Rhyme

DEFINITION

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

> A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Rhyming is particularly common in many types of poetry, especially at the ends of lines, and is a requirement in formal verse. The most familiar and widely-used form of rhyming is perfect rhyme, in which the stressed syllables of the words, along with all subsequent syllables, share identical sounds, as in "pencil" and "stencil." Perfect rhyme is so common, in fact, that the word "rhyme" is often used simply to refer to perfect rhymes. However, there are actually a variety of other types of rhymes, such as imperfect rhyme or slant rhyme, which also involve the repetition of similar sounds but in ways that are not quite as precise as perfect rhyme.

Some additional key details about rhyme:

- Rhyme is used in poetry, as well as in songwriting, not just because it's pleasant to hear, but because the repetition of sounds (especially when it's consistent) lends a sense of rhythm and order to the language.
- Contrary to what many people think, words don't have to share perfectly identical sounds in order to qualify as a type of rhyme. Many words that share similar sounds—including some words that only share a single letter—fall into one of the categories of rhyme we describe below.
- Poems that use rhymes at the end of each line often do so according to a repeating, predetermined pattern called a rhyme scheme.

Rhyme Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce rhyme: **rime**

Types of Rhyme

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. Not only are there many different types of rhyme, there are also many different *ways of categorizing* the different types of rhymes. The sections that follow cover all the different ways there are to categorize of rhyme.

Classifying Rhymes by Stressed and Unstressed Syllables

Perfect rhymes and **imperfect rhymes** are two important types of rhyme that are defined according to the sounds that they share as well as *where* the rhyme falls in relation to the stressed syllable in each word (that is, the syllable that receives the emphasis, such as "fine" in the word "de-**fine**"). Here's the definition of each, with examples:

- **Perfect Rhymes** include words whose stressed syllables share identical sounds, as do all sounds that follow the stressed syllable. The words "com**pare**" and "des**pair**" are perfect rhymes because both have final stressed syllables with identical sounds. The words "**plun**der" and "**thun**der" are also perfect rhymes because both their first stressed syllable and the syllable after it share common sounds.
- **Imperfect Rhymes** include words that rhyme the **stressed** syllable of one word with the unstressed syllable of another word, as in "**up**town" and "**frown**," or "**paint**ing" and "**ring**."

Classifying Rhymes by Sound

Another way of classifying types of rhymes focuses more on sound than it does on stressed syllables:

- **Assonance**, while also sometimes defined as its own figure of speech, assonance can also be described as a type of rhyme involving the repetition of the same or similar vowel sounds, as in "r**oo**f" and "t**oo**th," or "w**o**w" and "s**ou**nd."
- **Consonance**, like assonance, is often described as a figure of speech in its own right. But it can also be described as a type of rhyme involving the repetition of the same or similar consonant sounds, as in "cu**t**" and "ma**t**e," or "hal**f**" and "**f**ile."
- **Alliteration** is often treated as a figure of speech, but can also be categorized as a type of rhyme. It is a specialized form of consonance or assonance involving the repetition of the same sounds (consonant or vowel) either at the beginning of words or in the stressed syllable of words, as in "**P**eter **P**iper **p**icked a **p**int of **p**ickled **p**eppers."
- **Slant Rhyme** is similar to consonance and assonance in that it involves the repetition of similar consonants or vowel sounds, but slant rhyme requires the repeated sounds to occur in the final syllables of words, as in "pon**ch**o" and "crun**ch**y," or "cr**a**te" and "br**ai**d." This type of rhyme is a bit more technical in its definition than this short description, so for a more in-depth understanding it might be worthwhile to take a look at the entry on slant rhyme.
- **Pararhyme** is defined as "perfect consonance," meaning that all the consonants in two or more words are the same, as in "**l**ea**v**e**s**" and "**l**o**v**e**s**."

