

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 [rhyme scheme](#). 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 [formal verse](#), 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 [enjambment](#) 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, unmetred 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, [rhyme](#), 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 [iamb](#) 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 [rhyme scheme](#)) 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 [stanzas](#), 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 [line breaks](#), 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:

Chicago Manual

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