

Sonnet Puzzles

Sonnet puzzles help students learn iambic pentameter through experimentation. After solving a sonnet puzzle, students should understand the distinct rhythms of iambic pentameter, and should be able to read Shakespeare plays and sonnets more naturally in class. Too often, students learn poetry this way:

- Read a famous sonnet.
- Read about the rules of iambic pentameter.
- Write a sonnet for homework.

This approach has two problems. First, the sonnets studied invariably have some irregularities in their meters. Truly explaining these irregularities takes more time and nuance than the teacher may have. Glossing over them gives students the impression that these strange new rules are arbitrary or unimportant. Second, creating a sonnet out of whole cloth often overwhelms students, many of whom struggle daily just to write proper prose paragraphs.

A real sonnet is a balancing act of narrative, grammar, spelling, meter, word choice, rhyme, punctuation, rhythm, pacing, and plot. Sonnet puzzles allow students to focus on their new skills—meter, rhyme, and rhythm—while controlling for all the other components. The words in a sonnet puzzle are already there. The spelling is correct. There are exactly the right number of syllables. The rhymes are provided. The plot or narrative is settled. Students apply the rules of meter and line breaks to solve the puzzle and piece together a poem that already exists. In the process, they gain confidence in new skills.

The following sheets offer Shakespeare’s famous “Sonnet 18.” To make the puzzle, you will need:

- laser or ink-jet printer (for cardstock, use the “thick paper” setting)
- scissors or a paper-cutter
- clear tape (optional)

Print each page on a different color of paper. There are two copies of each stanza on each page; four pieces of paper will yield two complete sonnet puzzles. Trim the sonnets along the dotted lines. Each sonnet will have 14 strips; keep each sonnet in its own pile. Envelopes are helpful.

You may cut the puzzle however you wish; the example on the right has worked well. Notice how the puzzle gets more difficult through the stanzas. For the final couplet, fold the pieces lengthwise and tape them back, so students cannot see both the words and the dots at one time.

Sonnet Puzzle #1

“Sonnet 18” by William Shakespeare

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate;
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Thou art more lovely and more temperate;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Thou art more lovely and more temperate;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Suggested trim pattern for the first stanza. Here, the students have only two concerns: rhyme scheme and readability. Since the pieces are already in iambic pentameter, there are very few ways to get this wrong. Starting with “And” is as wrong for a sonnet as it would be for a paragraph or essay, so that’s out. Even though there’s no way to get the syllables wrong, ask the students to check whether each line has the right number of syllables, so they get used to paying attention to such matters.

BICYCLE COMICS

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Thou art more lovely and more temperate;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

○ ●○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

Suggested trim pattern for the second stanza. Here, students must grapple with iambic pentameter, because the lines are no longer intact as they were in the first stanza. Remind students that the first word in each line is usually capitalized; that lines 5 and 7 rhyme on the last, stressed syllable, that lines 6 and 8 rhyme on the last, stressed syllable; that a stressed syllable (●) cannot go next to another stressed syllable; and that an unstressed syllable (○) cannot go next to another unstressed syllable. 

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;

○ ●○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

And every fair from fair sometime declines,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ☼

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ☼

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

Suggested trim pattern for the third stanza. Here, students confront shorter and more numerous puzzle pieces, and there is a new wrinkle: a feminine rhyme. Lines 10 and 12 of “Sonnet 18” use a two-syllable rhyme, marked here with a sun ☼, and both lines thus have eleven syllables. **Note that both syllables rhyme.** One way of thinking of this concept is that perhaps sonnets rhyme in “extra innings.” After nine “plain” syllables, the final rhymes add one, two, or even three syllables to the line.

BICYCLE COMICS

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ☼

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ☼

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Suggested trim pattern for the final couplet. There are now multiple ways to get things wrong, among the most common being:

So long lives this, | as men can | breathe or eyes

So long | can see | gives life to thee. | and this

Students who are frustrated or baffled by the exercise may look for any plausible 10/10 split to get the puzzle over with. Remind them that a sonnet is not just syllables; it must also make sense, and it must rhyme. For advanced students, consider folding these strips lengthwise, then taping them shut so that the dots are on the other side, and students must flip the puzzle pieces over to check the rhythms.

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So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●

So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●