Stanza

DEFINITION

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

> A stanza is a group of lines form a smaller unit within a poem. A single stanza is usually set apart from other lines or stanza within a poem by a double line break or a change in indentation.

Some additional key details about stanzas:

- Stanzas provide poets with a way of visually grouping together the ideas in a poem, and of putting space between separate ideas or parts of a poem. Stanzas also help break the poem down into smaller units that are easy to read and understand.
- Stanzas aren't always separated by line breaks. Especially in older or longer poems, stanzas may be differentiated from one another according to where the meter or rhyme scheme change.
- Because stanzas are the basic unit of poetry, they are often compared to paragraphs in prose.

How to Pronounce Stanza

Here's how to pronounce stanza: **stan**-zuh

Stanzas, Meter, and Rhyme Scheme

Stanzas can have any meter or rhyme scheme, or none at all. However, that way that stanzas work are different in formal verse that has meter and rhyme scheme and free verse that does not.

Stanzas in Formal Verse

In formal verse—that is, poetry with a strict meter and rhyme scheme—a stanza may contain multiple meters and different rhymes. For example, some stanzas alternate between iambic pentameter and iambic tetrameter. However, the general rule about stanzas in formal verse is that their form recurs from stanza to stanza—the words are different in each stanza, but the general metrical pattern and rhyme scheme are usually the same in each stanza.

Here's an example. In this two-stanza poem by Emily Dickinson, the first stanza alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (eight syllables) with lines of iambic trimeter (six syllables), and the rhyme scheme is ABCB. Since this is formal verse, the second stanza should be expected to repeat the same pattern (the same meter and rhyme scheme, but using different rhymes), which it does.

> You left me – Sire – two Legacies –
> A Legacy of Love
> A Heavenly Father would suffice
> Had He the offer of –
>
> You left me Boundaries of Pain –
> Capacious as the Sea –
> Between Eternity and Time –
> Your Consciousness – and me –

Stanzas in Free Verse

In free verse—or, poetry without meter or rhyme scheme—the stanza is a unit that is defined by *meaning* or *pacing*, rather than by meter or rhyme. In other words, a stanza break may be used in free verse to create a pause in the poem, or to signal a shift in the poem's focus. In free verse, unlike in formal verse, stanzas are often irregular throughout the poem, so a poem may contain a dozen two-line couplets shuffled in with a handful of six-line sestets and one much longer stanza.

Here's an example of the use of stanza breaks in free verse—an excerpt from the poem "A Sharply Worded Silence" by Louise Glück—which consists of a four-line quatrain, followed by a single line, followed by a three-line tercet. Notice how the stanza breaks serve to break the poem into units of speech or thought—much like paragraphs in prose.

> Because it is the nature of garden paths
> to be circular, each night, after my wanderings,
> I would find myself at my front door, staring at it,
> barely able to make out, in darkness, the glittering knob.
>
> It was, she said, a great discovery, albeit my real life.
>
> But certain nights, she said, the moon was barely visible
> through the clouds
> and the music never started. A night of pure
> discouragement.
> And still the next night I would begin again, and often all
> would be well.

Types of Stanzaic Form

For the most part, stanzas are named according to the number of lines they contain.

- Couplet: A stanza made up of two lines. The simplest and most basic unit of poetry in English is the rhyming couplet.
- Tercet: A stanza made up of three lines. Also called a tristich. Forms of poetry that are based on the tercet include villanelles and terza rima.
- Quatrain: A stanza made up of four lines. The unit of many traditional forms of poetry, such as ballads and sestinas.

- Cinquain: A stanza made up of five lines. Also called a quintain. Some poems, such as the Japanese tanka and the American cinquain, consist of a single five-line stanza.
- Sestet: A stanza made up of six lines. Also called a sestain. Sestets appear primarily in sonnets.

Other Types of Stanzas

There are other types of stanzas that are not simply defined by their number of lines. These specialized types of stanzas are defined by specific rhyme scheme or metrical requirements, or they always appear in specific poetic forms. Here are just a few of the more common types of stanzas that are defined by rhyme scheme or meter.

- **Ballad Stanza:** A type of four-line stanza common in English poetry. It is generally written in common meter with an ABCB rhyme scheme.
- **Octave:** This is an eight-line stanza in iambic pentameter, usually with an ABBA ABBA rhyme scheme. It is of particular importance to sonnets, though it also appears in other forms.
- **Elegiac couplet:** One of the more common forms in ancient Greek and Latin verse, elegiac couplets are defined by their meter: alternating dactylic hexameter and pentameter. Elegiac couplets are scarcely used by poets writing in English.
- **Envoi:** An envoi is a brief concluding stanza at the end of a poem that summarizes the preceding poem or serves as its dedication. This type of stanza is defined not by its length, meter, or rhyme scheme, but rather by its content and its position at the end of the poem. Envois appear most often in the poetic form called the ballade.
- **Stand-alone lines:** Used almost exclusively in free verse, single-line stanzas are seldom be referred to as stanzas, but should be acknowledged as constituting a unit of poetry in and of themselves when preceded and followed by double line breaks.

