

# An Introduction to Poetry

Many people are intimidated by the mention of the word “poetry.” It is often perceived as something that is cryptic and beyond understanding. But there are some pieces of information that can help us to grasp poetry whether we are just starting to learn about analyzing poetry or trying to find our own poetic voice.

**Poetry has often reflected the voice of the time.** Meaning, subject matter and language choices may change with whatever is considered an everyday concern in the current society’s expectations. Not many contemporary poems will use the same language as Shakespeare, but that does not mean that they are any less valid and likewise, poetry that lasts through the transition of time still resonates with the reader in some way.

## **Words are the tools of a poet and poets are particular about their tools...**

- Examine each word and its relationship. Consider, not only the standard definition, but the extended definition as well.
- Explore the effect that the substitution of a synonym would have on how a line of poetry could be understood or how it can make a reader feel.

## **By considering these things, we are learning to understand DICTION and TONE**

**Diction** and **tone** are two terms that are useful when trying to write about poetry, and it is equally important to understand their impact when writing poetry ourselves.

## **Here is an explanation of these and other terms that will be helpful while navigating poetry:**

- **Alliteration** – words begin with the same letter: The wiggly wobbly wagon wheel
- **Allusion** – reference to something else outside of the subject of the poem: The open window alludes to the woman’s longing for freedom from her current situation.
- **Diction** – the poet’s precise choice of words.
- **Imagery** – descriptive, sensory words that create a mental picture.
- **Metaphor** – comparison between two unlike things without using like or as.
- **Personification** – attributing human qualities to animals or inanimate objects: The willow weeps
- **Pentameter** – the rhythm that words in a line of poetry create because of the stressed syllables. They have five {penta} strong beats. There are different pentameters (rhythms). The one that is probably the most familiar to us is iamb or iambic. Some other pentameters are trochaic, dactylic, and anapestic.
- **Repetition** – a recurrence of elements to create unity
- **Rhyme** – same syllable or word sounds, often occurring at the end of lines of poetry. There is also the possibility of slant rhyme. This is when words do not truly rhyme but have a similar sound or appear to rhyme visually (bridge/grudge, orange/forage, said/paid).
- **Rhythm** – repetition of stressed and unstressed syllables which create a certain sound and pace.
- **Simile** – comparison between two objects using like, as, or than.
- **Symbolism** – using one object to suggest another meaning: A window might symbolize freedom, release, or opportunity.
- **Theme** – the dominant unifying idea in a poem

**When analyzing poetry**, it is important to consider the fact that many poems go through several drafts and that process can span several years. Dissecting those poems in order to unlock any hidden meaning can also take a bit of time, so be patient and **allow the poem to unfold as you read and re-read.**

Most often when writing about something we have read, we break things down into sentences, paragraphs or chapters. In poetry, the units we refer to will be **lines** and **stanzas**. Some stanzas are a set number of lines long, and when this happens, we have the option of being even more particular about the way we reference them in our writing, and this can also help us to vary our wording and keep our audience engaged. Here are some of the terms (or units) we will encounter most often with a brief explanation of each:

**Couplet** – a pair of consecutive lines that typically rhyme though they do not have to.

**Tercet**- a three line stanza or poem. They often rhyme. A haiku is an example of a type of poem that is a Tercet.

**Quatrain**- a four line stanza or poem. If the poem has a rhyme scheme, alternate lines will rhyme.

**Stanza** – lines of poetry that are grouped as a unit and offset from other lines with a space.

## And Smaller Still...

While the way lines are grouped in a poem are significant, equally significant is where a poet has decided to end a particular line. While analyzing or executing a “close reading” of a particular poem, examine what effect the break of a line has on how that line is read.

## Here are Some Questions to Consider:

- Does the meaning of a line shift if the words beginning the line that follows are considered as well?
- What effect does this have on the audience?
- Are there any words that are on their own line?
- Why would a poet have chosen to do that, and what effect does it have on how the lines could be interpreted?

## Some of types of poems you are most likely to encounter:

**Ballad-** A short narrative poem with stanzas of two or four lines and possibly a refrain that most frequently deals with folklore or popular legends and is suitable for singing.

**Blank Verse-** Blank verse is poetry that has no set stanzas or line length. It is a common form of poetry seen often in Shakespeare, Milton, Yeats, Auden, Stevens, and Frost.

**Elegy-** A poem of lament, praise and/or consolation, usually formal and about the death of a particular person. Elegies can also mourn the passing of events or passions.

**Epic-** The epic is a long narrative poem that usually unfolds a history or mythology of a nation or race. The epic details the adventures and deeds of a hero and, in so doing, tells the story of a nation. Epic poetry is the oldest form of poetry dating back to classics like *Gilgamesh*, *The Iliad*, and *Beowulf*.

**Epistle-** Poems written in the form of a letter are called epistles.

**Haiku-** Traditionally a Japanese form of poetry, haiku consists of three lines. Each line has a specific number of syllables. The first line has five syllables, the second has seven and then the last has five. Often, haiku themes are centered in nature with some reference to season. For instance, if one line of a haiku referenced cherry blossoms, the reader is being informed that the season of spring is significant to the poem.

**Ode-** Often written in praise of a person, an object, or an event, odes tend to be longer in form and generally, serious in nature.

**Sonnet-** One of the most popular forms, the sonnet has two major styles: English (or Elizabethan or Shakespearean) and Italian (or Petrarchan). Both forms are fourteen lines long and much of the time, focus on love. Often, the first eight lines of the poem (the first two quatrains in an English sonnet) demonstrate the problem to be solved, and the final six lines (the last quatrain and a couplet in the English sonnet) resolve it. Sonnets are written in iambic pentameter. The English sonnet adheres to this rhyme pattern: ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, or a variation of it. The Italian sonnet usually follows this pattern: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE. Sometimes the tercets (groups of three lines) vary. These variations can look like: CDC DCD or CDC DDC or CDC EDC. Finally, there is a second form of English sonnet known as the Spenserian sonnet. It rhymes ABAB BCBC CDCD EE. It follows the same basic pattern as the Shakespearean sonnet but varies the rhyme.

These are just a few tips and terms for students beginning their journey into poetry. There are many more types of poetry to be explored beyond those listed here, and hopefully, we will be much more confident as we go forward!