- Rubai.** Arabic, quatrain. Rhymes *aaba*. A **rubaiyat** is a series of these quatrains, 3rd line rhymes with 1st of following quatrain (e.g. "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening.")
- Sapphic.** Greek (from Sappho, 7th-C B.C., from Lesbos). Quatrain of 3 **Sapphic lines** (11 syllables, 5 feet, 4 trochees around a central dactyl) and one **adonic** (dactyl then trochee).
- Sestina.** French. 39 lines: 6 sestets and 1 tercet (an *envoi*), unrhymed. End-words are reused throughout the poem. (Number first stanza's lines 1-6; next stanza's first line uses end word 6, second line uses end word 1; and so on following this sequence: 615243. Repeat for third stanza by numbering stanza 2 lines 1-6, and applying sequence 615243 to stanza 3; etc.) Envoi 1=S[stanza]1,[line]2; 2=S1,4; 3=S1,6; and envoi ends with 1=S1,5; 2=S1,3; 3=S1,1.
- Somonka.** Japanese. Written by two authors, call and response about love. Each writes a 5-line stanza of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.
- Sonnet.** Italian, "little song." The Italian (or Petrarchian, after the poet Petrarch) divides into an **octave** rhyming *abbaabba* and a **sestet** rhyming *cdecde* or *cdcdcd*. Between the octave and the sestet is the **volta**, or turn, which is a semantic division describing a "turn of thought."
 The English (or Shakespearean) divides into three **quatrains**, rhyming *abab cdcd efef*, and a **couplet** rhyming *gg*. The volta sits between the third quatrain and the couplet. A variation is the Spenserian sonnet, which rhymes *abab bcbc cdcd ee*. There are a number of modern variations, including the alternating, the linked, and the double sonnets.
- Spenserian Stanza.** 9 lines: 8 iambic pentameters followed by an Alexandrine.
- Terza Rima.** Italian. Iambic pentameter lines, in tercet, linked; rhymes *aba*, and *b* rhymes with 1st line of next stanza. Ends with a couplet.
- Villanelle.** French. 19 lines: 5 tercets, 1 quatrain. Line 1 same as 6, 12, 18; line 3 same as 9, 15, 19. (e.g., "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night.")