

The Language of Poetry

The poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge once described poetry as “the best words in their best order.” Poets sear images into readers’ minds, create unforgettable rhythms, and experiment with poetic forms. Whether they embrace the traditional rules of poetry, play with them, or break them altogether, poets use the techniques of their craft to inspire readers and communicate ideas. Experience these techniques in action by immersing yourself in the poetry of this unit.

Part 1: Form

Poetry is as much about form as it is about language and sound. **Form** refers to a poem’s structure, or the way the words are arranged on the page. All poems are made up of series of **lines**. The length of the lines, where they break, and how they are punctuated all contribute to a poem’s rhythm and meaning. In many poems, the lines are grouped into **stanzas**, which function like paragraphs in prose. Each stanza plays a part in conveying the overall message of a poem.

Poems come in a variety of forms, but they are usually talked about in terms of two categories—traditional and organic.

TRADITIONAL

Characteristics

- follows fixed rules, such as a specified number of lines
- has a regular pattern of rhythm and/or rhyme



Forms

epic, ode, ballad, sonnet, haiku, limerick

Example

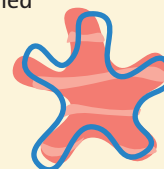
Surgeons must be very careful
When they take the knife!
Underneath their fine incisions
Stirs the Culprit—*Life!*

—by Emily Dickinson

ORGANIC

Characteristics

- does not follow established rules for form
- does not have a regular pattern of rhythm and may not rhyme at all
- may use unconventional spelling, punctuation, and grammar



Forms

free verse, concrete poetry

Example

we’re everything more than believe
(with a spin
leap
alive we’re alive)
we’re wonderful one times one

—from “If Everything Happens That
Can’t Be Done” by E. E. Cummings



Included in this workshop:

READING 2B Analyze the influence of classical literature on 20th and 21st century literature.

3 Understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of poetry and provide evidence from text to support understanding. Analyze the effects of diction and imagery in poetry.



MODEL 1: TRADITIONAL FORM

For centuries, poets have written sonnets that explore everything from unrequited love to the mysteries of nature. There are several types of sonnets, but all of them have 14 lines and are written in a strict pattern of rhythm and rhyme. Read this poem, which is a **Petrarchan sonnet**, to determine the characteristics of this particular form.

Pretty Words

Poem by Elinor Wylie

Poets make pets of pretty, docile words;
 I love smooth words, like gold-enamelled fish
 Which circle slowly with a silken swish,
 And tender ones, like downy-feathered birds:
 5 Words shy and dappled, deep-eyed deer in herds,
 Come to my hand, and playful if I wish,
 Or purring softly at a silver dish,
 Blue Persian kittens, fed on cream and curds.

I love bright words, words up and singing early;
 10 Words that are luminous in the dark, and sing;
 Warm lazy words, white cattle under trees;
 I love words opalescent, cool, and pearly,
 Like midsummer moths, and honied words like bees,
 Gilded and sticky, with a little sting.

Close Read

1. How many lines make up the first stanza? How many are in the second stanza?
2. In the first stanza, each group of end-rhyming words is highlighted in the same color. Identify the end-rhyming words in the second stanza.
3. Compare the ideas expressed in the first stanza with those in the second one.



MODEL 2: ORGANIC FORM

Poems written in **free verse**, like the one shown, do not adhere to a regular pattern of rhythm and rhyme.

from **Beware: Do Not Read This Poem**

Poem by Ishmael Reed

the hunger of this poem is legendary
 it has taken in many victims
 back off from this poem
 it has drawn in yr feet
 5 back off from this poem
 it has drawn in yr legs
 back off from this poem

Close Read

1. Identify three characteristics that make this poem unconventional.
2. Even though the poet does not use punctuation, this poem has a natural rhythm. Read the poem aloud, using the rhythm you think is appropriate.

Part 2: Poetic Elements

For a poet, deciding on a subject and form is just the beginning. Will the poem hum along at a steady beat or charge ahead with a bold rhythm? What images or sounds will convey a mood? Using sound devices and language, poets can convey meaning, make music, and tap into the senses.

SOUND DEVICES

Like music, language has rhythm. In poetry, the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line is what creates the **rhythm**. **Rhyme** also enhances the musical quality of a poem. It can occur at the ends of lines as **end rhyme** or within lines as **internal rhyme**.

A regular pattern of rhythm is called a **meter**. A regular pattern of rhyme is called a **rhyme scheme**. Meter is charted in a process called **scansion**, where stressed syllables are marked with a ´ and unstressed syllables with a ˘. A rhyme scheme is charted by assigning a letter of the alphabet to matching end rhymes. Notice how the meter and rhyme scheme are marked in these lines from “A Birthday” by Christina Rossetti:

<i>My héart / ˘ is líke / ˘ á síng / ˘ ینگ bírd</i>	a
<i>Whose nést / ˘ is ín / ˘ á wá / ˘ teréd shóót:</i>	b
<i>My héart / ˘ is líke / ˘ ǎn ǎp / ˘ ple-tree</i>	c
<i>Whose bouǎhs / ˘ ǎre bént / ˘ wíth thíck / ˘ sèt frúit;</i>	b

Here are some other techniques that poets use to create sound effects.

