

# Acrostic



## DEFINITION

What is an acrostic? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An acrostic is a piece of writing in which a particular set of letters—typically the first letter of each line, word, or paragraph—spells out a word or phrase with special significance to the text. Acrostics are most commonly written as a form of poetry, but they can also be found in prose or used as word puzzles.

Some additional key details about acrostics:

- While the most common type of acrostic is one formed by the initial letters of each line, there are many different types of acrostics with letters in different positions.
- The word that is spelled out in an acrostic is called the *acrostich*. The acrostich typically bears a special meaning in relation to the content of the acrostic, such as revealing the name of the poem's subject or the name of its author.
- Acrostic poems may be written in [meter](#) or in [free verse](#), with or without [rhyme](#).

## Acrostic Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce acrostic: uh-**krah**ss-tik

## Types of Acrostic Poems

In the most common type of acrostic poems, the initial letter of each line forms a word. This type of acrostic is simply called an acrostic.

Roses are red,  
Oranges yummy,  
Sugar's a sweet,  
Elixir in my tummy.

But other types of acrostic, with more specialized locations of the letters that spell out the word or phrase, do have special names:

- **Telestich:** An acrostic in which the *last* letters of each line spell a word or message.
- **Mesostich:** An acrostic in which the *middles* of words or lines form a word or message.
- **Double Acrostic:** An acrostic in which words are spelled by *both* the first and last letters of each line, so that one word can be read vertically down the left side of the poem and another word can be read vertically down the right side of the poem.
- **Abecedarian:** An acrostic that, instead of spelling a word, spells the alphabet. Chaucer's poem "La Priere de Nostre Dame" is an

example of an abecedarian acrostic. This type of acrostic may also be referred to as an *abecedarius*.

In addition to these named forms, acrostics can be non-standard. For example, some acrostics spell out words using neither the first nor last letters of a line, but rather by emphasizing letters in different places.

Roses are red,  
Violets are blue,  
Sugar is sweet,  
And so are you.

## Decoding Acrostics

The level of difficulty in decoding the hidden message of an acrostic varies widely, and that difficulty depends on how carefully the author has hidden it or, conversely, how deliberately he or she has revealed it. In many cases, it's easy to recognize the word being spelled in the acrostic because the important letters are capitalized or bolded and they fall at the beginning of each line. In other cases, the author may have intended for the acrostic to be harder to solve, leading them to insert the important letters more subtly by embedding them somewhere other than the first word of each line or leaving the letters lower-case. Put another way: an acrostic may be a show, in which the author wants you to see it at once, or a puzzle that the author is content to have some people find and other's not.

## Acrostics vs. Acronyms

Acrostics are in some ways similar to acronyms, in that both involve the isolation of individual letters to make a new word. Just as a poem might form the *acrostich* "Rose" from the first letters of its four lines, so is the acronym **POTUS** made by taking the first letters of "President of the United States." However, acrostics and acronyms are not the same, for two reasons:

- **Real words vs. made-up words:** Acrostics *must* form real words or names (or at the very least spell out the letters of the alphabet). In contrast, acronyms can be made up words. For example, POTUS isn't really a word, it's just an acronym that makes it easier to refer to the President of the United States. Acronyms *can* form real words, such as ACT UP, the acronym for an important activist group of the 1980's that was otherwise known as "AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power," but they don't have to.
- **Artistic merit vs. practical use:** The more significant difference between acronyms and acrostics is that while acronyms have a practical purpose—whether as a mnemonic or to make it easier to refer to things more quickly—acrostics have been regarded, to varying degrees at different moments in history, as a form of writing with literary value.

## Acrostics Through History

The earliest examples of acrostics can be found in the Hebrew Bible. Several passages in the book of Psalms begin with letters of the alphabet, forming an *abecedarian* acrostic (an acrostic that spells out the entire alphabet). The first examples of non-abecedarian acrostics come from ancient Greece, where the Erythraean Sybil (an oracle from the ancient Greek town of Erythrae) was known to write her prophecies on leaves and arrange them so that the first letters would spell out a word. Later, acrostics were commonly used in medieval literature to encode a secret message—for example, to disclose the name of the poet or the name of the poem's subject, especially in cases where the subject of the poem was a secret lover. Today, however, acrostics have lost some of the literary prestige they once enjoyed in the past. Instead, they are now often considered to be juvenile, or useful primarily as a comedic form.

nonsense if you haven't read the story, they are, in fact, key to interpreting the story's mysterious plot.

