SONNET FORM

The sonnet is a popular classical form that has compelled poets for centuries. Traditionally, the sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, employing one of several rhyme schemes, and adhering to a tightly structured thematic organization.

The name is taken from the Italian sonetto, which means "a little sound or song.

**Types of Sonnets**

Two sonnet forms provide the models from which all other sonnets are formed: the Petrarchan and the Shakespearean.

Petrarchan Sonnet

The first and most common sonnet is the Petrarchan, or Italian. Named after one of its greatest practitioners, the Italian poet [Petrarch](https://poets.org/poet/petrarch), **the Petrarchan sonnet is divided into two stanzas, the octave (the first eight lines) followed by the answering sestet (the final six lines). The tightly woven rhyme scheme, abba, abba, cdecde or cdcdcd, is suited for the rhyme-rich Italian language, though there are many fine examples in English**. Since **the Petrarchan presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or *volta,* occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands.**

[Sir Thomas Wyatt](https://poets.org/poet/thomas-wyatt) introduced the Petrarchan sonnet to England in the early sixteenth century. His famed translations of Petrarch’s sonnets, as well as his own sonnets, drew fast attention to the form. Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, a contemporary of Wyatt’s, whose own translations of Petrarch are considered more faithful to the original though less fine to the ear, modified the Petrarchan, thus establishing the structure that became known as the Shakespearean sonnet. This structure has been noted to lend itself much better to the comparatively rhyme-poor English language.

Shakespearean Sonnet

**The second major type of sonnet, the Shakespearean, or English sonnet, follows a different set of rules. Here, three quatrains and a**[**couplet**](https://poets.org/text/couplet-poets-glossary)**follow this rhyme scheme: abab, cdcd, efef, gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, or even refutation of the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end.** In [Sonnet 130](https://poets.org/poem/my-mistress-eyes-are-nothing-sun-sonnet-130) of [William Shakespeare](https://poets.org/poet/william-shakespeare)’s epic sonnet cycle, the first twelve lines compare the speaker’s mistress unfavorably with nature’s beauties, but the concluding couplet swerves in a surprising direction.