

# Free Verse



## **DEFINITION**

What is free verse? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Free verse is the name given to poetry that doesn't use any strict meter or <a href="rhyme-scheme">rhyme-scheme</a>. Because it has no set meter, poems written in free verse can have lines of any length, from a single word to much longer. William Carlos Williams's short poem "The Red Wheelbarrow" is written in free verse. It reads: "so much depends / upon / a red wheel / barrow / glazed with rain / water / beside the white / chickens."

Some additional key details about free verse:

- The opposite of free verse is <u>formal verse</u>, or poetry that uses both a strict meter and rhyme scheme.
- Not only do poets writing in free verse have the freedom to write unrhymed lines of any length, but they also often use <a href="enjambment">enjambment</a> in unconventional ways, inserting line breaks in the middle of sentences and even in the middle of words (such as "wheelbarrow" and "rainwater").
- Walt Whitman is often said to be the father of free verse. It's true
  that he popularized this type of poetry, but in fact there were
  others who had written unrhymed, unmetered poetry before him.
- Most poets writing today write in free verse.

### Free Verse in Depth

In order to understand free verse in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms related to poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding blank verse easier.

- Poetry: Also referred to as "verse," poetry is a genre of literature
  that consists of writing that's arranged into lines that often follow
  a pattern of rhythm, <u>rhyme</u>, or both. The three main types of
  poetry are:
  - Formal verse: Poetry with a strict meter (rhythmic pattern) and rhyme scheme.
  - Blank verse: Poetry with a strict meter but *no* rhyme scheme.
  - Free verse: Poetry without any strict meter or rhyme scheme.
- Stress: In poetry, the term stress refers to the emphasis placed on certain syllables in words. For instance, in the word "happily" the emphasis is on the first syllable ("hap"), so "hap" is the "stressed" syllable and the other two syllables ("pi" and "ly") are "unstressed."
- Foot: In poetry, a "foot" refers to the rhythmic units of stressed and unstressed syllables that make up lines of meter. For

example, an <u>iamb</u> is one type of foot that consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in the word "De-**fine**."

• Meter: A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of lines of poetry. Poetic meters are named for the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

#### Free Verse, Meter, and Rhyme

Poems written in free verse are characterized by generally not using meter or rhyme, but that doesn't mean that they can never include meter or rhyme. In fact, poets writing in free verse often do include a bit of meter or rhyme in their poetry. Saying that a poem is "free verse" just means that the use of meter or rhyme is not extensive or consistent in the poem.

For instance, TS Elliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is a famous free verse poem in which many lines end in rhyme, but those rhymes don't follow any particular pattern (or <a href="rhymescheme">rhymescheme</a>) and the poem follows no particular meter. Similarly, Walt Whitman was known to occasionally lapse in and out of using meter in his unrhymed poetry—but for the most part his poems don't make use of meter, so they're still considered free verse.

#### Stanzas in Free Verse

While some types of formal verse have specific requirements for the length or number of <u>stanzas</u>, free verse has no such restrictions. A poet writing in free verse may use stanzas of regular length consistently throughout their poem, though more often than not the length of stanzas in free verse poems varies at least somewhat throughout the poem—which is just to say that they don't follow any rule in particular.

#### Free Verse and Prose Poems

Since free verse is, by definition, free of formal constraints, there aren't any specific types or "forms" of free verse poetry (as there are with formal verse)—except for one. Prose poems are a specific type of free verse poetry that doesn't have any <u>line breaks</u>, and which therefore take the form of paragraphs.



### **EXAMPLES**

#### T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

This famous free verse poem by T.S. Eliot rhymes, but not according to any particular pattern, and it doesn't use meter (note how varied the line lengths are). Here's an excerpt:





Let us go then, you and I,

When the evening is spread out against the sky

Like a patient etherized upon a table;

Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,

The muttering retreats

Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels

And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument

Of insidious intent

To lead you to an overwhelming question ...

Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"

Let us go and make our visit.

#### Walt Whitman's "When Lilacs Last In Dooryard Bloom'd"

Walt Whitman is best known for writing free verse, but he often injected <u>metered</u> lines into his free verse sporadically. Here the second line is a near-perfect line of <u>dactylic</u> hexameter (six feet of <u>stressed</u>-unstressed syllables) that appears seemingly out of the blue. The lines before and after this example are not dactylic at all.

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,

Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in the dimness.

To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

#### E.E. Cummings's "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in]"

E.E. Cummings was famous for pushing the boundaries of what many readers would have even recognized as poetry at the time when he was writing. Written in free verse, the formal inventiveness of his poetry bucks many other poetic conventions as well, including the use of proper punctuation and normal rules of indentation. [i carry your heart with me(i carry it in] is one of his more well-known poems, and it uses rhyme irregularly throughout. This excerpt contains the poem's first two stanzas:

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in my heart)i am never without it(anywhere i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done by only me is your doing,my darling)

fear

no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want no world(for beautiful you are my world,my true) and it's you are whatever a moon has always meant and whatever a sun will always sing is you

#### William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just To Say"

Williams's writing is a good example of the incredibly spare, restrained style that can be achieved through free verse—in this case, by using very short lines to heighten language that might otherwise seem perfectly ordinary and unremarkable. Here are the first two stanzas of his famous poem, "This is Just to Say":

I have eaten

the plums

that were

in the icebox

and which

you were probably

saving

for breakfast

# **WHY WRITERS USE IT**

Generally speaking, formal verse gradually fell out of fashion with poets over the course of the 20th century. This was in part because, as literacy levels rose, meter and rhyme (which originated as formal features to aid in memorization and comprehension) no longer seemed necessary.

But free verse was also attractive to poets simply because it lacked the restrictions and constraints imposed on poetry by meter and rhyme, and therefore left it to the poet to determine the form his or her poem would take—and to invent his or her own restrictions and constraints. Today, it could be said that the main reason most poets write in free verse is simply that it has become the norm, in much the same way that formal and blank verse were once the norm.

While free verse lacks some of the restraints of formal and blank verse, it still involves all the elements that make up the form of a poem (including diction, syntax, lineation, stanza, rhythm, and the many different types of rhyme). It's just that there aren't any rules governing how they must be used.

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### **OTHER RESOURCES**

- The Wikipedia Page on Free Verse: An overview of free verse, including a bit more information on the history of its use.
- The Dictionary Definition of Free Verse: A simple definition of free verse.
- Collected free verse: A webpage that compiles some of the more famous examples of free verse poetry from history.
- Free Verse on Youtube: A short video that gives a basic definition
  of free verse and provides some examples.

### **HOW TO CITE**

#### MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Free Verse." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.



### Chicago Manual

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