

Valentine Sonnet

Love is in the air, and there's no time like Valentine's Day for your high schooler to learn about the most romantic poetic form: the sonnet! Invented by 13th century Italians and popularized by English poets in the 16th century, the sonnet provided William Shakespeare the structure for his most enduring poetic achievements, dealing with youth, beauty, and especially love.

Sonnets use plenty of rhyme, but this poetic form is not a walk in the park for beginning bards. Rhyme scheme, rhythm, meter, and such poetic elements as alliteration and assonance all play a part in crafting a Valentine's poem built to last. To get your high schooler started on a love poem that will teach more than the birds and the bees, here's a fun activity that will have your teen learning all about the sonnet, then writing her own!

What You Need:

- Pen
- Paper
- Materials to copy the sonnet into a Valentine's card (optional)

What You Do:

1. The most easily recognizable element to the Shakespearean sonnet is its rhyme scheme. To determine the rhyme scheme of a poem, look at the last word of the first line and letter it as "A." When a line rhymes with a previous line, it should have the same letter. When a line ends in a different rhyme, it should be marked with the next letter of the alphabet (in this case, "B"). To practice, have your teen take a look at this famous poem, Shakespeare's Sonnet 116, and try to notate the rhyme scheme: *Let me not to the marriage of true minds Admit impediments, love is not love Which alters when it alteration finds, Or bends with the remover to remove. O no, it is an ever fixed mark That looks on tempests and is never shaken; It is the star to every wand'ring bark, Whose worth's unknown although his height be taken. Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks Within his bending sickle's compass come, Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, But bears it out even to the edge of doom: If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ, nor no man ever loved.* If your teen has looked carefully, she should see that the sonnet follows the following rhyme scheme: A-B-A-B-C-D-C-D-E-F-E-F-G-G
2. What else can your teen observe about the above example? How many syllables are found in each line? What is the "meter," or rhythmic structure of each line? To determine the meter, your teen should read each line out loud, making note of whether there is a "long" syllable and where there is a "short" syllable. Some lines will be easier to scan than others. This is no easy task, but hopefully your child will soon discover that this poem follows a short-long rhythm (i.e. "Da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM"). The particular meter is called "iambic pentameter." It is the most common meter in English poetry.
3. Now it's time to get writing! Using the knowledge about the sonnet that your child has gained, she should try and put together a 14-line poem that fits the rhyme scheme and meter of Shakespeare's sonnet. This won't be easy, but it doesn't have to be a chore, either. It might help to make this a silly exercise instead of a full-blown love poem.
4. When your teen is finished, read over the poem together to make sure that the rhyme scheme and meter have been followed. If she wants, your teen can copy her poem into a Valentine's card and give it to someone special!