- **Forced rhyme** is a type of "near-rhyme" that include words with a close but imperfect match in sound in the final syllables, especially when a word is spelled abnormally in order to make the rhyme work, as in "truth" and "endu'th" (a contraction of "endureth"). Forced rhyme tends to make use of other rhyming devices like assonance and consonance, so it overlaps in many cases with the definition slant rhyme, but forced rhyme is a much broader and loosely-defined term that can be used to apply to any type of near-rhyme in the final syllables of a word.
    - The term "forced rhyme" is also sometimes used to refer to rhymes that use an awkward or unnatural syntax in order to "force" a rhyme at the end of a line. An example of this is "I gave my love to you my dear, / Cruel words from me you'll never hear" because the second line has so obviously been rearranged in order to make the rhyme work (the syntax we would expect to hear is "You'll never hear cruel words from me").
- **Semirhyme** is a rhyme in which two words share an identical sound but one of the words has an extra syllable at the end, as in "time" and "climbing."
- **Eye Rhymes** don't actually share any of the same sounds, but they *look* as though they should because they have the same spelling. Examples of eye rhyme include any words that look the same but sound different, as in "rough" and "cough," or "Christ" and "wrist."
- **Identical Rhymes** are just the opposite of eye rhymes: they include words that sound exactly the same but look different, as in "two" and "too," or "ball" and "bawl."
- **Monorhyme** is the term used for a poem that uses a single rhyme throughout. In other words, the rhyme scheme for a monorhyming poem would just be AAAA, etc

Classifying Rhymes by Their Placement Within Lines

In addition to the categories above, which describe rhymes based on the *types* of sounds they have in common, rhymes can also be described by their location within a line of poetry.

- **End rhyme** is any rhyme that occurs at the end of a line of verse, in the final word or syllables. This is by far the most common type of rhyme used in poetry. An example would be, "Roses are red, violets are **blue**, / Sugar is sweet, and so are **you**."
- **Internal rhymes** are rhyming words that *do not* occur at the ends of lines. An example would be "I **drove** myself to the lake / and **dove** into the water."
- **Broken rhymes** are rhymes in which one word is divided across lines (usually with a hyphen) in order to make it rhyme with another word. This is pretty uncommon, but it's not unheard of.
- **Cross rhyme** is a rhyme where a word at the end of a line rhymes with another word in the middle of a different line.

These categories are generally used *in conjunction with* the categories we've already covered, not *instead of* them. So, for instance, a certain rhyme might be described as "internal pararhyme," or "identical end rhyme."

Classifying Rhymes by Emphasis

Rhymes aren't only classified by whether their stressed syllables rhyme. They can also be classified according to location of the stressed syllables *within* the rhymed words:

- **Single:** a perfect or slant rhyme in which the **emphasis** falls on the last syllable, as in "**stop**" and "**mop**," or "com**pare**" and "des**pair**."
- **Double:** a perfect or slant rhyme in which the **emphasis** falls on the penultimate (second-to-last) syllable, as in "**plun**der" and "**thun**der."
- **Dactylic:** a perfect or slant rhyme in which the **emphasis** falls on the third-to-last syllable, as in "**in**dicate" and "**vin**dicate."

Rhyme and Rhyme Scheme

In formal verse (which is the name given to rhymed poetry that uses a strict meter), end rhymes typically repeat according to a pattern called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, so that each line of verse that corresponds to a specific type of rhyme used in the poem is assigned a letter, beginning with "A." For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth has the rhyme scheme ABAB, as in the lines below from the poem *To Anthea, who may Command him Anything* by Robert Herrick:

> Bid me to weep, and I will weep
> While I have eyes to see
> And having none, yet I will keep
> A heart to weep for thee

Although *all* formal verse poems have some sort of rhyme scheme, certain forms of poetry have a pre-determined rhyme scheme, such as the sonnet or the villanelle. Poets wanting to write such poems have to match the rhyme scheme they use to that defined by the type of poem in question.

EXAMPLES

Perfect Rhyme in John Milton's "When I consider how my light is spent"

Each rhyme in this famous sonnet by Milton is an example of perfect rhyme (words whose stressed syllables share identical sounds, as well as all sounds that follow the stressed syllable).

> 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
> Lodged 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."

Internal Rhyme and Alliteration in Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven"

Poe's famous poem uses internal rhyme in addition to end rhyme—and also makes heavy use of alliteration. Examples of alliteration are **bolded**, while examples of internal rhyme are highlighted.

> Once upon a midnight dreary, **w**hile I pondered, **w**eak and
> **w**eary,
> Over many a **q**uaint and **c**urious volume of forgotten lore—
> While I **n**odded, **n**early **n**apping, suddenly there came a
> tapping,
> As of some one gently **r**apping, **r**apping at my chamber door.
> "'Tis some visitor," I muttered, "tapping at my chamber
> door—
> Only this and nothing more."

