



You've stuck to set syllable counts ...

You've stuck to set rhyme schemes ...

You've followed the formulas that dictate the number of lines per stanza ...

Even when you discarded all

of this, you stuck to the iambic pentameter of blank verse.

Well, get ready for a new and decidedly heady taste of real freedom. While blank verse gave you plenty of room to manoeuvre, free verse allows you to fly. It is unrhymed, has no set meter, no format, no set number of lines. So is free verse just the poetic license to run amuck? Almost.

Free verse first appeared in France in the 19<sup>th</sup> century where poets were launching another attempt to replicate the natural rhythms of speech. They called it *vers libre*. In English, it is also known as “open form” verse or “cadenced” verse. And it would appear that cadence is the only regulating factor in free verse. My very old and very beat-up dictionary defines cadence as “rhythm; the measured movement of sound”, and the rise and fall of music or speech.

So if cadence is rhythm, then how is free verse different from, say, blank verse which also has a rhythm? As we saw in the last chapter, blank verse has a set beat that is repeated over and over again (that old familiar duh Da, duh Da, duh Da, duh Da, duh Da of iambic pentameter). Sure, the poet can stray from it on occasion, but the overall rhythm of the piece is set. Free verse has no set meter that the poet must stick to. The only rhythm you need to worry about is the natural rise and fall of

the sentence you write. As a result, your lines will vary in length and the poem will look a bit irregular on the page. However it will, and must, sound natural.

Paying attention to the rhythm of your words is important because, if you don't, then your lines are not poetry, but prose. Prose is ordinary, unrhymed writing with no rhythm. Right now, I am writing prose. And while prose has a myriad of uses, it is not what we're trying to create here.

M. H. Abrams, in A Glossary of Literary Terms, offers a very good description of free verse which is highly learned and very technical. It is the sort of definition that English majors at university would find useful. If I include it here, you're likely to log out of this website and never come back. I'm enjoying your company and do not wish to drive you away; so let me paraphrase Abrams words: Free verse is more musical, more rhythmic than prose. But it is not locked into a set rhythm, nor do its lines have to be a certain length. Having given those things up, you are now free to control the pace of your verses and use pause as you see fit. Free verse is not regular, but it is not completely without control either. The control comes from the natural rhythm of the line.

As always, the best way to teach you about this is not by endlessly telling you about it, but by showing it to you in the form of examples. Let's take a look at a few...

## Fog

~by Carl Sandburg

The fog comes  
on little cat feet.



It sits looking  
over harbour and city  
on silent haunches  
then moves on.

This poem by Carl Sandburg is very like a tanka, isn't it? The lines are short and each contains one image. Notice how he divides his lines up according to the natural rise and fall of the language he uses. Read it aloud and you will see that line one is slow: the "aw" sound in fog followed by a "g" forces you to slow down to announce the word before moving on to "comes". Line two is decidedly quicker. The repetition of the letter "t" moves the line along swiftly with a syncopation that evokes the quick step of the cat's paws. In fact, it is here that Sandburg introduces the cat as a metaphor for the fog itself. A **metaphor** uses one thing to describe something else. Here the cat, a creature that walks on silent paws, represents and describes the stealth and silence of the moving fog.

While fog may move in quickly, it often settles in one place for a while. And so Sandburg captures this inertia with the rhythm of the language he uses. The last four lines of the poem are again moving at a slower pace, helped by his choice of where to break off a line and start the next one. For instance, to read aloud "It sits looking (pause), over harbour and city" brings to mind the slowly shifting gaze of the cat as it takes in the view. All in all, it is a very effective poem. Through its imagery it captures the essence of the subject and it is a delicious verse to read out loud.

This is but one example of free verse; some of the others are like nothing you've ever seen before. Let's take a look at some more...

may my heart always be open

~by E.E. Cummings

may my heart always be open to little  
birds who are the secrets of living  
and whatever they sing is better than to know  
and if men should not hear them men are old

may my mind stroll about hungry  
and fearless and thirsty and supple  
and even if it's sunday may i be wrong  
for whenever men are right they are not young

and may myself do nothing usefully  
and love yourself so more than truly

there's never been quite such a fool who could fail  
pulling all the sky over him with one smile



As you can see, this is very different from the tanka-like poem, “Fog.” It does, however, utilise the same rise and fall of language. I confess that I find the first two lines slightly awkward. They read: “may my heart always be open to little [line break] birds who are the secrets of living”. The natural rise and fall of the language suggests that line one should be: “may my heart always be open to little birds” then have a line break and finish the thought with “who are the secrets of living”. So why does Cummings break the two lines up as he does? Don’t know. I’m not inside the poet’s head and cannot tell you why he made that decision. If I had to guess, I would say that Cummings had before him a kick-butt idea: “may my heart always be open to little birds who are the secrets of living.” But that is a very long first line –

longer than he intended any of his other lines to be. So how to divide that wonderful sentence up? He could have put the break after the word “birds” – that is the obvious place, but E.E. Cummings rarely opts for the obvious or the conventional. Therefore he chose to write it so that you don’t really pause at the end of line one but keep reading and then catch a breath at the end of line two. He can do that. Heck, he can do anything he wants to: it’s free verse.

Also, as he says in the poem, "may i be wrong /for whenever men are right they are not young". Certainly the poet revels in "being wrong" -- the first line break is in the wrong place and he doesn't use capital letters or punctuation, but that is all part of the vibrancy of youth he wishes to sustain.

