

Cinquain



DEFINITION

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

The word cinquain can refer to two different things. Historically, it referred to *any* stanza of five lines written in any type of verse. More recently, cinquain has come to refer to particular types of five-line poems that have precisely defined features, such as their meter or the number of syllables they contain in each line. The most common of these specific types of cinquains is the American cinquain.

Some additional key details about cinquains:

- Another name for a five-line stanza is a quintet, and five-line poems can also be called quintains.
- The American cinquain was created by the American poet Adelaide Crapsey in the early 20th century.
- A variant of the American cinquain, called the didactic cinquain, is often taught to children in school.

Cinquain Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce cinquain: sin-**kwane**

Cinquains as Five-Line Stanzas in Formal Verse

Five-line stanzas are particularly common in [formal verse](#)—verse that has both a strict [meter](#) and [rhyme scheme](#). They appear in many different languages, and are used for different purposes. Examples can be found dating back to medieval French poetry. Here are some key details about cinquain's most common appearances in formal verse:

- The five-line stanza was particularly popular in English formal verse in the 16th and 17th centuries, when iambic pentameter (a metrical form consisting of five [iamb](#)s per line) was the most commonly-used meter. Consequently, many of the most well-known examples of cinquains are written in iambic pentameter, though poets also used other meters in cinquains.
- Limericks are a common form of humorous poetry that typically consists of a single, rhyming cinquain written in iambic meter.
- Cinquains tend to follow fairly straightforward [rhyme schemes](#) such as ABAAB, ABABB, or AABBA.
- The number of cinquains in a given poem can vary. An entire poem can be a single cinquain, or a poem might have many cinquain stanzas.

American Cinquains

In the early twentieth century the American poet Adelaide Crapsey, inspired by the five-line Japanese poetic form of *tanka*, began to write five-line poems that followed a distinct form. This poetic form soon came to be known as an American cinquain (though it's also sometimes referred to as a Crapseian cinquain, after its creator).

The American cinquain is an unrhymed, five-line poetic form defined by the number of syllables in each line—the first line has two syllables, the second has four, the third six, the fourth eight, and the fifth two (2-4-6-8-2). They are typically written using [iamb](#)s. Adelaide Crapsey's "November Night" is a good example:

Listen...

With faint dry sound,
Like steps of passing ghosts,
The leaves, frost-crisp'd, break from the trees
And fall.

Some scholars define the line length of American cinquains by counting iambs or stressed syllables, rather than by counting total syllables. By this sort of counting, the proper line length of an American cinquain would be 1-2-3-4-1, since it would contain one iamb in the first line, two in the second line, and so on. The right way to count the line length is ultimately a matter of interpretation, though, since Crapsey never specified the rules of the form she invented.

Variations on American Cinquains

American cinquains have inspired a number of variations, which are most often written by amateur poets.

- **Reverse cinquain:** An American cinquain in reverse order, so the syllables in its lines follow the pattern of 2-8-6-4-2.
- **Mirror cinquain:** An American cinquain followed by a reverse cinquain.
- **Butterfly cinquain:** An American cinquain is merged with a reverse cinquain, such that the final two syllable line of the American cinquain is the first line of the reverse cinquain. The result is a nine line poem with the syllable-per-line pattern of 2-4-6-8-2-8-6-4-2.
- **Crown cinquain:** Five American cinquains written to form a single five-stanza poem.
- **Garland cinquain:** Six American cinquains, in which the lines of the final stanza are taken from the first five, with line one of the final stanza using line one of the first stanza, line two of the final stanza using line two of the second stanza, etc.

Didactic Cinquains

The didactic cinquain is a simplification of the American cinquain. This variation is used primarily in classrooms for teaching poetry to children. Didactic cinquains dictate both the number of words per line and the types of words used in each line.

- **Line length:** The number of words in each line and follows the pattern 1-2-3-4-1 (so that the first line has one word, the second has two, and so on).
- **Types of words used on each line:** The first line is a **noun**, the second line is composed of **adjectives** that describe the noun in the first line, the third line has an **action**, the fourth line contains a **longer description**, and the fifth line is a **noun** that relates to the noun in the first line.