Breaking Down and Adding Up Stanzas

Stanzas consisting of four or more lines may sometimes be described as containing shorter stanzas within them, even if there is no stanza break. For example, the first two lines of a quatrain may be referred to as a couplet, even if they do not form their own stanza. This can make it easier, when speaking or writing about a poem, to break larger pieces down into units that are shorter than stanzas but longer than individual lines.

The same is true of grouping multiple stanzas together. Two distinct quatrains may be described as making up a single octave, as is often the case with sonnets—the two quatrains that begin a sonnet are, together, referred to as the octave. Similarly, the two halves of an octave can always also be referred to as quatrains. What this means is that while stanzas are usually set off from other stanzas by lines breaks or indentation, that isn't always the case. For instance, fourteen-line sonnets often appear without any stanza breaks at all—and yet the first eight lines of the poem are still referred to as the octave.

In some cases, a stanza can be broken down multiple ways. For example, a stanza that is a sestet may be described as consisting of two tercets, even though there may not be a stanza break between the two tercets to distinguish them. On the other hand, a sestet may *also* be described as consisting of three couplets. Neither would be improper, but which one you choose may be informed by a few separate factors. A sestet with the rhyme scheme ABCABC would more likely be described as consisting of two tercets than three couplets, since it would be more natural to break the stanza up into two units with a rhyme scheme of ABC than to break it into three units with rhyme schemes of AB, CA, and BC. A sestet with an ABABAB rhyme scheme, on the other hand, would more properly be described as consisting of three couplets, since such a stanza could be thought of as breaking down into three units with rhyme schemes of AB.

Stanza vs. Strophe

"Strophe," like "stanza," is a term that refers to a grouping of lines in poetry. In some cases it can be used interchangeably with "stanza," while in others it can't:

- **When line groupings are *inconsistent*:** "Strophe" is used specifically in the context of poetry that does not use stanzas of consistent length throughout the poem, as is the case with many poems written in free verse. In such cases the term "strophe" can be used interchangeable with "stanza" to refer to any grouping of lines as a unit.
- **When line groupings are *consistent*:** When line groupings are either consistent (when all of the stanzas in a poem are four-line quatrains, for instance) or when the line-groupings follow traditional rules (as in the octave and sextet of a sonnet), the word strophe cannot be used. In those cases, "stanza" is always used to refer to such line groupings.

To put it another way: all strophes are stanzas, but not all stanzas are strophes.

EXAMPLES

Couplets in Max Ritvo's "Boy Goes to War"

Here's a contemporary example of the use of couplets in a work of free verse by the poet Max Ritvo.

> His father told him never start writing
> or reading in the middle of a book.
>
> There's a title, don't go on without one.
> And he didn't go on without one — he had the title Private.
>
> This was life's taproot — the obedient
> boy began always at the beginning.

> Books start out with what the boy calls Beauty
> — the boat's still in port. The cat's alive. Pantry's packed.

Tercets in Dylan Thomas's "Do not go gentle into that good night"

Tercets are the basic unit of a form known as the villanelle, which follows an ABA rhyme scheme and has two refrains that repeat throughout the poem. These two tercets are the opening two stanzas of one of the more famous modern examples of the villanelle, Dylan Thomas;s "Do no go gentle into that good night."

> Do not go gentle into that good night,
> Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
> Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
>
> Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
> Because their words had forked no lightning they
> Do not go gentle into that good night.

Quatrains in Millay's "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver"

This ballad by Edna St. Vincent Millay uses quatrains with a rhyme scheme of ABCB.

> "Son," said my mother,
> When I was knee-high,
> "You've need of clothes to cover you,
> And not a rag have I.
>
> "There's nothing in the house
> To make a boy breeches,
> Nor shears to cut a cloth with
> Nor thread to take stitches.

Cinquain in Poe's "To Helen"

Here's an example of a poem by Edgar Allen Poe written entirely in cinquains. In this example, the rhyme scheme is not consistent between stanzas—Poe uses ABABB in the first and ABABA in the second, and ABBAB in the third.

> 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.
>
> On desperate seas long wont to roam,
> Thy hyacinth hair, thy classic face,
> Thy Naiad airs have brought me home
> To the glory that was Greece,
> And the grandeur that was Rome.
>
> Lo, in yon brilliant window-niche
> How statue-like I see thee stand,
> The agate lamp within thy hand,
> Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
> Are Holy Land!

Couplet in Shakespeare's "Sonnet V"

The lines at the end of this sonnet may be referred to as a "rhyming couplet." This couplet is distinguished from the rest of the poem not by a double line break, but by indentation—as well as by the fact that it uses a separate rhyme scheme from the rest of the sonnet. (In keeping with the form of the English sonnet, this poem uses a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Notice how the final two lines are the only adjacent lines in the whole poem to rhyme; this is yet another factor that sets them apart as a couplet.)

