

## So, You Want To Write A Sonnet?

Here are some easy tips on writing an Elizabethan Sonnet, provided by The Philadelphia Shakespeare Theatre

1) An Elizabethan, or Shakespearean, Sonnet is defined by 14 lines of **iambic pentameter** with an ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG rhyme scheme. This rhyme scheme is defined below in Shakespeare's Sonnet 18.

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

← As you can see here, the first and third lines rhyme. This makes them an "A." The second and fourth lines rhyme, as well, making them a "B" rhyme.

This rhyme scheme is repeated throughout the sonnet. For instance, in the second stanza: the fifth and seventh line rhyme ("shines" and "declines" ends the C lines) and the sixth and eighth ("dimmed" and "untrimmed" end the D lines).

← The sonnet ends with two lines that rhyme with each other. This is called a "**couplet**."

2) What's iambic pentameter, you ask? Let's break it down!

An **iamb** is one poetic foot of two syllables, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. (i.e. da-DUM) The da-DUM of a human heartbeat is the most common example of this rhythm. (Which makes it perfect for love poems, don't you think?)

**Pentameter** means that there are five iambs. (i.e. da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM, da-DUM)

Iambic Pentameter can easily be seen in Sonnet 18:

shall **I** com**PARE** thee **TO** a **SUM**mer's **DAY**  
thou **ART** more **LOVE**ly **AND** more **TEMP**er**ATE**

And in this line from ROMEO AND JULIET. Note the words that are stressed – how important are they to the line? What about the words that are unstressed?

my **GRAVE** is **LIKE** to **BE** my **WED**ding **BED**

3) Make sure you have included the correct amount of lines!

An Elizabethan Sonnet is a fourteen line poem. It is split into three stanzas of four lines and finished with a rhyming couplet.

Typically, the **first four lines (or quatrain) introduce an idea** (like someone's love being like a summer's day). The **second quatrain develops this idea** further (the sun can sometimes be too hot or not shine at all), and the **third quatrain twists that idea**, adding a surprise thought to

the original statement. In this example, the subject of this sonnet will never see their beauty dim, as it is now captured in the lines of this poem. The **couplet at the end tends to wrap up all of these ideas or completely shatter the ideas** introduced in the poem beforehand. In this case, it tells us exactly how the subject of this poem will never die: It is preserved in the poem that will last as “long as men can breathe or eyes can see.”

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 in time thou grow'st:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

4) Remember – love isn't always raindrops and roses!

Shakespeare wrote about the dark sides of love as well. When writing your sonnet – think about love AND loss. Sometimes they go hand in hand!