

Quatrain



DEFINITION

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

A quatrain is a four-line stanza of poetry. It can be a single four-line stanza, meaning that it is a stand-alone poem of four lines, or it can be a four-line stanza that makes up part of a longer poem.

Some additional key details about quatrains:

- Quatrains are most common in verse that uses both meter and rhyme, but they appear in all types of poetry.
- The lines of a quatrain vary in length depending on the type of verse being written: they can range from a single syllable to twenty syllables or more.
- Quatrains have been used as an important unit in composing verse in cultures all around the world and throughout history, from ancient China to Medieval France through to the modern day.

How to Pronounce Quatrain

Here's how to pronounce quatrain: kwah-**trayn**

Quatrains in Depth

The Quatrain in Formal Verse

The four-line stanza is most common in [formal verse](#)—verse that employs both a strict meter and [rhyme scheme](#). Here are a few different types of quatrain that occur in formal verse:

- **Decasyllabic quatrain:** Also called "elegiac stanza" or "heroic stanza," this common example of quatrain is written in iambic pentameter (meaning that each line has ten syllables made up of five [iamb](#)s) and typically uses the rhyme scheme ABAB or AABB. The alternative names "elegiac" and "heroic" are due to the common use of this type of quatrain in [elegies](#) beginning in the 18th century, as well as to its earlier popularization through the narrative poems of Chaucer in the 14th century.
- **Common meter:** Used frequently in ballads and hymns, common meter consists of quatrains that alternate between iambic tetrameter (eight syllables consisting of four iambs) and iambic trimeter (six syllables made up of three iambs). Emily Dickinson often used common meter, and common meter is also the meter used in the hymn "Amazing Grace."
- **Zi Ye and Jueju:** Many forms of classical Chinese poetry are based on the quatrain. Zi Ye poetry, and a later variation on the form known as Jueju, are forms of four-line metered poetry that have

been practiced in China for many centuries. In these poetic forms, line length is measured according to the number of characters, and each line is said to correspond to a season—spring, summer, winter, and autumn.

- **Ruba'i:** A four-line poem or stanza in Persian verse that follows a prescribed pattern of long and short syllables. The ruba'i is typically monorhyming, meaning that it follows the rhyme scheme AAAA.

The Quatrain in Blank Verse

Quatrains are not as common in [blank verse](#) (verse that has a strict meter but no rhymes) because blank verse is generally used for long narrative poems and verse drama, which seldom uses any types of stanzas at all. However, there are a limited number of examples of quatrains written in blank verse, which typically arise in contexts in which the text is naturally broken up into stanzas of four lines, such as the dialogue in plays.

One example is from Act 2, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's [Romeo and Juliet](#), in which Romeo speaks four lines in iambic pentameter in the course of regular dialogue, making a quatrain in blank verse:

ROMEO

I have night's cloak to hide me from their sight;
And but thou love me, let them find me here:
My life were better ended by their hate,
Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.

The Quatrain in Free Verse

[Free verse](#) is unrhymed and unmetered, and its stanzas (if it has them) can contain any number of lines. Quatrains appear in free verse with some frequency, but there aren't any rules or reasons behind their use. One example is this excerpt from the first section of Walt Whitman's iconic poem "Song of Myself":

My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil,
this air,
Born here of parents born here from parents the same, and
their parents the same,
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.

Since Whitman wrote "Song of Myself" in free verse, there is no meter or rhyme here, and this quatrain comes from a section of the poem that also includes stanzas of two and three lines. Apparently, this stanza is a quatrain simply because Whitman thought that a stanza of four lines was the form best suited to communicating these particular ideas.



EXAMPLES

Quatrains in Formal Verse

Wordsworth's "Elegiac Stanzas"

The full title of this poem by William Wordsworth is "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle in a Storm, Painted by Sir George Beaumont." In keeping with the poem's form of elegiac (or "heroic") stanzas, the meter is iambic pentameter and each individual stanza has a [rhyme scheme](#) of **ABAB**.

Farewell, farewell the heart that lives **alone**,
 Housed in a dream, at distance from the **Kind**!
 Such happiness, wherever it be **known**,
 Is to be pitied; for 'tis surely **blind**.

But welcome fortitude, and patient **cheer**,
 And frequent sights of what is to be **borne**!
 Such sights, or worse, as are before me **here**.—
 Not without hope we suffer and we **mourn**.

Quatrain in "The Unquiet Grave"

As with many traditional [ballads](#), this poem is not attributable to any one author because it existed for many years in oral tradition before entering written language. This ballad is written in common meter, with a rhyme scheme of **ABAB**. The example here is the ballad's concluding quatrain:

The stalk is withered dry, my **love**,
 So will our hearts **decay**;
 So make yourself content, my **love**,
 Till God calls you **away**.

