

So far we have determined that poetry can be rhymed or unrhymed. Its lines can stick to a set syllable count (or not, if you want to write free-form). It can also include a repeating refrain. In addition to this, poetry can have a set rhythm which can be altered to add interest. And you can insert pauses at the end or in the middle of the lines.

But this idea of rhythmic verse deserves a second look. So far every poem we've looked at that has a set rhythm also has a set rhyme scheme. Is there such a thing as unrhymed metered verse? Of course there is. Let's take a look at it...



## Blank Verse

After the sonnet's rigid stanzas with their strict rhythm and rhyme, you may be relieved to hear that you can finally kick off your shoes and relax a bit. We move on now to a very versatile style that is so much easier than the sonnet that I'm getting a little giddy. Ok, maybe giddy is too strong a word – but I *do* find sonnets hard to write and am rather glad not to be doing them anymore. Now we can write blank verse -- a style that has no set format, an unlimited number of lines and doesn't rhyme. It is usually written in iambic pentameter (or five iambic feet). Keeping to that rhythm is your only concern. It can be a few lines long or go on for hundreds of pages, it's up to you. The main characteristic of blank verse is that it sounds very much like normal speech and best of all, there is a lot of it about. The list of examples that I could share with you seems endless.

So let's start with the man himself -- William Shakespeare and his play *Julius Caesar*. To fill you in on what's going on: Caesar had amassed too much power -- a fact that made the Roman senators very nervous. A band of them killed Caesar, stabbing him repeatedly "for the good of the republic." In the following speech, Caesar's right-hand man, Mark Antony, is seeking to inflame the citizens of Rome against the assassins. He shows them Caesar's bloody cloak...

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now....  
Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through;  
See what a rent the envious Casca made;  
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabbed  
And as he plucked his cursed steel away,  
Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it....  
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar's angel.  
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar loved him!  
This was the most unkindest cut of all;  
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,  
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors' arms,  
Quite vanquished him. Then burst his mighty heart... great Caesar fell.  
O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!  
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,  
Whilst bloody treason flourished over us.

It's very well done, isn't it? When read aloud, these lines of unrhymed iambic pentameter sound very natural and flow like normal speech. Now this is interesting, because now you are not confined to rhyme and stanzas and formulas, now you can write a poem that sounds ... well, like you. You can write plays, like Shakespeare, using blank verse for the dialogue. You can have one long, uninterrupted poem or you can break your lines up into stanzas -- but you get to decide how long the stanzas are. [These stanzas are now referred to as "verse paragraphs" -- it's a new name, but

essentially it's the same thing.] Stick to the rhythm, at least loosely, but otherwise do what you will.

Ah, freedom: it's a beautiful thing. And it is just what budding poets need as you begin to develop the poetry of the future. Speaking of beautiful things, here are a few more examples of blank verse, courtesy of the masters. For the full effect, read them aloud.

Excerpt from Ulysses

~by Alfred Lord Tennyson

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink  
Life to the lees; all times I have enjoyed  
Greatly, have suffered greatly, both with those  
That loved me, and alone....

Stanza one of The Snowstorm

~by Ralph Waldo Emerson

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,  
Arrives the snow, and driving o'er the fields,  
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air  
Hides hills and woods, the river, the heavens,  
And veils the farmhouse at the garden's end.  
The sled and traveler stopped, the courier's feet  
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit  
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed  
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Excerpt from Book I of Paradise Lost

~by John Milton

*Satan, once an angel in heaven, tries to violently overthrow God who casts him into a burning lake (it's exciting stuff, this) ...*

A dungeon horrible, on all sides round,  
As one great furnace flamed; yet from those flames  
No light; but rather darkness visible  
Served only to discover sights of woe,  
Regions of sorrow, doleful shades, where peace  
And rest can never dwell, hope never comes  
That comes to all, but torture without end.

I know that I'm offering you a lot of excerpts or bits of poems here. The

reason is simple: many of these poems are very long. I have, sitting in front of me, a shortened version of Paradise Lost that is 143 pages long. Likewise, Tennyson's Idylls of the King is 296 pages in length. I didn't think you'd want to read the whole thing by way of an example. And so, we'll treat these big and wonderful poems a little like a buffet table of party food. You may only get the poetic equivalent of a cocktail sausage, but hopefully that will be enough to entice you back to the table again and again.

You may have noticed that there are places within these examples where the poet deviates from the iambic rhythm. It only goes to show how truly flexible blank verse can be. Veering from iambic pentameter cannot only help a line flow better, but can add interest and get us away from the monotony of duh Da, duh Da, duh Da. It is also a handy way to emphasize a particular line, to bring a phrase or idea into sharp focus and give it power.

Some poets have dispensed with the iamb altogether. Take, for instance, this passage from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "Hiawatha" which is written in trochaic tetrameter (four trochaic feet or DA duh DA duh DA duh DA duh):

Down the river, o'er the prairies,  
Came the warriors of nations,  
Came the Delawares and Mohawks,  
Came the Choctaws and Comanches,  
Came the Shoshonies and the Blackfeet,  
Came the Pawnees and Omahas....  
And they stood there on the meadow,  
With their weapons and their war-gear,  
Painted like the leaves of Autumn,  
Painted like the sky of morning,  
Wildly glaring at each other;  
In their faces stern defiance,  
In their hearts the feuds of ages,  
The hereditary hatred,  
The ancestral thirst of vengeance.  
Gitche Manito, the mighty,  
The creator of the nations,  
Looked upon them with compassion,  
With paternal love and pity;  
Looked upon their wrath and wrangling  
But as quarrels among children,  
But as feuds and fights of children!...  
"O my children! My poor children!  
Listen to the words of wisdom,  
Listen to the words of warning,  
From the lips of the Great Spirit,  
From the Master of life who made you!  
"I have given you lands to hunt in,

I have given you streams to fish in,  
I have given you bear and bison,  
I have given you roe and reindeer,  
Filled the marshes full of wild-fowl,  
Filled the rivers full of fishes:  
Why then are you not contented?  
Why then will you hunt each other?  
    "I am weary of your quarrels,  
Weary of your wars and bloodshed,  
Of your wrangling and dissensions;  
All your strength is in your union,  
All your danger is in discord;  
Therefore be at peace henceforward,  
And as brothers live together.

Longfellow and Shakespeare, Tennyson and Milton and so many others have used blank verse to brilliant effect. With all these great names swimming before my eyes, I sat down to write my own...

I am all grown and have a woman's strength  
Of arm and mind and independent will.  
And yet I feel that I'm a child and small --  
I sit, the phone pressed to my ear, and hug  
My knees and listen while you tell me, mom,  
Of cancer in your bones -- all words that sound  
Like "good-bye."  
I must be strong for you and never flinch  
At what is coming: loss of hair and loss  
of weight and loss of spark from eyes once bright.  
And when night comes I'll tell myself again  
That I am grown and not a helpless child  
Who cries in darkness for her mother's arms.

Considering what Shakespeare was able to write, I know that my efforts are very humble. But it doesn't really matter. Shakespeare was the voice of his generation, but he cannot speak for us. That is our job. So now it's your turn to try....