

Writing (from) Sonnets

These exercises are based on three sonnets: Shakespeare's 'Sonnet XCI', William Drummond's 'I know that all beneath the moon decays', and Edwin Morgan's 'The Coin'.

Sonnet XCI

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill,
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,
Some in their garments, though new-fangled ill;
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse;
And every humour hath his adjunct pleasure,
Wherein it finds a joy above the rest:
But these particulars are not my measure;
All these I better in one general best.
Thy love is better than high birth to me,
Richer than wealth, prouder than garments' cost,
Of more delight than hawks and horses be;
And having thee, of all men's pride I boast:
Wretched in this alone, that thou mayst take
All this away, and me most wretched make.

William Shakespeare (1564–1616), from *Sonnets* (1609)

I know that all beneath the moon decays,
And what by mortals in this world is brought,
In Time's great periods shall return to nought;
That fairest states have fatal nights and days;
I know how all the Muse's heavenly lays,
With toil of spright which are so dearly bought,
As idle sounds, of few, or none are sought,
And that nought lighter is than airy praise.
I know frail beauty like the purple flower,
To which one morn oft birth and death affords;
That love a jarring is of minds' accords,
Where sense and will invassal reason's power:
Know what I list, this all can not me move,
But that, O me! I both must write, and love.

William Drummond of Hawthornden (1585–1649), from *Poems* (1616)

The Coin

We brushed the dirt off, held it to the light.
The obverse showed us *Scotland*, and the head
of a red deer; the antler-glint had fled
but the fine cut could still be felt. All right:
we turned it over, read easily *One Pound*,
but then the shock of Latin, like a gloss,
Respublica Scotorum, sent across
such ages as we guessed but never found
at the worn edge where once the date had been
and where as many fingers had gripped hard
as hopes their silent race had lost or gained.
The marshy scurf crept up to our machine,
sucked at our boots. Yet nothing seemed ill-starred.
And least of all the realm the coin contained.

Edwin Morgan (1920–2010), from *Sonnets from Scotland* (1984)

Reading

Before you start writing, read one or all of these sonnets. Here are some questions to get you started with them.

Read through the sonnet a couple of times, and find out the meaning of any unfamiliar words.

Broadly speaking, what is the sonnet *about*? Try to sum this up in one sentence.

Find the sonnet's *volta*, or turn. Look at what happens in lines 1 to 8 – then at what happens in lines 9 to 14 – and try to describe what's different, what changes.

Do you *like* this poem? Why? (Or, why *not*?)

Rhyme Words

One of the hardest parts of writing a sonnet is finding the rhymes. To get you started, we've made a 'rhyme list' by extracted the rhyme words from our three sonnets (each has a slightly different rhyme scheme).

Try to write your own sonnet using one of these 'rhyme lists' – write lines that lead up to these words. We've taken away any punctuation the poets

used after them, so you can use them how you want – after them you could decide to put a comma, a full-stop, a question-mark, an exclamation mark, or perhaps nothing at all – enjambment – as one line runs over into the next line.

Here are the rhymes from Shakespeare's Sonnet XCI (the rhyme scheme is ABABCD CD E F E F G G):

skill
force
ill
horse
pleasure
rest
measure
best

me
cost
be
boast
take
make

Here are the rhymes from William Drummond's 'I know that all beneath the moon decays' (the rhyme scheme is ABBAABBA CDDCEE):

decays
brought
nought
days
lays
bought
sought
praise

flower
affords
accords
power
move
love

Here are the rhymes from Edwin Morgan's 'The Coin' (the rhyme scheme is

ABBACDDC EFGEFG):

light
head
fled
right
pound
gloss
across
found

been
hard
gained
machine
ill-starred
contained

Random Words

We've picked fourteen words pretty randomly from our three sonnets.

We've picked a mixture of nouns, verbs and adjectives, and ordered them alphabetically.

Use them to start your own piece of writing; use them in any order; and use them in any way you want – for example, 'measures' could be a noun or a verb, and 'general' could be an adjective or a noun.

Here are some suggestions of how you can use the words.

Four sentences

Write four sentences, each featuring 3-4 of the words, until you have used them all.

Two sentences

Write one sentence featuring eight of the words, and a second sentence featuring the other six.

Questions and answers

Write a series of questions and answers featuring the words. You could start by including one word in each question and one in each answer, and gradually make this harder by using two, three, four words in each question and each answer.

Monologue

Write a monologue in the voice of a particular person.

Look at your fourteen words, and imagine what kind of person might use these words.

They might be male or female, young or old, rich or poor, happy or unhappy...

They might be living today, in Shakespeare's time, sometime in between, in the far distant past, in the future...

They might be inside or outside: if they're inside, what kind of room or building are they in? For example, large or small, warm or cold, grand or mean, noisy or quiet, and so on. If they're outside, where are they? For example, town or country, garden or forest, high up or low down, surrounded by people or all alone, and so on.

What time of day is it, what time of year is it, what's the weather like?

Now make up a monologue for your character which includes the fourteen words. You can write it as prose, or as a poem. If it's a poem, think about whether it needs to rhyme, whether it has lines which are all the same length, and whether it has verses which are all the same length.

Here are fourteen words taken from Shakespeare's 'Sonnet XCI'.

alone, birth, delight, finds, general, having, hawks, love, make, measures, new-fangled, prouder, wealth

Here are fourteen words taken from William Drummond's 'I know that all beneath the moon decays'.

affords, brought, idle, jarring, know, list, moon, praise, purple, return, sense, states, toil, write

Here are fourteen words taken from Edwin Morgan's 'The Coin'.

boots, crept, dirt, edge, guessed, many, realm, red, sent, shock, showed, silent, still, turned

3. First lines

Below are some first lines (fourteen, in fact) from Shakespeare's sonnets.

Choose one of these first lines, and write a new text which includes it.

Beginning

Choose one, and try using it as an opening for a piece of writing of your own. This could be prose – or a poem – perhaps a sonnet.

You could use this line as a deliberate quote – or you could integrate it into your own work.

Middle and End

You could also write a piece of work – prose, poem or sonnet – which includes the line, but not at the beginning. Maybe it's how your piece ends; or maybe it comes somewhere in the middle.

Here are some ideas to get you writing.

The Reader

Someone opens a book, and reads this line aloud to their companion.

Who are these two people, the reader and his or her companion?

Where are they?

What time of day is it?

Whose book is it?

Why does one of them want to read from it?

Why do they read this line – is it deliberately or randomly chosen?

Does the other one want to listen?

Does the line have anything to do with their situation?

The reader closes the book again. What happens next?

The Speaker

Two people are walking together, when one of them says this line.

Who are these two people, the speaker and his or her companion?

Does the line break the silence between them, or is it part of a conversation between them?

Where are they going? Where have they been?

How well do they know each other?

Does the line have anything to do with their situation?

What happens next?

Here are a selection of first lines from Shakespeare's sonnets.

Music to hear, why hear'st thou music sadly?

When I do count the clock that tells the time,

When I consider every thing that grows

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
Let me confess that we two must be twain,
How heavy do I journey on the way,
What is your substance, whereof are you made,
Like as the waves make towards the pebbled shore,
No longer mourn for me when I am dead
Some say thy fault is youth, some wantonness;
To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
O! never say that I was false of heart,
Love is too young to know what conscience is,

KC, 28/10/2011