

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Poetry Track

Step Two: Types of Poem Structures

In today's poetry world, most often poets will write in free verse, which means they don't follow a specific structure and can make up their own rules. They may have a rhyme scheme or they may not. They may make up their own "rules" or structure to follow, or they may not. If you like writing in free verse, and only want to write in free verse, that's fine. However, if you want to challenge yourself and use structures, below you'll find a list of options. Your collection can feature the same structure throughout, or you may switch it up as you go. It's completely up to you.

There are hundreds of different poem structures out there, way more than any one person needs to know about. I've selected a few to put on this list, but know that you are welcome to use any structure you wish, if you want to look up your own structures or use one that you already know about that isn't on this list (like the Sestina).

Traditional Types of Structured Poems

1. Sonnet

- Sonnets are practically synonymous with Shakespeare, but there are actually two different kinds of this famous poetic form. Having originated in 13th century Italy, the sonnet usually deals with love and has two common forms: the Petrarchan (named for its famous practitioner, the poet Petrarch) and the Shakespearean (also known as the Elizabethan sonnet). Each type contains 14 lines but comes with its own set of rules.
- **Petrarchan Sonnet**
 - Characteristics and Rules:
 - 2 stanzas
 - Presents an argument, observation, or question in the first 8 lines
 - Turn (or "volta") between 8th and 9th lines
 - Second stanza answers the question or issue posed in the first
 - Rhyme Scheme: ABBA, ABBA, CDECDE
- **Shakespearean Sonnet**
 - 3 quatrains (4 lines each) and a couplet (2 lines)
 - Couplet usually forms a conclusion
 - Rhyme scheme: ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG

2. Villanelle

- Villanelles have even more specific rules than sonnets. Luckily, many of the lines are repetitions, but this means you'll have to take care to make those lines meaningful.

- **Villanelle Characteristics and Rules**
 - 19 lines
 - 5 stanzas of 3 lines each
 - 1 closing stanza of 4 lines
 - Rhyme scheme: ABA, ABA, ABA, ABA, ABA, ABAA
 - Line 1 repeats in lines 6, 12, and 18
 - Line 3 repeats in lines 9, 15, and 19
- **Examples of Villanelles**
 - “The Waking” by Theodore Roethke
 - “Do not go gentle into that good night” by Dylan Thomas

3. Haiku

- The haiku originated in 17th century Japan. Although they usually refer to nature, the only real rule applies to the number of syllables in each line, so you can let your imagination run wild with this one.
- **Haiku Characteristics and Rules**
 - 3 lines
 - Line 1 contains 5 syllables
 - Line 2 contains 7 syllables
 - Line 3 contains 5 syllables

4. Ekphrastic Poems

- Ekphrastic poems don’t really have specific rules, but they do speak of another work of art.
- Ekphrasis comes from the Greek word for “description,” and that’s exactly what this poem should do: vividly describe a painting, statue, photograph, or story. One famous example is found in the Iliad, where Homer refers to Achilles’ shield.

5. Concrete Poems

- Concrete poetry is designed to take a particular shape or form on the page. Poets can manipulate spacing or layout to emphasize a theme or important element in the text, or sometimes they can take the literal shape of their subjects.
- **Example of Concrete Poetry**
 - “The Altar” by George Herbert was intended to resemble a church altar

6. Elegy

- The elegy is another type of poem that lacks particular rules, but it usually is written in mourning following a death. They can be written for a particular person, or treat the subject of loss more generally.
- **Example of an Elegy**

- One famous example of an elegy is Walt Whitman's "O Captain, My Captain," which Whitman wrote following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln

7. Epigram

- Epigrams are short, witty, and often satirical poems that usually take the form of a couplet or quatrain (2-4 lines in length).
- **Example of an Epigram**
 - An example of this wit is provided by Samuel Taylor Coleridge:
Sir, I admit your general rule,
That every poet is a fool,
But you yourself may serve to show it,
That every fool is not a poet.

8. Limerick

- Limericks are humorous poems that have a more distinct rhythm. Their subject matter is sometimes crude, but always designed to offer laughs.
- **Limerick Characteristics and Rules**
 - 5 lines
 - 2 longer lines (usually 7-10 syllables)
 - 2 shorter lines (usually 5-7 syllables)
 - 1 closing line to bring the joke home (7-10 syllables)
 - Rhyme scheme: AABBA
- **Example of a Limerick**
There once was an old man of Nantucket
Who kept all his cash in a bucket
His daughter, called Nan,
Ran away with a man,
And as for the bucket, Nantucket.

9. Ballad

- Ballads usually take a narrative form to tell us stories. They are often arranged in quatrains, but the form is loose enough that writers can easily modify it.
- **Ballad Characteristics and Rules**
 - Typically arranged in groups of 4 lines
 - Rhyme scheme: ABAB or ABCB
- **Examples of Ballads**
 - "Annabel Lee" by Edgar Allan Poe (first two stanzas):

10. Ode

- Odes address a specific person, thing, or event. The ode is believed to have been invented by the ancient Greeks, who would sing their odes. Modern odes follow an irregular pattern and are not required to rhyme.
- **Example of an Ode**

- “Ode to the West Wind” by Percy Bysshe Shelley

Other Types of Structures

1. Blackout Poetry

- A blackout poem is when a poet takes a marker (usually black marker) to already established text—like in a newspaper—and starts redacting words until a poem is formed. The key thing with a blackout poem is that the text AND redacted text form a sort of visual poem.

2. Erasure (Found) Poetry

- An erasure poem is any poem that sculpts itself out of another larger text. Meaning you could take another work, pull out words and phrases you like, and arrange it into a new poem.

3. Echo Verse Poems

- Unlike many of the poetic forms, echo verse has a pretty simple rule: Repeat the end syllable(s) of each line. No other rules.
- There are two ways to do this: Repeat the ending syllable(s) at the end of the same line (as in the example below); or repeat the ending syllable(s) on its own line directly beneath each line. I’ll include a variant example below.

- **Echo Verse Example:**

something to talk about, by Robert Lee Brewer

Is there anything to know? No!
 Or a person to betray? A
 man is doomed by other men; men
 find solace in nothing; nothing
 leads to what no one can know. No,
 I’d rather find something something.

- **Variant Example of Echo Verse:**

something to talk about, by Robert Lee Brewer

Is there anything to know?
 No!

Or a person to betray?
 A

man is doomed by other men;
 men

find solace in nothing;
 nothing

leads to what no one can know.
No,

I'd rather find something
something.

4. Golden Shovel

- Take a line (or lines) from a poem you admire.
- Use each word in the line (or lines) as an end word in your poem.
- Keep the end words in order.
- Give credit to the poet who originally wrote the line (or lines).
- The new poem does not have to be about the same subject as the poem that offers the end words.
- If you pull a line with six words, your poem would be six lines long. If you pull a stanza with 24 words, your poem would be 24 lines long. And so on.
- If it's still kind of abstract, read these two poems to see how Terrance Hayes used a Gwendolyn Brooks poem to write the first golden shovel:
 - "We Real Cool," by Gwendolyn Brooks (original poem)
 - "The Golden Shovel," by Terrance Hayes (golden shovel poem)

5. List Poem

- Basically, a list poem (also known as a catalog poem) is a poem that lists things, whether names, places, actions, thoughts, images, etc. It's a very flexible and fun form to work with.

6. Mirror Poetry

- Basically you can read the poem either top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top. Almost like two poems in one. Often times, when you read the "mirror" version of the poem (bottom-to-top) the meaning changes.