I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies—every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost.

### Acrostic in Chaucer's "La Priere de Nostre Dame"

Commonly referred to as "Chaucer's ABC's," this poem is an example of the sub-genre of acrostic known as *abecedarian* poetry, in which the first letters of each stanza spell the alphabet in sequence.

ALMIGHTY and all-merciable Queen,  
To whom all this world fleeth for succour...  
Bounty so fix'd hath in thy heart his tent,  
That well I wot thou wilt my succour be...  
Comfort is none, but in you, Lady dear!  
For lo! my sin and my confusion...

### Acrostic in Blake's "London"

This poem by William Blake puts a special emphasis on the sounds of London's cityscape, such as the cries of the chimneysweeps and the sighs of the soldiers. In the third stanza, the initial letters of each line form an acrostic that spells the word "HEAR," which underscores the speaker's fixation on the sounds in his environment. This is an example of acrostic being used in just one stanza of a poem—the remainder of the poem does not contain acrostics.

How the Chimney-sweepers cry  
Every blackning Church appalls,  
And the hapless Soldiers sigh  
Runs in blood down Palace walls

### Acrostic in Cage's "Overpopulation and Art"

John Cage was a hugely influential experimental composer and poet who, toward the end of his life, became interested in writing acrostic poems in which the key letters were placed in the middles of lines instead of at the beginnings—a form known as *mesostich* poetry. The following excerpt is the beginning of one of the last poems Cage wrote in his lifetime, "Overpopulation and Art." The long mesostich poem, written in [free verse](#), spells out the words of the title, "overpopulation and art," twenty times (the number of letters in the title). The excerpt below shows just one of the twenty cycles of the poem.

abOut 1948 or 50 the number of people  
liVing  
all at oncE  
equaled the numbeR who had ever lived at any time all



## EXAMPLES

In the examples below, the letters that form the acrostich (the acrostic's hidden message) are **bold**.

### Acrostic in Lewis Carroll's "Acrostic"

This poem by Lewis Carroll spells out the names of three sisters: Lorina, Alice, and Edith. Alice was purportedly the real-life inspiration for Carroll's book [Alice's Adventures in Wonderland](#).

Little maidens, when you look  
On this little story-book,  
Reading with attentive eye  
Its enticing history,  
Never think that hours of play  
Are your only HOLIDAY,  
And that in a HOUSE of joy  
Lessons serve but to annoy:  
If in any HOUSE you find  
Children of a gentle mind,  
Each the others pleasing ever—  
Each the others vexing never—  
Daily work and pastime daily  
In their order taking gaily—  
Then be very sure that they  
Have a life of HOLIDAY.

### Acrostic in Nabokov's "The Vane Sisters"

While acrostics are most often found in poetry, Vladimir Nabokov's short story "The Vane Sisters" contains an example of an acrostic formed with prose. In "The Vane Sisters," a short story which is about a professor who becomes fascinated with acrostics, the first letters of each word in the story's final paragraph spell out the phrase, "Icicles by Cynthia; Meter from me, Sybil." While these words may seem like

added together  
                   the Present as far as numbers  
                   gO  
 became equal to the Past  
       we are now in the fUture  
           it is something eLse  
           hAs  
           iT doubled  
       has It quadrupled  
 all we nOw  
       kNow for sure is  
       the deAd  
       are iN the minority  
 they are outnumberedD by us who're living  
       whAt does this do to  
       ouR  
 way of communicatiNg...



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Acrostic](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Acrostic](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of acrostic.
- [An article](#) that gives the history of alphabet poems (including Old Icelandic poems written in runes), with many examples.
- [An article](#) on acrostics as love poems in colonial Williamsburg: "For the young men and women of Williamsburg in 1768, acrostic verses were the equivalent of pop songs and Hallmark cards."
- [A reading](#) of John Cage's long mesostich poem, "Overpopulation and Art"

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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

### Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Acrostic." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/acrostic>.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Acrostics are used to add new dimension to a poem or other text. They can transform straightforward poetry or prose into a word puzzle by enlisting the reader to decode a secret message. In addition, acrostics are often used to spell out names or meanings that are associated with the text but that have not been said outright—this can be used for comedic effect, to tell a secret, or to give supplemental information. Acrostics can also make poems easier to remember or memorize, as their messages can function as mnemonic devices that help a reader to recall the remainder of each line. For this reason, acrostics are commonly used in children's poetry.