English Literature GCSE

Structure, Form, Rhyming and Meter Explanation Guide

Note: *this guide goes beyond the expectations of the GCSE English Literature specification - it may provide some useful points and context for grade 7/8/9 students or if you're intending to take English Literature at A-Level.*

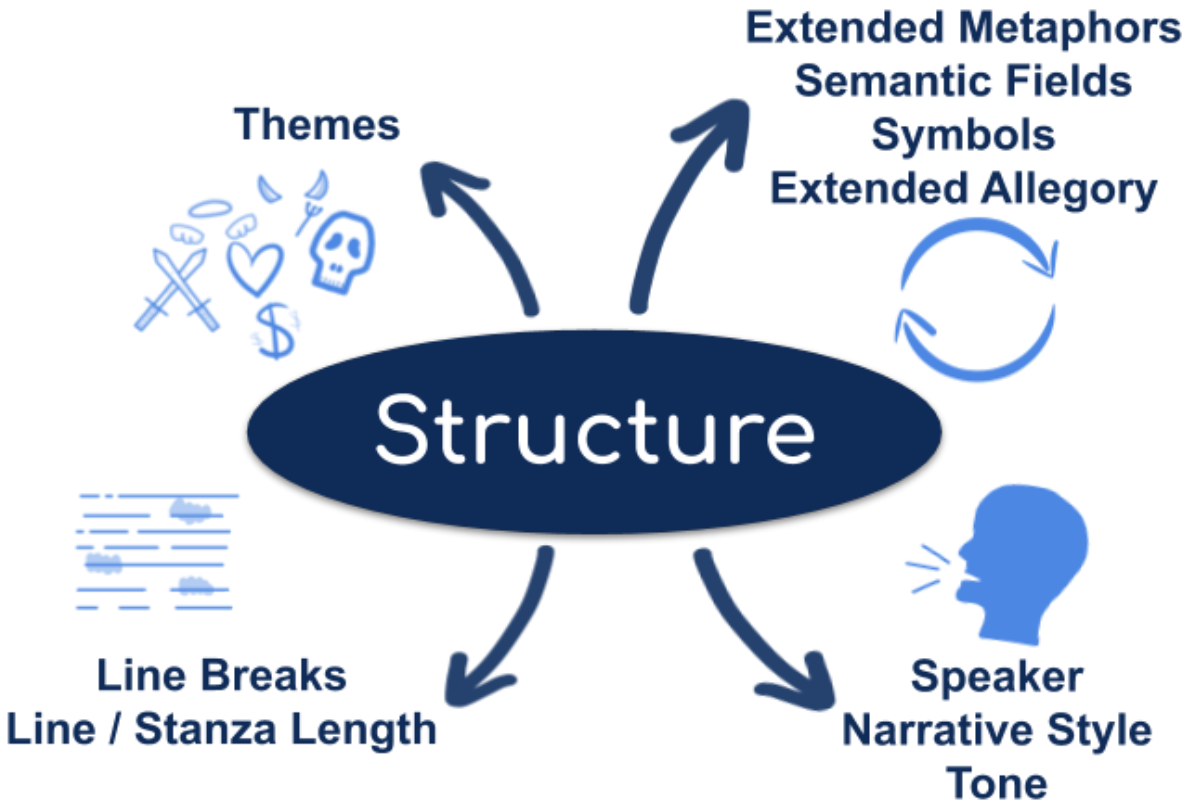
Structure

Introduction

It is easy to get confused between **structure** and **form**, especially as the two concepts **overlap** a lot.

The basic **differences** are:

Structure	Form
• Semantic fields, themes, foreshadowing, repetition. • Sentence structure. • Narrative structure, the speaker's voice and different perspectives included.	• Genre. • 'Type' of text, such as play, poem, or novel. • How the poem appears on the page, and the physical organisation of the stanzas.



The **structure of a poem** is carefully thought out by the poet and either **mirrors the thematic content** they include or serves to **juxtapose** it. In both cases, the poet is using structure to **emphasise the point(s) they're trying to make** and **messages they're trying to impart** through their writing.

Meter

Introduction

Poetry is written, for the most part, in lines. These lines have **individual patterns** which provide them with rhythm and pace - and **these patterns are called meters**.

Meters often **run over lines**. So, meters are basically combinations of **unstressed and stressed syllables**. You place more **emphasis** when speaking a **stressed syllable** than an unstressed syllable. This can be shown in poems, drama, even nursery rhymes - for example, 'Hickory Dickory Dock":

Hickory, **dick**ory, **dock**.
The **mouse** ran **up** the **clock**.
The **clock** struck **one**,
The **mouse** ran **down**,
Hickory, **dick**ory, **dock**.

The bolded letters are sections of **stressed syllables**, compared to unstressed syllables. When you read this rhyme out loud, you place **more emphasis** on the bold sections. Give it a go!

