Couplet

DEFINITION

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

> A couplet is a unit of two lines of poetry, especially lines that use the same or similar meter, form a rhyme, or are separated from other lines by a double line break.

Some additional key details about couplets:

- Couplets do not have to be stand-alone stanzas. Instead, a couplet may be differentiated from neighboring lines by its rhyme, or because it forms a complete sentence, or simply because someone talking about the poem wants to specify which two lines they're referring to.
- Couplets do not have to rhyme, though they often do.
- A couplet may be open or closed, meaning that each line may make up a complete sentence, or the sentence may carry from one line into the next.

How to Pronounce Couplet

Here's how to pronounce couplet: **cup**-let

Couplets in Depth

It's easy to identify a couplet when the couplet is a stanza of only two lines, but the term "couplet" may also be used to specify a pair of consecutive lines within a longer stanza. Although technically *any* two consecutive lines of verse can be referred to as a couplet, there are certain properties that make it more appropriate to refer to a grouping of two lines within a longer stanza as a couplet. Below is an explanation of how best to identify couplets in the context of whether they're stand-alone or exist within a longer stanza, or whether they're rhymed or unrhymed.

Stand-alone Couplets

Couplets are easiest to identify when they stand alone. Sometimes a couplet stands alone because it forms an entire two-line poem. For example, Alexander Pope's famous two-line epigram that he engraved on the collar of a puppy given to the Prince of Wales:

> I am his highness's dog at Kew;
> Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?

Other couplets stand alone because a poem's double line breaks create two-line stanzas. For example, Robert Creeley's poem "The Whip" is written entirely in couplets without rhyme. Here are the first two stanzas:

> I spent a night turning in bed,
> my love was a feather, a flat
>
> sleeping thing. She was
> very white

However, a poem does not have to be entirely broken into couplets to include stand-alone couplets; couplets also occur in poems with stanzas of varying lengths. For example, the first two stanzas of Robert Creeley's poem "The Innocence" are a couplet followed by a tercet:

> Looking to the sea, it is a line
> of unbroken mountains.
>
> It is the sky.
> It is the ground. There
> we live, on it.

Couplets Within Longer Stanzas

Though stanzas that are exactly two lines long are the clearest examples of couplets, the term "couplet" also refers to two-line groupings within longer stanzas. This is slightly confusing; while *any* two consecutive lines of verse may be called a couplet, there are some two-line groupings that are much more conventionally accepted as couplets.

The most accepted way to break a longer stanza into couplets is through meter and rhyme scheme. For that reason, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of what meter and rhyme scheme are in order to understand how to identify couplets. We provide more details about these terms on their own pages, but offer a quick primer here.

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates the rhythm of lines of poetry. The units of meter are called feet. Feet have different stress patterns. For instance, an iamb is a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (de-**fine**), while a trochee has the opposite: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (**Po**-et). Poetic meters are defined by both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter used in many ballades that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).
- **Rhyme scheme**: Poems that make use of end rhymes (rhymes at the end of each line), often do so according to a repeating, predetermined pattern. That pattern is called a rhyme scheme. Rhyme schemes are described using letters of the alphabet, so that each line of verse that corresponds to a specific type of rhyme used in the poem is assigned a letter, beginning with "A." For example, a four-line poem in which the first line rhymes with the third, and the second line rhymes with the fourth has the rhyme scheme ABAB.

Rhyme scheme is the most straightforward way to identify couplets within a longer stanza. Since rhyme schemes are repeating patterns, those patterns naturally suggest ways to break longer stanzas into shorter units. There are two types of couplets that can be defined using couplets: **rhymed couplets** and **unrhymed couplets**.

Rhymed Couplets

Rhymed couplets, unsurprisingly, are couplets in which the two lines share a rhyme. For example, in a quatrain (a four-line stanza) with a rhyme scheme of AABB, both AA and BB are couplets—without even knowing what those lines say, their rhymes make it clear which lines go together. The same is true of longer stanzas, such as a sestet (six-line stanza) with the rhyme scheme AABBCC or AABBAA.

