

Writing Shakespearean Sonnets

Think of the many ways people express their love today—messages on voicemail, emails, texts, giving cards and gifts. In Shakespeare's day, the best way to woo your love was with a sonnet.

Sonnets are 14 line poems with a specific rhythm-and-rhyme pattern (iambic pentameter). Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets during his lifetime. Now it's time to try your hand at romance "à la Shakespeare"!

Here is one of Shakespeare's most famous sonnets to use as a guide:

Sonnet 18

*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 dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimm'd:
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time though growest.
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.*

In this sonnet, Shakespeare compares his love to a summer day, but finds that a summer day can be too windy, hot, or unstable. On the other hand, his love's inner and outer beauty is far more enduring than a summer day. The problem is that his love will grow old someday, and die. But his solution is that in the lines of this poem, his love's beauty will live on forever.

Follow this process to make writing your sonnet a little easier:

1. Choose a special person about whom to write your sonnet (you don't have to mention the person's name in your sonnet).
2. Brainstorm all of his/her wonderful qualities—create a list.
3. Write 2 or 3 *similes* or *metaphors* comparing the qualities you brainstormed to something in nature, for example, *My love's hair shines so very like the sun*. Poets in Shakespeare's time liked to exaggerate both beauty and their emotions, so be dramatic and as over-the-top as you like.
4. Think of a small problem or conflict for you and your love, and then a simple solution.
5. Using all your ideas, notes, and comparisons, write your own sonnet. The first 12 lines should describe your love and then a problem. The last two lines should provide a solution.
6. Writing in Iambic Pentameter means that you should have exactly 10 syllables per line.

The rhyming pattern for a sonnet goes like this:

A
B
A
B
C
D
C
D
E
F
E
F
G
G

In other words, the last word of the first and third lines rhyme with each other, the second and fourth lines rhyme with each other. The fifth and seventh lines rhyme; the sixth and eighth lines rhyme. The ninth and eleventh lines rhyme; the tenth and twelfth lines rhyme. Finally, the last two lines rhyme (rhyming couplet).