Types of Meter

If we arrange these stressed and unstressed syllables into **different patterns**, we create a set of recognisable **'feet'** - which are **units of sets of stressed and unstressed syllables**. The most common four are:

Anapest

da-da-**DA**

For example, the word "un-der-**STAND**", the phrase "in the **BLINK** of an **EYE**", or Dr. Seuss' *Oh, the Places You'll Go:*

You have **BRAINS** in your **HEAD**.
You have **FEET** in your **SHOES**.
You can **STEER** yourself
ANy dir**ECT**ion you **CHOOSE**.

Dactyl

DA-da-da

For example, the word "**BUFF**-al-o", the phrase "**ACT**ions speak **LOUD**er than **WORDS**", or Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*:

CANNon to **RIGHT** of them,
CANNon to **LEFT** of them,
CANNon in **FRONT** of them
VOLLeyed and **THUN**dered;

Lamb

da-**DA**

For example, the word “em-**PLOY**”, the phrase “of **MICE** and **MEN**”, or Houseman’s *When I was One-and-Twenty*:

When **I** was **ONE**-and-**TWENTY**
I **HEARD** a **WISE** man **SAY**,
'Give **CROWNS** and **POUNDS** and **GUINEAS**
But **NOT** your **HEART** a**WAY**;

This is the **most common form of meter** found in poetry and drama, and it is used by Shakespeare in all of his works.

Trochee

DA-da

For example, the word “**HAM**-mer”, the phrase “**DOCT**-or **WHEEL**-er”, or much of Poe’s *The Raven*:

ONCE up**ON** a **MID**night **DREAR**y,
WHILE I **POND**ered, **WEAK** and **WEAR**y,
Over **MANY** a **QUAINT** and **CURiOUS**
vol**UME** of **FOR**gott**EN** lore—
WHILE I **NOD**ded, **NEAR**ly **NAP**ping,
SUDden**LY** there **CAME** a **TAP**ping,

ONE FOOT	MONOMETER
TWO FEET	DIMETER
THREE FEET	TRIMETER
FOUR FEET	TETRAMETER
FIVE FEET	PENTAMETER
SIX FEET	HEXAMETER

Why is Meter Important to Understanding Poetry?

Sometimes a poet will **change the meter** within their poems to emphasise lines which have especially important meanings. If there is a **consistent meter to a poem** you should look our for sudden **breaks in meter** or there are lines which don't adhere to the meter. Consider these lines on an **individual basis** and try to work out **why** the poet has chosen to highlight them.

Assigning a **particular type of meter** to a specific character can reveal details about them. For example, Shakespeare often applies **iambic pentameter** exclusively to the **wealthy or upper class** characters.

It can provide **texture** to the piece of poetry, and it's often suggested that meter has a more **appealing sound to the human ear** when the piece is read out loud, as it has a more **steady rhythmic pattern**.

By manipulating or selecting a particular meter, poems can create different **tones**, such as **melancholic** or **upbeat**. It can also be used to **juxtapose** or **reinforce** the themes explored in the language of the poem.

Work out which type of feet these words/phrases/lines are in:

1	Shatter	6	I wandered lonely as a cloud // That floats on high o'er dales and hills [I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud, W. Wordsworth]
2	Horrible	7	We will walk // long and hard, // just to find // my lost bard.
3	Bitterly	8	In the heat of the day, in the cool of the pool. [Horton Hears a Who, Dr. Seuss]
4	Get a life	9	Double, double toil and trouble; // Fire burn, and caldron bubble. [Macbeth, Shakespeare]
5	Slacker	10	Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness. [When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed - W. Whitman]

ANSWERS - Trochee, Dactyl, Dactyl, Anapest, Trochee, Lamb, Anapest, Anapest, Trochee, Dactyl

Form

Introduction

Poetic form describes which set of **rules a poem follows**. These can include the number of lines, lengths of stanzas, how many stanzas the poem has, the rhyming scheme the poet uses, as well as more thematic elements. Often, particularly in the early modern period, poets would write a series of sonnets focused on a unifying subject. Examples of poets who did this are Shakespeare and Elizabeth Barrett-Browning.

Types of Form

Sonnet

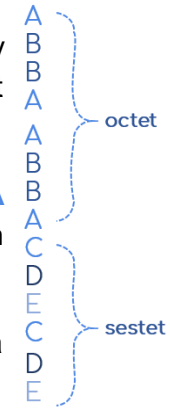
The most famous type of poetic form is the **SONNET**, but even within this general umbrella there are different types of sonnet. They are differentiated based on the stanza length and rhyming scheme the sonnet uses. The main types are:

Italian / Petrarchan

This was the **earliest form of poem** and was introduced in the **14th century** by the poet Francesco Petrach, however it is often thought he didn't actually invent the form.