SOUND DEVICE	EXAMPLE
<p>REPETITION a sound, word, phrase, or line that is repeated for emphasis and unity</p>	<p>back off from this poem it has drawn in yr feet back off from this poem</p> <p>—from “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem”</p>
<p>ALLITERATION repetition of consonant sounds at the beginnings of words</p>	<p>Which circle slowly with a silken swish</p> <p>—from “Pretty Words”</p>
<p>ASSONANCE repetition of vowel sounds in words that don’t end with the same consonant</p>	<p>Words shy and dappled, deep-eyed deer in herds</p> <p>—from “Pretty Words”</p>
<p>CONSONANCE repetition of consonant sounds within and at the ends of words</p>	<p>Whose nest is in a watered shoot</p> <p>—from “A Birthday”</p>

MODEL 1: METER

To identify a poem's meter, you have to break each line into smaller units, called feet. A **foot** consists of one stressed syllable and one or two unstressed ones. Look at the type and the number of feet in each line. Then combine the terms listed on the side—for example, **trochaic trimeter** or **iambic pentameter**—to describe what you find. Scan this poem to determine its meter.

FIRE AND ICEPoem by **Robert Frost**

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.

From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.

- 5 But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

METER**TYPES OF FEET**

iamb (reSÍST)

trochee (ÁBsent)

spondee (GÓAL LÍNE)

NUMBER OF FEET

trimeter (3)

tetrameter (4)

pentameter (5)

Close Read

1. What is the metrical pattern of the lines in the **box**?
2. What is the poem's rhyme scheme?

MODEL 2: OTHER SOUND DEVICES

Edgar Allan Poe wrote "The Bells" to experiment with the musical qualities of language. Read this excerpt aloud to get the full impact.

from *The Bells*Poem by **Edgar Allan Poe**

Hear the sledges with the bells—
Silver bells!

What a world of merriment their melody foretells!

- How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,
5 In the icy air of night!
While the stars that oversprinkle
All the Heavens, seem to twinkle
With a crystalline delight;
Keeping time, time, time,
10 In a sort of Runic rhyme, . . .

Close Read

1. Identify four examples of sound devices used in this poem.
2. What effects do these sound devices create? Explain how they add to Poe's description of the bells.

IMAGERY AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Unlike prose, poetry is very concise: a limited number of words must carry a great deal of meaning. Therefore, **diction**, or word choice, is especially important. Poets must choose their words carefully in order to create certain effects. One of the ways poets expand their ability to make meaning and to achieve intended effects is by using imagery and figurative language.

You've already learned how **imagery** in fiction evokes sensory experiences for readers by appealing to the five senses. Poets also use sensory details to illustrate and elaborate on their ideas and feelings. For example, look again at "Fire and Ice" on the preceding page. Robert Frost uses two powerful sensory details—fire and ice—to help you picture the end of the world. Not only can you probably visualize the world engulfed in flames or numbed by ice, but you can also probably imagine what each type of destruction would feel like. These details are enough to spark unsettling images in your mind.

Like imagery, **figurative language** opens up the mind to more than the literal meanings of words. In this example, notice how the figurative expression not only is more descriptive but also conveys a stronger emotion:

Literal: He was angry.

Figurative: He burned with anger.

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE	EXAMPLE
SIMILE a comparison between two unlike things, containing the words <i>like</i> , <i>as</i> , or <i>as if</i>	My heart is like a singing bird —from "A Birthday"
METAPHOR a comparison between two unlike things without the word <i>like</i> or <i>as</i>	Poets make pets of pretty, docile words —from "Pretty Words"
PERSONIFICATION a description of an object, an animal, a place, or an idea in human terms	it [this poem] has taken in many victims —from "Beware: Do Not Read This Poem"
HYPERBOLE an exaggeration for emphasis or humorous effect	the hunger of this poem is legendary —from "Beware: Do Not Read This Poem"

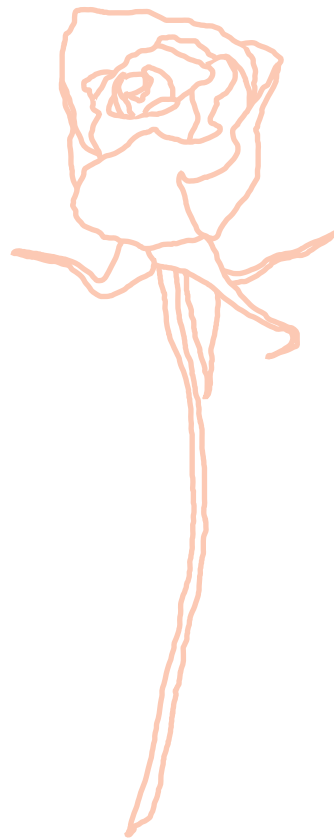
MODEL 3: IMAGERY AND FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