Khayyám's "Goblet"

This poem by Omar Khayyám is an example of *rubá'i*, a style of poem in Persian verse consisting of four lines. Ruba'i may employ different rhyme schemes, but two of the more popular are **AAAA**, as below, and **AABA**. Because translation from Persian to English is difficult, this English translation does not retain the original poem's metrical pattern, one of the ruba'i's defining features.

At dawn came a calling from the **tavern**
 Hark drunken mad man of the **cavern**
 Arise; let us fill with wine one more **turn**
 Before destiny fills our cup, our **urn**.

Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Robert Frost is said to have borrowed the form of this poem from English translations of Persian ruba'i poetry that employed the **AABA** rhyme scheme. As you can see, the unrhymed **B** line of the first stanza is taken up as the predominant rhyme in the following stanza. This

pattern, which continues throughout the poem, is a hallmark of longer ruba'i poems that use the **AABA** rhyme scheme. The two stanzas below are an excerpt of the complete poem.

Whose woods these are I think I **know**.
 His house is in the village **though**;
 He will not see me stopping **here**
 To watch his woods fill up with **snow**.

My little horse must think it **queer**
 To stop without a farmhouse **near**
 Between the woods and frozen **lake**
 The darkest evening of the **year**.

Rustaveli's "The Knight in the Panther Skin"

This is an example of a poetic form called shairi, a form of medieval Georgian verse consisting of four lines of 16 syllables each, with an **AAAA** rhyme scheme.

Once there ruled in Arabia, Rostevan, a king by God's **grace**
 Thriving, majestic, generous, modest though in the highest **place**.
 So just and merciful, many vassals did his service **embrace**.
 He was a fearless warrior, a peerless speaker, never **base**.

Zi Ye Poetry

Zi Ye, or "Lady Midnight," was a Chinese poet of the Jin Dynasty who invented a poetic form consisting of four lines with five characters each. The form, which other poets later imitated, was named after her. Here you can see it in the original Chinese with the English translation below.

夜長不得眠
 明月何灼灼
 想聞散喚聲
 虛應空中諾

All night I could not sleep
 Because of the moonlight on my bed.
 I kept on hearing a voice calling:
 Out of Nowhere, Nothing answered "yes."

Quatrains in Blank Verse

Marlowe's "Doctor Faustus"

Christopher Marlowe's famous tragedy [Doctor Faustus](#) is a drama written in blank verse (strict meter but no rhyme), much like the plays of Shakespeare. Blank verse in iambic pentameter is the standard form for verse dramas, and *Doctor Faustus* is no exception. Here, the line break that turns these eight lines into two quatrains is inserted to transition between speakers.

GOOD ANGEL:

O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside,
And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul,
And heap God's heavy wrath upon thy head!
Read, read the Scriptures:—that is blasphemy.

EVIL ANGEL:

Go forward, Faustus, in that famous art
Wherein all Nature's treasure is contain'd:
Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky,
Lord and commander of these elements.

Quatrains in Free Verse

Glück's "October"

Louise Glück's long poem, "October," is a more contemporary example of the use of quatrain. Glück, like the vast majority of poets writing in English today, writes in free verse. The three excerpted stanzas below are broken up as they are, one can assume, because the poet thought that it created the right pacing in the text.

It does me no good; violence has changed me.
My body has grown cold like the stripped fields;
now there is only my mind, cautious and wary,
with the sense it is being tested.

Once more, the sun rises as it rose in summer;
bounty, balm after violence.
Balm after the leaves have changed, after the fields
have been harvested and turned.

Tell me this is the future,
I won't believe you.
Tell me I'm living,
I won't believe you.

them, which may lead a poet to choose to write in that form. For example, the four lines of a Zi Ye poem correspond to the four seasons, which adds another dimension of meaning to the words of the poem. This level of specificity, however, is the exception to the rule when it comes to quatrains. Most poets who use quatrains do so because it is dictated by other aspects of the form in which they're writing. For example, a poet who wants to write a proper ballad will need to use quatrains, and a playwright writing in blank verse might sometimes give four lines of dialogue to a character, inadvertently making a quatrain.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Quatrain](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Quatrain](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of quatrain (it comes from the French word for four).
- An [extensive list](#) of poems that use quatrains.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Quatrain." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 28 Nov 2017.

Chicago Manual

Bergman, Bennet. "Quatrain." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved November 28, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/quatrain>.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

The reasons for writing quatrains are as numerous and as varied as the reasons for writing poetry. Some forms of the stand-alone quatrain have specific requirements and traditions associated with