It uses **EIGHT LINES** (octet) as the first stanza, with the rhyme scheme **ABBA ABBA**, then **SIX LINES (sestet)**, which can follow multiple rhyming patterns with the most common CDECDE and CDCCDC.

It is usually used to present an argument or commentary, so normally there's a volta (shift in tone) occuring after the eighth line.

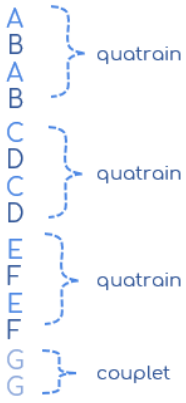


Shakespearean

Shakespeare adapted the **traditional format of the Petrarchan sonnet**.

He uses THREE stanzas of FOUR LINES (quatrains) then a concluding stanza of TWO LINES (couplet). The rhyme scheme employed is normally ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

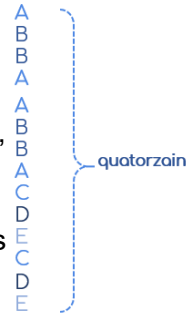
He'd often used ten syllables per line, phrased in the structure of iambic pentameter.



Miltonic

John Milton decided to stop using the form of sonnet to write a series of poems, instead writing the occasional poem in sonnet form.

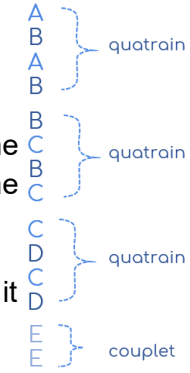
They'll often focus on internal conflict rather than the material world, sometimes working beyond the normal limits of length and rhyme.



Spenserian

Pioneered by the English poet from the 16th century, Edmund Spenser, the Spenserian sonnet copies the structure from Shakespeare, yet uses the rhyme scheme ABAB BCBC CDCD EE.

This is a kind of merge of the Shakespearean sonnet and Petrachan sonnet, as it employs the couplet form throughout but retains the Shakespearean structure.



- Poets tend to use sonnets if they want to use a **traditional structure**, which carries a lot of **historical weight**.
- They're also associated with **love poetry**, particularly **Pechrarchan**, so if this is a key theme the poet is working with in the poem a sonnet is an ideal form to use as the reader will have **preconceptions about the theme of love**.
- Petrach also explored the concept that poetry and other art forms will outlive their creators, using it to explore the theme of **eventuality** and the **finite nature of life**.

Villanelle

This is a french poetic form which uses **five stanzas of three lines** followed by a **concluding quatrain**. The **first** and **third** lines from the first stanza alternatingly repeat in the other four stanzas, before forming the final couplet in quatrain at the end of the poem. An example of the Villanelle is Edwin Arlington Robinson's *The House of the Hill:*

They are all gone away,
The House is shut and still,
There is nothing more to say.

Through broken walls and gray
The winds blow bleak and shrill:
They are all gone away.

Nor is there one to-day
To speak them good or ill:
There is nothing more to say.

Why is it then we stray
Around the sunken sill?
They are all gone away,

And our poor fancy-play
For them is wasted skill:
There is nothing more to say.

There is ruin and decay
In the House on the Hill:
They are all gone away,
There is nothing more to say.

As you can see, the first and third lines from the first stanza is repeated throughout the poem as highlighted above. They then come together at the end to create a final rhyming couplet.

Ballad

A ballad is a **narrative song** which is traditionally communicated orally, usually following the form of **ABCB rhyming quatrains**.

There is a separation between traditional folk ballads and more 'literary' ballads, which began to originate in the renaissance.

Blank Verse

This is poetry written **unrhymed**, but in **iambic pentameter** - which is ten syllables per line, with pairs of beats going da-**DA**, unstressed and stressed.

Poems which are written in blank verse tend to be dramatic monologues or epic poems, such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Ode

Lyric poem, often with a tone of formality, which celebrates a person, concept or place. In Ancient Greece, an ode would be a very public poem, often set to music, which would be constructed for and played at athletic victories and similar events.

They vary a lot in the stanza form and line length, and typically don't employ a rhyming scheme.

Epic

An epic poem is a long narrative poem, within which a 'hero' completes a journey or acts in an event with historical, or mythical, significance. Examples include *Beowulf* and *Paradise Lost*.

Rhyming

Introduction

Poets either decide to use a **rhyming scheme** or write in **free verse** when structuring their poem.

Many poets, such as Keats in his odes, use a **very specific rhyme scheme** [ABABCDECDE] across lots of separate poems.

Poets can also use **internal rhymes**, where words **rhyme within a line** rather than between two different lines, or use **half-rhymes**, which are a pair of words that almost rhyme but don't, such as 'gun' and 'thumb'.