Eye Rhyme in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 35"

Eye rhymes (rhymes that sound different but use the same spelling) are far more common in English verse prior to the 19th century, when the convention fell out of favor with many writers. Also worth nothing is that many older examples of eye rhyme occur not because the author originally intended them but because the way that words are pronounced changes over time.

> All men make faults, and even I in this,
> Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
> Myself corrupting salving thy amiss,
> Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are...

Slant Rhyme in Yeats' "Lines Written in Dejection"

This poem by W.B. Yeats gives an example of slant rhyme, since "moon" and "on" don't rhyme perfectly but end in the same consonant, while "bodies" and "ladies" don't use the same sounds in their stressed syllables, but end with identical unstressed syllables. Here are the first four lines of the poem:

> 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

Notice, too, the poet's use of alliteration in the phrase "wild witches."

Slant Rhyme in Big Daddy Kane's "Wrath of Kane"

It's pretty common for songwriters to use slant rhymes in addition to perfect rhymes—especially in rap. This 1989 track by Big Daddy Kane gives an expert example of complex rhyme that makes use of dactylic as well as double slant rhyme. If that's confusing, don't worry—all you need to know is that these slant rhymes are *almost* perfect (meaning they use assonance instead of identical sounds). The first highlighted example is dactylic because the final three syllables of both lines rhyme and have the same stress pattern (stressed-unstressed-stressed), whereas the second highlighted example is double because the final two syllables of the lines rhyme and also share the same stress pattern (stressed-unstressed).

> The heat is on so feel the fire
> Come off the empire, on a more higher
> Level than def, one step beyond dope
> The suckers all scope and hope to cope but nope
> Cause I can never let 'em on top of me
> I play 'em out like a game of Monopoly
> Let 'em speed around the board like an Astro
> Then send 'em to jail for trying to pass Go
> Shaking 'em up, breaking 'em up, taking no stuff
> But it still ain't loud enough

Note how Kane here creates his slant rhymes not through simple pairs of words, but by sometimes matching sets of words ("on top of me") with single words that make up the same number of syllables ("monopoly").

Forced Rhyme in Milton's "How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth"

This excerpt from a poem by John Milton is a good example of forced rhyme, since the poet had to alter the spelling of two different words in order to make them seem to rhyme with the word "youth."

> How soon hath Time, the subtle thief of youth,
> Stol'n on his wing my three-and-twentieth year!
> My hasting days fly on with full career,
> But my late spring no bud or blossom shew'th.
> Perhaps my semblance might deceive the truth
> That I to manhood am arriv'd so near;
> And inward ripeness doth much less appear,
> That some more timely-happy spirits endu'th.

"Shew'th" (meaning: "shows") and "endu'th" (meaning: "endures") are the forced rhymes in this example. Notice, too, how the syntax in line 4 is slightly unusual: it would be more natural to have written "But my late spring shows no bud or blossom." The awkward phrasing of the line is a further indication that the rhyme in it is forced.

Broken Rhyme in Edward Lear's "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear"

This example makes unusual use of enjambment (a line break without punctuation) to split the word "nightgown" in half so it rhymes with "white"—an example of broken rhyme. The rhyme scheme here is ABAB.

> When he walks in waterproof white,
> The children run after him so!
> Calling out, "He's gone out in his night-
> Gown, that crazy old Englishman, oh!"

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use rhyme because it makes language sound more beautiful and thoughtfully-composed, like music. Especially in formal verse (since it uses a strict meter), rhymes repeat at regular intervals, dramatically increasing the rhythm and musicality of poetry and thus making it not only more pleasant to listen to but easier to understand and more memorable.

While strict rhyme schemes may have fallen out of favor with many poets writing today—who prefer free verse to the more constraining forms of formal verse—more subtle forms of rhyme (such as assonance) remain ever popular for increasing the aesthetic quality of a poetic composition. In addition to poetry, rhyme is common in riddles, nursery rhymes, jokes, and children's books, since it also aids in memorization. It's also common in song lyrics, for many of the same reasons it's popular in poetry.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Rhyme: A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples and some more information about the history of rhyme in various languages and cultures.
- The dictionary definition of Rhyme: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of rhyme.
- Rhymer is a rhyming dictionary—a great online resource for finding different kinds of rhymes for any word.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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

Chicago Manual

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