In this poem, the writer uses sensory details and figurative language to acquaint you with a vivid character. As you read, notice the contrasting images of Miss Rosie—what she was and what she has become. Also, pay attention to the poem’s **speaker**, the voice that describes the character. How does the speaker’s impression of Miss Rosie affect your perception of her?

miss rosie

Poem by **Lucille Clifton**

when i watch you
 wrapped up like garbage
 sitting, surrounded by the smell
 of too old potato peels
 5 or
 when i watch you
 in your old man’s shoes
 with the little toe cut out
 sitting, waiting for your mind
 10 like next week’s grocery
 i say
 when i watch you
 you wet brown bag of a woman
 who used to be the best looking gal in georgia
 15 used to be called the Georgia Rose
 i stand up
 through your destruction
 i stand up

**Close Read**

1. Point out three unusual comparisons and identify them as similes or metaphors. What image of Miss Rosie does this figurative language convey?
2. Find the hyperbole and explain its effect.
3. Reread the boxed lines. What is the speaker’s attitude toward Miss Rosie? Explain how it affects your impression of Miss Rosie.

Part 3: Analyze the Literature

Now that you've learned about poetic forms and techniques, you're ready to see how everything works together in two distinctly different love poems.

The first poem is a Shakespearean sonnet, which has a rhyme scheme and organization different from those of the Petrarchan sonnet on page 741. This form of sonnet was introduced by 16th-century English poets and popularized by Shakespeare, but many modern poets still use the form today. A **Shakespearean sonnet** consists of three **quatrains**, or four-line units, and a final **couplet**, or pair of rhyming lines. Read the sonnet aloud first to understand what it is saying. Then read it again to analyze its poetic elements. What techniques are used to complement and extend the poem's meaning?

NOT IN A SILVER CASKET...

Poem by **Edna St. Vincent Millay**

Not in a silver casket cool with pearls
Or rich with red corundum¹ or with blue,
Locked, and the key withheld, as other girls
Have given their loves, I give my love to you;
5 Not in a lovers'-knot, not in a ring
Worked in such fashion, and the legend plain—
Semper fidelis,² where a secret spring
Kennels a drop of mischief for the brain:
Love in the open hand, no thing but that,
10 Ungemmed, unhidden, wishing not to hurt,
As one should bring you cowslips³ in a hat
Swung from the hand, or apples in her skirt,
I bring you, calling out as children do:
“Look what I have!—And these are all for you.”

1. **corundum**: an extremely hard mineral, red and blue forms of which are rubies and sapphires.

2. *Semper fidelis* *Latin*: always faithful.

3. **cowslips**: plants that have fragrant yellow flowers.

Close Read

1. Identify the rhyme scheme of the poem.
2. This poem is written in iambic pentameter. Find and scan two lines that reflect this meter. Then find two lines that vary from the pattern. What is the effect of the change in rhythm?
3. How do the images in lines 1–8 contrast with those in lines 9–12?

Now read this poem, which offers another perspective on love. As you read, notice how the sound devices, figurative language, and form help convey a heartfelt and sincere message.

I AM OFFERING THIS POEM

Poem by Jimmy Santiago Baca

I am offering this poem to you,
 since I have nothing else to give.
 Keep it like a warm coat
 when winter comes to cover you,
 5 or like a pair of thick socks
 the cold cannot bite through,
 I love you,
 I have nothing else to give you,
 so it is a pot full of yellow corn
 10 to warm your belly in winter,
 it is a scarf for your head, to wear
 over your hair, to tie up around your face,
 I love you,
 Keep it, treasure this as you would
 15 if you were lost, needing direction,
 in the wilderness life becomes when mature;
 and in the corner of your drawer,
 tucked away like a cabin or hogan¹
 in dense trees, come knocking,
 20 and I will answer, give you directions,
 and let you warm yourself by this fire,
 rest by this fire, and make you feel safe,
 I love you,
 It's all I have to give,
 25 and all anyone needs to live,
 and to go on living inside,
 when the world outside
 no longer cares if you live or die;
 remember,
 30 I love you.

1. **hogan**: a one-room Navajo building that is used as a dwelling or for ceremonial purposes.

Close Read

1. Is this poem traditional or organic in form? Explain how you can tell.
2. Find four specific sound devices in the poem that give it unity and rhythm.
3. Identify the similes and metaphors in lines 1–12. A simile has been boxed. What qualities of the love poem do these comparisons help to emphasize?
4. Compare what these poems say about love. Cite similarities as well as differences.