

Rhyme Scheme



DEFINITION

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

A rhyme scheme is the pattern according to which end rhymes (rhymes located at the end of lines) are repeated in works of poetry. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, such that all the lines in a poem that rhyme with each other are assigned a letter, beginning with "A." For example, a four-line poem in which the **first line** rhymes with the **third line**, and the **second line** rhymes with the **fourth line** has the rhyme scheme **ABAB**, as in the poem "Roses are red, / Violets are blue. / Shakespeare is dead? / I had no clue."

Some additional key details about rhyme schemes:

- Rhyme schemes represent [stanza](#) breaks using spaces. So a poem made up of two rhyming [couplets](#) (two-line stanzas) would be said to have a rhyme scheme of AA BB.
- There are different conventions for writing out rhyme schemes. Some people use lowercase letters (abab), some use uppercase (ABAB), and some even throw in italics or hyphens (*a-b-a-b*). This formatting aspect of rhyme schemes is not very scientific.
- Rhymes are used in all types of poetry, but they don't always occur in regular patterns or at the ends of lines—so not all poems that use rhyme necessarily have rhyme schemes. Rhyme schemes are only used to describe poems that use [end rhyme](#) (that is, rhymes at the ends of lines).

Types of Rhyme Schemes

A poem's rhyme scheme can be anything the poet wants it to be, but here's a list of some of the more common rhyme schemes:

- **Alternate rhyme** is ABAB CDCD EFEF and so on. This is the rhyme scheme typically used in [ballads](#).
- **Coupled rhyme** is any rhyme scheme in which rhymes occur in pairs, such as AABBCC. The rhymes themselves are called couplets.
- **Monorhyme** is the term used for poems that use just one rhyme throughout the entire poem, as in AAAA.
- **Enclosed rhyme** is the term used for "sandwich" rhyme schemes like ABA or ABBA.
- **Simple 4-line rhyme** follows a pattern of ABCB.
- **Chain rhyme** describes rhyme schemes in which stanzas are linked together by rhymes that carry over from one stanza to the next, as in ABA BCB CDC.

Keep in mind that this is just a list of some of the more common types of rhyme scheme. It's *not* a list of all the different forms of poetry, since the form of a poem is defined by more than just its rhyme scheme.

Rhyme Scheme and Formal Verse

Generally speaking, poems that have rhyme schemes are written in what's known as [formal verse](#) (which is the name given to rhymed poetry that uses a strict meter). All formal verse poems have some sort of rhyme scheme.

In addition, certain forms of poems, such as [sonnets](#) or [villanelles](#) have a pre-determined rhyme scheme. Poets wanting to write such poems have to match the rhyme scheme they use to the rhyme scheme defined by the type of poem in question.

Single-Stanza vs. Whole-Poem Rhyme Schemes

The pattern of a rhyme scheme can be specific to a single stanza of a poem, or it can repeat throughout an entire poem. For instance, if a poem is said to have an ABAB rhyme scheme, that might mean that the same two rhymes are used throughout the whole poem (as in, ABAB ABAB ABAB), but this is pretty uncommon in English—so more likely than not it's just a shorthand way of saying that *each stanza* uses a rhyme scheme of ABAB, but the A and B rhymes are not actually the same between stanzas. In this case, a longer poem with an ABAB rhyme scheme, if you were to write it out, would actually be ABAB CDCD EFEF, and so on. If you're not sure whether a rhyme scheme is supposed to apply to a whole poem or just a single stanza, the easiest way to figure this out is to just check the poem to see if rhymes are the same between different stanzas.

There are really only a few circumstances in which it makes sense to write out the entire rhyme scheme of a poem from beginning to end (instead of just using the single-stanza rhyme scheme as shorthand): when describing "fixed verse forms," or poems with a predetermined number of lines and a fixed rhyme scheme, such as a [sonnet](#). Sonnets are 14-line poems that typically use a rhyme scheme of ABBA ABBA CDEDCD—so in this case, writing out the rhyme scheme of the entire poem is actually the most efficient way of describing it.

Other fixed verse forms, such as the [villanelle](#), are easier to describe using simple English, as in, "five tercets with an ABA rhyme scheme, plus a final [quatrain](#) with a rhyme scheme of ABAA." That's less tedious and much easier on the eyes than writing "villanelles use a rhyme scheme of ABA ABA ABA ABA ABA ABAA," though both ways of describing a villanelle's rhyme scheme are acceptable.

Perfect Rhyme, Imperfect Rhyme, and Rhyme Scheme

Most people, when they think about what constitutes a rhyme, are actually thinking about one type of rhyme in particular, called perfect

rhyme, which only includes words with identical sounds like "game" and "tame," or "table" and "fable." But in fact, rhyme is a rather broad and loosely-defined literary device that includes many different types of repetition of sounds between words. For instance, the words "crate" and "braid" make a specific type of rhyme called [slant rhyme](#), because they both share a vowel sound ("ay") in their final syllable. When it comes to rhyme schemes and how they're written out, poems that use imperfect rhymes are no different from poems that use perfect rhymes. Therefore, this excerpt from a poem by Yeats would be said to have an **ABAB** rhyme scheme even though it uses slant rhyme:

When have I last looked **on**
 The round green eyes and the long wavering **bodies**
 Of the dark leopards of the **moon**?
 All the wild witches, those most noble **ladies**

Refrains and Rhyme Schemes

Some types of poems, such as [ballades](#), have entire lines that repeat at regular intervals throughout the poem. These repeating lines are called [refrains](#). For poems that use refrains, it's common to write the rhyme scheme in lowercase letters and then to use an uppercase letter to indicate the refrain. For example, ballades consist of three eight-line stanzas with a rhyme scheme of ababbcbC, plus a final four-line stanza with a rhyme scheme of bcbC, where the final line of every stanza is the refrain.