Types of Rhyme Schemes

- **ABAB [alternate rhyming scheme]**
  This is very typical of poems using **four-line [quatrain] length stranzas**. The first and third lines rhyme and the second and fourth lines rhyme.

A
B
A
B

- **AABB [coupled rhyme]**
  Pairs of rhyming lines are referred to as **couplets**. They're often very popular in forms such as **sonnets** - Shakespearean sonnets always end in rhyming couplets, such as at the end of *Sonnet 88*, where 'belong' and 'wrong' rhyme:

A
A
B
B

Such is my love, to thee I so **belong**,
That for thy right, myself will bear all **wrong**.

- **ABCB**
  This is a simple **four-lined rhyme**, and often used when the poet is following this scheme for the entire poem.

A
B
C
B

- **Half-Rhyme**
  This is when the **stressed syllables** of **ending consonants** are the **same** between the two words, but the vowel sounds aren't. For example, "ho**ld**" and "ba**ld**" have the common consonant sound "**ld**" at the end but the vowel sounds don't rhyme, therefore this pair are half-rhymes. Other examples include "lo**ng**" & "swi**ng**" and "ba**ld**" & "he**ld**".

- **Internal Rhyme**
  Using **internal rhyme** is often an easier and more flexible way for a poet to ensure they have a **good rhythm and pace** working in their poem. Types of rhyme include:
    - **Same line internal rhyme**, where you can have a middle word rhyming with the word at the end of the stanza, such as "we **walked** and we **talked**".
    - There's also **separate line internal rhyme**, which is when the rhyme comes from two or more words in the middle of consecutive lines, such as "yesterday we **went** and got a goat // today we used the **bent** and bad old boat".

- **ABABBCBC [ballade]**
  This is a **lyrical poem** which typically have **three stanzas of eight lines each**, concluding in a quatrain, with the last time of each stanza being the same every time.

Monorhyme
Whereby **all the lines in a stanza**, or sometimes the whole poem, end with the **same rhyme**. If this is just three lines, it can be called a 'triplet'. For example:

We walked for hours in the **hot**,
hot sun, but then we saw it was **not**
where we'd gone and aimed our **shot**.

Significance of rhyming schemes in poetry

- The use of **some kind of rhyme** such as **couplets** are often used in **romantic poetry**, so this may suggest a poem has a **romantic theme** to it.

- It's an integral backbone to the **structure** of a poem, and can be used to **create a sense of balance** and manage the **rhythm** of the poem, as well as providing a sort of orally-pleasing aesthetic: it naturally sounds good to the human ear.

- A poet can choose to **deviate from a set rhyming scheme** which they've established in a poem if they are wishing to **draw attention** to a particularly important line or idea in a section of the text.

"*When I have fears*" - Keats

Structure & form analysis

We can see that the rhyming scheme is very common of a Shakespearean sonnet.

Uses a semantic field of the harvest and other natural imagery to introduce the theme of change and time passing.

The exploration of Keats' fear of mortality is typical of his work.

All the lines have ten syllables, in iambic pentameter, as highlighted in the first quatrain. This provides a stable backdrop of structure to contrast the philosophical and deep, unanswerable questions he is posing in the first couple of stanzas.

A	When I have fears that I may cease to be
B	Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
A	Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,
B	Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
	/
C	When I behold, upon the night's starred face,
D	Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
C	And think that I may never live to trace
D	Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
	/
E	And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
F	That I shall never look upon thee more,
E	Never have relish in the faery power
F	Of unreflecting love—then on the shore
	/
G	Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
G	Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

We can separate the poem into three quatrains and one concluding couplet as it is a Shakespearean sonnet. This will help us understand Keats decisions when it comes to the poem's narrative.

Keats seems to structurally separate his exploration of the themes of time and love, which may suggest he is implying love is timeless.

The first line is presented as entirely monosyllabic, which may suggest the poem is speaking with a tone of sincerity and frankness.

The poem is split between Keats referencing his fears towards death in the first twelve lines, before concluding and dismissing almost these thoughts in the final two and a half lines

How does Keats present fears towards death in his poem "*When I have fears*"?

Keats employs a tone of sincerity and frankness within his poem which is displayed through the entirely **monosyllabic first line**. This engages the reader and encourages them to contemplate the prospect of death as they read the poem. As the poem is in the form of a **Shakespearan sonnet**, Keats is constructing an argument; he discusses his fears towards death in the first twelve lines before concluding on and dismissing them in the final two and a half lines. The use of the dash separating the line "Of unreflecting love - then on the shore" physically separates his argument from the conclusion. Furthermore, Keats formats all his lines in **iambic pentameter**, providing a stable structure to contrast the philosophically complex, even unanswerable themes, he introduces in the first three stanzas. These themes along with the exploration of Keats' fear of his own mortality is typical in his work.