Rhymed couplets are reasonably easy to identify because they are governed by clear rules. The most basic rule is that a rhymed couplet must be two lines in formal verse (poetry with meter and rhyme scheme) that share the same end-rhyme. Within that broad definition, there are even more specific types of rhymed couplets that appear frequently in formal verse. The most common of those are:

- **Elegiac couplet:** (appears in Greek and Latin peotry, though not in English) These couplets, found often in elegies of ancient Greece and Rome, had alternating dactylic hexameter (six dactyls per line) and dactylic pentameter (five dactyls per line).
- **Heroic couplet:** These couplets use rhyming iambic pentameter (five iambs per line). This type of couplet is particularly common because iambic pentameter is such a frequently-used meter in English verse. Many poems by Chaucer, John Dryden, or Alexander Pope use heroic couplets.
- **Common meter:** Common meter is a verse form that alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line) with trimeter (three iambs per line) and often consists of rhyming couplets (AABB), though just as often it uses an ABAB rhyme scheme.
- **Distich**: A poem consisting of two lines is called a distich. Distichs tend to be written in formal verse, composed of a single rhymed couplet.

Rhymed couplets are also commonly used as a key component of specific types of poems. For example, the type of sonnet known either as an English or Shakespearean sonnet typically ends with a rhymed couplet, even though the lines that precede the couplet have an alternating rhyme scheme.

Take a look at the following sonnet by Shakespeare. As one would expect based on its form (a Shakespearean sonnet), the final lines of the poem together make up a rhyming couplet. Note that this couplet is *not* distinguished from the rest of the poem by a double line break; it is differentiated solely by the fact that it uses a separate rhyme scheme from the rest of the poem, which is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

> 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 ow'st;
> Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
> When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
> So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
> So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Notice how the final two lines are the only consecutive lines in the entire poem to rhyme; this is a clear example of a couplet within a longer stanza of formal verse.

Unrhymed Couplets

Like rhymed couplets, unrhymed couplets are clearly defined: they are formed by two consecutive lines of formal verse that do *not* share the same end-rhyme, but *do* share the same meter. An unrhymed couplet is most commonly found in poems with an alternating rhyme scheme—thus, an unrhymed couplet could be one "AB" half of an ABAB rhyme scheme.

Unrhymed couplets are most clearly identified when the two lines of the unrhymed couplet form a single sentence, such as the first two lines of the first stanza of W.B. Yeats's "Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop":

> I met the Bishop on the road
> And much said he and I.
> 'Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
> Those veins must soon be dry;
> Live in a heavenly mansion,
> Not in some foul sty.'

"Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop" is a helpful example, because it is written in formal verse with the rhyme scheme ABCBDB. While the AB, CB, and DB couplets *could* each be considered an unrhymed couplet, the highlighted couplet *most perfectly* fits the bill because its two lines form their own sentence, while the CB and DB couplets are both part of the same overall sentence.

One last thing: there is some debate about whether unrhymed couplets can only exist in formal verse, or if they can also exist in blank verse (poetry with meter but no rhyme) or even free verse (poetry lacking rhyme and meter). For example, this is a stanza from "Her Lips Are Copper Wire" by Jean Toomer:

> and let your breath be moist against me
> like bright beads on yellow globes

Even though this stanza is two lines long and the lines don't rhyme, the majority of poets would argue that it *cannot* be properly called an "unrhymed couplet" because the poem is written in free verse. These

poets would argue that this stanza should simply be called a "couplet." It's worth knowing that there are some people who would argue, though, that *any* couplet lacking a rhyme should be called an unrhymed couplet.

When "Couplet" Doesn't Apply

In poems with ABAB (or ABCBDB, etc.) rhyme scheme, unrhymed couplets are a natural unit. However, it's important to look carefully at the logic of the poem's overall rhyme scheme when thinking about breaking it into couplets. For example, Percy Bysshe Shelley's famous "Ode to the West Wind" is written with alternating rhymes, but ones that would not be naturally broken into couplets. The first two stanzas have the rhyme scheme ABA BCB, which means that it makes more sense to break them into tercets than into couplets:

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
> Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
>
> Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
> Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

While it would be technically correct to refer to the first two lines of "Ode to the West Wind" as a couplet—and even an unrhymed couplet, since they share a meter—to actually do so would be unusual. Instead, it would make more sense to keep the tercet intact to give a sense that the rhyme scheme relies on units of three lines.

Likewise, in a stanza with a rhyme scheme of ABCABC, it would be odd to refer to the first two lines (AB) as a couplet, rather than to use the ABC tercet as the basic unit of the poem because that is the unit that repeats. The same would be true of a stanza with a more irregular rhyme scheme, such as ABBAB. Rather than referring to any of these two lines as a couplet, it would probably make more sense just to call the entire stanza a cinquain.

Open vs. Closed Couplets

Couplets are also sometimes described as being "open" or "closed."