EXAMPLES

The following examples show all sorts of different rhyme schemes.

Coupled Rhyme in Dr. Seuss's *Horton Hears a Who!*

Dr. Seuss wrote many of his children's books in [formal verse](#). The opening stanza of his book *Horton Hears a Who*, excerpted below, uses a simple rhyme scheme of coupled rhyme (AABB).

On the fifteenth of May, in the jungle of **Nool**,
 In the heat of the day, in the cool of the **pool**,
 He was splashing... enjoying the jungle's great **joys**...
 When Horton the elephant heard a small **noise**.

Chain Rhyme in Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

In the excerpt of Frost's poem shown here, the **B** rhyme of the first stanza is taken up as the predominant rhyme in the second stanza, while the **C** rhyme in the second stanza then becomes the predominant line in the third stanza—making the rhyme scheme an example of chain rhyme (in which stanzas are linked together by rhymes that carry over from one stanza to the next).

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**.

He gives his harness bells a **shake**
 To ask if there is some **mistake**.
 The only other sound's the **sweep**
 Of easy wind and downy **flake**.

Milton's "When I Consider How My Light is Spent"

This [sonnet](#) by John Milton follows the traditional rhyme scheme of Italian sonnets: **ABBA ABBA CDECDE**.

When I consider how my light is **spent**
 Ere half my days in this dark world and **wide**,
 And that one talent which is death to **hide**
 Lodg'd with me useless, though my soul more **bent**
 To serve therewith my Maker, and **present**
 My true account, lest he returning **chide**;
 "Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?"
 I fondly ask. But Patience to **prevent**
 That murmur, soon replies: "God doth not **need**
 Either man's work or his own gifts; who **best**
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him **best**. His **state**
 Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding **speed**
 And post o'er land and ocean without **rest**:
 They also serve who only stand and **wait**."

Andrew Lang's "Ballade to an Optimist"

This poem follows the standard form of the [ballade](#). It has three stanzas of eight lines each, a four-line final stanza, and a **refrain** in the last line of each stanza. It uses the typical ballade rhyme scheme of **ababbcbC** for the eight-line stanzas and **bcbC** for the final stanza.

And, sometimes on a summer's **day**
 To self and every mortal **ill**
 We give the slip, we steal **away**,
 To walk beside some sedgy **rill**:
 The darkening years, the cares that **kill**,
 A little while are well **forgot**;
 When deep in broom upon the **hill**,
We'd rather be alive than not.

What though we wish the cats at **play**
 Would some one else's garden **till**;
 Though Sophonisba drop the **tray**
 And all our worshipped Worcester **spill**,
 Though neighbours "practise" loud and **shrill**,

Though May be cold and June be hot,
 Though April freeze and August grill,
We'd rather be alive than not.

And, sometimes on a summer's day
 To self and every mortal ill
 We give the slip, we steal away,
 To walk beside some sedgy rill:
 The darkening years, the cares that kill,
 A little while are well forgot;
 When deep in broom upon the hill,
We'd rather be alive than not.

Pistol, with oaths didst thou fulfil
 The task thy braggart tongue begot,
 We eat our leek with better will,
We'd rather be alive than not.

Oscar Wilde's "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"

This poem by Oscar Wilde is a variation on a traditional [ballad](#). It uses a six-line stanza instead of the ballad's usual four-line stanza, and it has an "ABCDBD" rhyme scheme.

He did not wear his scarlet coat,
 For blood and wine are red,
 And blood and wine were on his hands
 When they found him with the dead,
 The poor dead woman whom he loved,
 And murdered in her bed.

He walked amongst the Trial Men
 In a suit of shabby grey;
 A cricket cap was on his head,
 And his step seemed light and gay;
 But I never saw a man who looked
 So wistfully at the day.

It's worth noting that this is an example of a rhyme scheme that applies at the level of the stanza rather than the whole poem. Therefore, the "A" rhyme of the first stanza doesn't rhyme with the "A" rhyme of the second stanza, the "B" rhyme of the first stanza doesn't rhyme with the "B" rhyme of the second stanza, and so forth. When we say the rhyme scheme is "ABCDBD," that's just shorthand for ABCDBD EFGFHF, etc.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Poets use rhyme schemes for many of the same reasons they use rhyme: because it makes language sound more beautiful and thoughtfully-composed, like music. In the majority of rhyme schemes, rhymes repeat at regular intervals, dramatically increasing both the rhythm and musicality of poetry and in the process making the poem more pleasant to listen to, easier to understand, and more memorable.

Poets also choose specific rhyme schemes for different purposes. For instance, rhyme schemes in which rhymes are coupled (AABB) or in which they alternate (ABAB) tend to feel highly predictable and repetitive, which makes them well-suited to children's books and songs. However, after a while these rhyme schemes can start to seem a bit simplistic and tiresome. For that reason, poets who consider their work to be more literary or complex might choose to write in a poetic form that uses a more elaborate rhyme scheme (such as the sestina), both as a way of challenging themselves, and as a way of using rhyme more subtly in their work.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Rhyme Scheme](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [An article](#) that covers some of the most basic rhyme schemes and links to examples of poems that use them.
- [A short video](#) that explains rhyme scheme and shows how to label rhymes.

HOW TO CITE

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