Here's an example:

Ocean
 Blue, powerful
 Waves crashing ashore
 Teeming with sea creatures
 Life



EXAMPLES

The following examples cover both the general and specific definitions of cinquain. The general definition refers to any five-line stanza, while the specific definition primarily refers to a particular type of five-line poem called the American cinquain.

Examples of Cinquains as Any Five-Line Stanza

The examples below show the vast variety of poems written using five-line stanzas.

Donne's "Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness"

This example of a cinquain written in formal verse is from a poem by the 17th century poet John Donne. In this poem, Donne uses iambic pentameter and an ABABB rhyme scheme.

We think that Paradise and Calvary,
 Christ's cross and Adam's tree, stood in one place ;
 Look, Lord, and find both Adams met in me ;
 As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
 May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.

Lear's "There was an Old Man in a boat"

The poet [Edward Lear](#) is famous for his limericks—short, humorous poems consisting of five lines that usually describe an eccentric figure experiencing misfortune. This limerick is a well-known classic that follows the formula.

There was an Old Man in a boat,
 Who said, 'I'm afloat, I'm afloat!
 When they said, 'No! you ain't!
 He was ready to faint,
 That unhappy Old Man in a boat.

Poe's "To Helen"

This is the first stanza of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe that is written in cinquains and follows the rhyme scheme ABABB. The first four lines of this stanza are in iambic tetrameter, (four iambs per line) while the fifth is iambic trimeter (three iambs per line).

Helen, thy beauty is to me
 Like those Nicean barks of yore,
 That gently, o'er a perfumed sea,
 The weary, way-worn wanderer bore
 To his own native shore.

A *Tanka* by Hiroko Seki's

Here is an example of the traditional Japanese five-line poem known as *tanka*, a form which inspired Adelaide Crapsley to create the American cinquain. Each of the lines of a *tanka* has a prescribed number of syllables following the typical pattern of 5-7-5-7-7 (so that the first line has five syllables, the second has seven, and so forth). This particular *tanka* was written by the Japanese poet Hiroko Seki:

In castle ruins
 the tappings of a hand-drum
 so clearly echo,
 that in Komachi's dancing
 even the moon seemed to smile.

American Cinquains

Crapsey's "Triad"

Adelaide Crapsley invented the American cinquain, which in modern times is often referred to simply as a cinquain. It is a non-rhyming, five-line poem with two syllables in the first line, four in the second, six in the third, eight in the fourth, and two in the fifth. Her poem "Triad" adheres to this form. The meter is iambic—each line is organized by two-syllable groupings, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (be-**fore**).

These be
 Three silent things:
 The falling snow. . the hour
 Before the dawn. . the mouth of one
 Just dead.

A Didactic Cinquain

This is an example of a didactic cinquain, a variation on the American cinquain in which line length is determined by the number of words in each line, instead of the number of syllables. The Didactic cinquain follows the pattern 1-2-3-4-1 (so that the first line has one word, the second has two, and so forth).

Rain
Light, soft
Hanging, drifting, suspended
Making the world ghostly
Mist

This example follows the standard formula for this form, in which the first and last lines are related nouns, the second line is made up of adjectives describing the noun in the first line, the third line has an action, and the fourth line contains a longer description.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Adelaide Crapsey invented the American cinquain because she was inspired by traditional forms of Japanese poetry (such as the *tanka*) and she wanted to work within the restrictions that their strict metrical conventions imposed on poetic expression. The result is a form of poetry that is short, meditative, imagistic, and above all *delicate*—a quality regarded as beautiful in and of itself.

The limerick, by contrast, could hardly be more different than the *tanka* or American cinquain, exemplifying how varied the uses of the cinquain can be. Limericks lack all the eloquence and gravity of American cinquains. Instead, limericks are intended to be recited as jokes, and their less-strict meter enables writers to use the form to weave short narratives.

Ultimately, the vast differences between different sorts of five-line poems shows that the style of a poem is influenced more by the meter than by the number of lines.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Cinquain](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Cinquain](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of cinquain (it comes from the French word for five).
- A [helpful guide](#) to understanding the importance of Adelaide Crapsey's writing to the way people think about cinquains.
- Three poems, written in [Haiku, Tanka, and American Cinquain](#) on the same subject (some black swans).

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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

Chicago Manual

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