It is worth noting the poet’s use of assonance and consonance. Remember, assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds; consonance is the repetition of consonants – both of which create a subtly echoing rhyme. In the example above, the poet echoes...

the “l” of “little” with that of “living”

the “o” of “know” with that of “old”

the “u” of hungry with that of “supple”

the “ong” of “wrong” with that of “young”

the “ly” of “usefully” with that of “truly”

the “l” of “fail” with that of “smile”.

Therefore, despite all of the liberties Cummings took with his lines, he has created here a tight composition that is both unique and beautiful.

Other poets do not bother with rhyme at all. Take, for instance, this example by Walt Whitman:

### When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,

When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in  
columns before me,

When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to  
add, divide, and measure them....

How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,  
Till rising and gliding out I wandered off by myself,  
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,  
Looked up in perfect silence at the stars.



Not everybody enjoyed Whitman's work. Poet Ezra Pound thought, not to put too fine a point on it, that he was a git:

### A Pact

I make a pact with you , Walt Whitman --

I have detested you long enough.

I come to you as a grown child

Who has had a pig-headed father;

I am old enough now to make friends.

It was you that broke the new wood,

Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root --

Let there be commerce between us.

That only goes to show that, even if you don't like a poet's work or style, you can still learn from him. For instance, T. S. Eliot is not always my cup of tea, but I really like this passage from his poem, "The Hollow Men":

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion and the act  
Falls the shadow ...  
Between the conception  
And the creation  
Between the emotion  
And the response  
Falls the shadow...

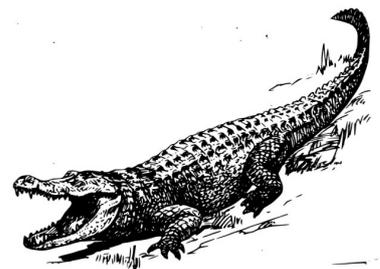


And here's one last example. After all this philosophising about astronomy, poetic tradition and the shadow between thought and action, it is nice just to have a poem about an alligator...

### Alligator Poem

~by Mary Oliver

I knelt down  
at the edge of the water,  
and if the white bird standing  
in the tops of the trees whistled any warning  
I didn't understand,  
I drank up to the very moment it came  
crashing toward me,  
its tail flailing  
like a bundle of swords,  
slashing the grass,  
and the inside of its cradle-shaped mouth  
gaping,  
and rimmed with teeth --  
and that's how I almost died  
of foolishness  
in beautiful Florida.  
But I didn't.



I leaped aside, and fell,  
and it streamed past me, crushing everything in its path  
as it swept down to the water  
and threw itself in,  
and, in the end,  
this isn't a poem about foolishness  
but about how I rose from the ground  
and saw the world as if for a second time,  
the way it really is.  
The water, that circle of shattered glass,  
healed itself with a slow whisper  
and lay back  
with the back-lit light of polished steel,  
and the birds, in the endless waterfalls of the trees,  
shook open the snowy pleats of their wings, and drifted away,  
while, for a keepsake, and to steady myself,  
I reached out,  
I picked the wild flowers from the grass around me --  
blue stars  
and blood-red trumpets  
on long green stems --  
for hours in my trembling hands they glittered  
like fire.

Now to try my hand at it...

Today the wind is an animal,  
lowly growling  
through the small gaps between houses.  
It is not a happy sound --  
not the kitten's purr of a soft summer breeze,  
nor the sigh-of-relief exhale  
of cool air

on a hot day.

No,

it moans in discontent.

The heavy clouds roll in black and full  
and paint the sunlight grey.

I understand it

that same turbulence in my stomach,  
that same haze behind my eyes.

The grey within and the grey without  
are one.

And, there,

the first raindrops

to wet my cheeks

like tears.



### Little Things

“Don’t sweat the small stuff,”

they say.

For, presumably,

small things make no difference.

And yet, there is the mosquito  
buzzing around your room at night.

There is the pebble in your shoe,

the disapproving look,

the fly in your soup,

the blister on your heel,

two minutes late --

in time to see the train pull out of the station,

a tiny air bubble in the vein,

the flea that carries plague,

and the preposition “in” --

such a small word and yet the chasm between

“I love you,

but I'm not in love with you.”

If Whitman is Right... (Gettysburg, 1993)

I lie on the grass and feel the warmth of generations  
seeping up from the ground,

here

on this old battlefield

no longer scorched black and stained red,

but deeply green.

If Whitman is right,

then the atoms

of those buried here

have mingled

with the soil and the sod

and the bent cypress tree.

The dead surround us --

in the leafy hedge

in the green grass

in the air exhaled by trees.

They touch our skin and fill our lungs

and it is good.

It is good that they remain --

a part of all that was

and is

and ever will be.



Of Mud and Concrete

There are days when I walk

with one foot on the pavement

and one in the past --

One foot on concrete

and one in mud  
that grabs my foot and sucks it in  
and holds it.  
Something today --  
a chilly nip in the air,  
the musk of damp, fallen leaves --  
took me back to you,  
your hands shoved in the pockets of your black coat  
and your cold eyes that saw what I could not see:  
how it would end.  
I keep walking,  
but there is mud on my shoes  
and a trail of dark footprints follows behind.