> Those hours, that with gentle work did frame
> The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell,
> Will play the tyrants to the very same
> And that unfair which fairly doth excel;
> For never-resting time leads summer on
> To hideous winter, and confounds him there;
> Sap checked with frost, and lusty leaves quite gone,
> Beauty o'er-snowed and bareness every where:
> Then were not summer's distillation left,
> A liquid prisoner pent in walls of glass,
> Beauty's effect with beauty were bereft,
> Nor it, nor no remembrance what it was:
> But flowers distilled, though they with winter meet,
> Leese but their show; their substance still lives sweet.

Elegiac Couplets in Ovid's "Elegy III"

This brief excerpt from a longer love poem by the Roman poet Ovid makes use of elegiac couplets (though the original meter is lost in translation). Although the couplets aren't separated from one another by double line breaks, each half of the quatrain below may be referred to as a couplet because of the metrical pattern they followed in the original Latin, as well as the AABB rhyme scheme they follow in English.

> Heav'n knows, dear maid, I love no other fair;
> In thee lives all my love, my heav'n lies there.
> Oh! may I by indulgent Fate's decree,
> With thee lead all my life, and die with thee.

Envoi in Kipling's "Sestina of the Tramp-Royal"

This sestina by Rudyard Kipling is a good example of the sestina's use of envoi, a brief concluding stanza to a poem. The example here is an excerpt of the sestina's final stanza and the envoi. This envoi has three lines, as do all envois in sestinas. Envois also often appear in the poetic form called ballades, where they may have four or more lines.

> It's like a book, I think, this bloomin' world,
> Which you can read and care for just so long,
> But presently you feel that you will die
> Unless you get the page you're readin' done,
> An' turn another—likely not so good;
> But what you're after is to turn 'em all.
>
> Gawd bless this world! Whatever she 'ath done—
> Excep' when awful long I've found it good.
> So write, before I die, ''E liked it all!'

Stanzas in Milton's "On the New Forcers of Conscience under the Long Parliament"

Here's an example of a poem in which the poet uses indentation to differentiate the stanzas, rather than double line breaks. This poem is a "caudate sonnet," a variation on the sonnet that consists of an octave (or two quatrains) and a sestet (two tercets) followed by a brief concluding portion called a coda, which consists here of two tercets. Milton uses indentation to accentuate lines that are, in a traditional sonnet, the first lines of stanzas. Here, we've color-coded the different stanzas so it's easier to see how the indentation signals stanza breaks.

> BECAUSE you have thrown off your Prelate Lord,
> And with stiff vows renounced his Liturgy,
> To seize the widowed whore Plurality,
> From them whose sin ye envied, not abhorred,
> Dare ye for this adjure the civil sword
> To force our consciences that Christ set free,
> And ride us with a Classic Hierarchy,
> Taught ye by mere A. S. and Rutherford?
> Men whose life, learning, faith, and pure intent,
> Would have been held in high esteem with Paul
> Must now be named and printed heretics
> By shallow Edwards and Scotch What-d'ye-call!
> But we do hope to find out all your tricks,
> Your plots and packing, worse than those of Trent,
> *That so the Parliament*
> *May with their wholesome and preventive shears*
> *Clip your phylacteries, though baulk your ears,*
> And succour our just fears,
> When they shall read this clearly in your charge:
> New Presbyter is but old Priest writ large.

Notice how the six lines of the coda are indented differently from the stanzas in the rest of the poem, signifying the coda's difference from the rest of the sonnet.

Stanzas in Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire"

This is an example of stanzas in songs with lyrics. "Ring of Fire," a song by the American folk musician Johnny Cash, has verses of four lines and a chorus of five lines. The rhyme scheme is different between the verses and the chorus; it shifts from AABB in the verse to ABACA in the chorus. The excerpt below shows the first stanza of the song and the chorus.

> Love is a burnin' thing
> And it makes a fiery ring
> Bound by wild desire
> I fell into a ring of fire
>
> I fell into a burnin' ring of fire
> I went down, down, down
> And the flames went higher
> And it burns, burns, burns
> The ring of fire, the ring of fire

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Stanzas are used, much like paragraphs in prose, to group related ideas into units. This helps the poem to feel more structured and, therefore, more digestible to the reader or listener. The specific length, meter, and rhyme scheme of a stanza may be dictated by the poem's form, or they may be decisions that the poet makes freely according to his or her artistic vision. For example, a single-line stanza can be used to convey an image in a dramatic fashion, or an eight-line stanza can be used to convey one long, complex thought.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Stanza: A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- The dictionary definition of Stanza: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of stanza (in Italian it means "room," or "stopping place.")
- A short video explaining stanzas in under a minute.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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

Chicago Manual

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