

POETICALLY SPEAKING

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BLANK VERSE (IN BRIEF)

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Prefatory Remarks

Blank verse is by far the most flexible style of poetry. The most common form is **heroic blank verse**, and is written in **iambic pentameter** verses with variations according to pauses.¹

It is the style of verse that lies between the **formal verse** and **vers libre**, and has some characteristics of each. This gives the poet a simple and flexible means of poetic expression, something not always achievable with formal structures in poetry.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Blank verse is **unrimed** in so far as rimes do not occur according to a set pattern. That is, there is no specified **rime scheme**. Adding to its flexibility, there is no set stanza length, and we may say that the stanzas in blank verse are essentially **verse-paragraphs**. The stanza length can be set according to the poet's requirements.

The style of blank verse is well-suited for any type of poetry, ranging from a mere few **casual verses** to **narratives** and **epics**. Its success in longer poems is because rime is not a demanding or restricting factor. With the necessity of rime being removed, the poet is more easily able to express themselves, and the resulting verses come as more natural in their content and flow.

In some ways, blank verse may have the characteristics suitable for a **measure** for speaking English verse because of its more natural flow. However, the uniformity of verse lengths may still be somewhat restrictive, especially with the use of iambic pentameter. If different verse lengths are used with consistency, the verse form may well be appropriate for a natural flow of the English language in everyday terms.

Blank verse has the **stability** of formal verse and the **flexibility** of vers libre. The **primary rhythm** (the forced placement of the ictus) may be strong, and the **secondary rhythm** (recurring similar, but not identical sounds) may be present without being obtrusive, and we would not expect these to be present at verse endings. The **tertiary rhythm** (stanzas) may or may not be present in a uniform manner.

¹ Although blank verse is normally always written in iambic pentameter or its equivalent, there is nothing to forbid the poet from writing in shorter verses. An example is iambic tetrameter. However, if mixed, there should be some consistency in how and when they are used.

In general, it is easier to change themes and moods, but care must be taken, for although rigid, if the rhythm is lost, it becomes formless and no better than prose. This is what we see in **prose drama**. Whereas there is nothing intrinsically offensive with prose drama, it is not suited to poetry.

Poetic Expression

Poets are able to impart their personality more easily with their interpretation of blank verse. Those like Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton, Shelley, and Tennyson composed similarly with blank verse, but there was also a great difference while still using the same general form, each finding their own freedom of expression. Blank verse enables this diversity, whereas strict forms do not lend themselves well to the individuality of the form.

Longer Pieces such as Narratives and Epics

With respect to longer pieces using blank verse, the poet can keep track from the beginning to the end without being confined to a rigid stanza format. This is an important aspect, and at times difficult to satisfy. Often, it is very easy to get lost in the poetry and lose sight of the actual theme. As such, this makes the development easier than that of perhaps a sonnet or Spenserian stanza for continuity of a theme. This is one of the major advantages of blank verse over any traditional fixed form.

Techniques used in Blank Verse

The following techniques are not confined to blank verse, but they are more commonly applied to produce the desired variations and continuity with the natural flow of the poem.

Metrical Variations

Variations in individual verses are, to a point, limited, but by shifting **pauses** and the movement of **speech-accents** along with **enjambment**, allow a greater diversity in verse-paragraphs. There may be combinations involving **end-stopped verses** or **medial breaks** for expression and/or dramatic effect.²

Verse-Paragraphs

Stanzas are not confined to any specific number of verses and may, on occasions, be separated by a **split verse** provided the combination of the two part-verses produces the same length as the normal verse. This may also be useful to separate stanzas, as for the change of mood, scenes, or discourse between characters, if present.

Using Feminine Verses

Feminine verses can be used, but there needs to be some form of **symmetry** and **consistency** in their use. They may be used in **two consecutive verses**, or in **alternate verses** separated by one other verse. For example, consecutively as one and two, or as one and three, then two and four. This creates a symmetry that does not needlessly distract the reader's attention.

² The similarity to writing in heroic couplets cannot be ignored, with the obvious exceptions being rime and the necessity to capture an entire thought in two verses.

Enjambment

A common technique in blank verse is the use of **enjambment**. With enjambment, not all verses are end-stopped, and it is not uncommon to find sense endings mid-verse. Naturally, care and skill are required to render the verse rhythm appropriately, and for the verse-paragraph as a whole. Enjambment should not be prolonged any longer than required. Sentence structure and sense are important not only to the poem but also to the reader. If the length is exceeded, grammatical problems will occur, making the verse difficult to read and comprehend.

Final Comments

Even though our first experience of **blank verse** may appear to be relatively simple to write, the truth is that it requires a lot of skill. Although still predominantly written in **iambic pentameter**, the rhythm can be varied to suit the mood. Naturally, this is through the appropriate choice of words, their positioning, and the position of pauses.

Grammatically, the wording may not always be correct, but the positioning of important words with respect to the content is. A word too harsh, too soft, or an emphasis on an unimportant or irrelevant word can destroy the verse and highlight a fault in the poem itself. It is not always a matter of the first word that comes to mind, or using a thesaurus to find something more exotic. Simplicity is often the best.

Blank verse allows the poet a great deal of stability and flexibility, but misapplied, it can result in **prose-paragraphs** rather than the expected **verse-paragraphs**. These are two entirely different forms, and this fault may arise from a lack of concentration or focus on rhythm, a property that is necessary for successful blank verse.