- **An open couplet** (or a "run-on" couplet) is a group of two lines, usually rhymed, in which the sentence begun in the first line continues into and finishes in the second line.
- **A closed couplet** (or a "formal" couplet) is a group of two lines—again, usually rhymed—in which the first line makes up one complete sentence, and the second line makes up another complete sentence.

In the following excerpt from an Alexander Pope poem, the first two lines make a closed couplet (because each line forms a complete sentence), while the third and fourth lines make an open couplet (because together the two lines form one complete sentence).

> Why rove my thoughts beyond this last retreat?
> Why feels my heart its long-forgotten heat?
> Yet, yet I love!—From Abelard it came,
> And Eloisa yet must kiss the name.

EXAMPLES

Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*

Chaucer popularized the heroic couplet (rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter) with his *The Canterbury Tales*, a long narrative poem for which this metrical pattern is well-suited.

> In Oxford there once lived a rich old lout
> Who had some guest rooms that he rented out,
> And carpentry was this old fellow's trade.
> A poor young scholar boarded who had made
> His studies in the liberal arts, but he
> Had turned his fancy to astrology
> And knew the way, by certain propositions,
> To answer well when asked about conditions,
> Such as when men would ask in certain hours
> If they should be expecting drought or showers,
> Or if they asked him what was to befall
> Concerning such I can't recount it all.

Alexander Pope's "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady"

Alexander Pope was an 18th century English poet, also known for writing in heroic couplets—as in the elegy below.

> What beck'ning ghost, along the moon-light shade
> Invites my steps, and points to yonder glade?
> 'Tis she!—but why that bleeding bosom gor'd,
> Why dimly gleams the visionary sword?
> Oh ever beauteous, ever friendly! tell,
> Is it, in heav'n, a crime to love too well?
> To bear too tender, or too firm a heart,
> To act a lover's or a Roman's part?
> Is there no bright reversion in the sky,
> For those who greatly think, or bravely die?

Couplets in Ben Jonson's "The Gut"

This short poem by Jonson is an epigram consisting of two unrhymed couplets in an ABAB rhyme scheme and one rhymed couplet. However, because there are not double line breaks in this single-stanza poem, it would *also* be accurate to describe the poem not as a set of three couplets, but as a single sestet, or stanza of six lines.

> Gut eats all day and lechers all the night;
> So all his meat he tasteth over twice;

> And, striving so to double his delight,
> He makes himself a thoroughfare of vice.
> Thus in his belly can he change a sin:
> Lust it comes out, that gluttony went in.

Emily Dickinson's Distichs

Here are two distichs (two-line poems) by Emily Dickinson.

> In this short Life that only lasts an hour
> How much - how little - is within our power

Each of these poems consists of a single, open heroic couplet.

> Let me not thirst with this Hock at my Lip,
> Nor beg, with domains in my pocket—

Max Ritvo's "Your Voice in the Chemo Room"

Here is an example of a contemporary poem written nearly entirely in couplets of free verse by the poet Max Ritvo. Because this is free verse, with no meter and no rhyme scheme, the couplets are defined by physical line breaks between them. The first four stanzas of the poem are shown here:

> There is a white stone cliff over a dropping slope
> sliced along with bare trees.
>
> In the center of the cliff is a round dry fountain
> of polished stone. By seizing my whole body up
>
> as I clench my hand I am able to open
> the fountain into a drain, revealing below it
>
> the sky, the trees, a brown and uncertain ground.
> This is how my heart works, you see?

Notice how the punctuation in the couplets above doesn't line up with the couplets in any regular way.

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Generally speaking, stanzas are used, much like paragraphs in prose, to group related ideas inside a poem into units of the right size. It follows, then, that couplets (being a shorter type of stanza) are generally used to create images or express ideas that are not exceedingly long or complex. The nature of rhymed couplets, in particular, makes them well-suited to narrative poems, since rhymes that are completed in the next line after they're introduced (as opposed to two or more lines later) make the stories easier to understand and listen to.

Shorter stanzas like couplets, when they're separated by double line breaks, also have an effect on the pacing of a poem. By inserting more white space into the poem, the natural instinct of the reader is to slow down while reading, and to read each line with more deliberateness. In this way, couplets can enable the poet to draw more attention to each line that they write—a particularly useful technique for restrained writing styles in which great care is taken with the details of the language, as is usually the case with poetry.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Couplet: A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- The dictionary definition of Couplet: A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of couplet.
- A short video that defines couplets in under two minutes.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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