

Free Verse

Who invented free verse?

American poet, Walt Whitman, was often called the 'Father of Free Verse'. Free verse was loosely applied to poetry by him with irregular metres. It is an open form of poetry which was originally a literal translation of vers libre (q.v.), the name of a movement that originated in France in the 1880s.

It does not follow the rhythm schemes of traditional poetry but it is 'free' only in a relative sense. It does not use consistent metre patterns, rhyme, or any musical pattern but follows the rhythm of natural speech. It gives poets the space to use alliteration, rhyme, cadences, and rhythm to get the artistic effects that they desire. In the early 20th century, many prominent English poets such as T.E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, were influenced by vers libre.

Famous Free Verses:

A Noiseless Patient Spider

by Walt Whitman

A noiseless patient spider,
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surrounding,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.

And you O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd, till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my soul.

Come slowly, Eden

by Emily Dickinson

Come slowly, Eden
Lips unused to thee.
Bashful, sip thy jasmines,
As the fainting bee,
Reaching late his flower,
Round her chamber hums,
Counts his nectars—alights,
And is lost in balms!

A Supermarket in California

by Allen Ginsberg

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down the streets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the full moon. In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!
What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes! — and you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?
I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.
I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What price bananas? Are you my Angel?
I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and followed in my imagination by the store detective.
We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.
Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which way does your beard point tonight?
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and feel absurd.)
Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to shade,
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lights out in the houses, we'll both be lonely.
Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in
driveways, home to our silent cottage?
Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you
have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and
stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

The Garden

by Ezra Pound

Like a skein of loose silk blown against a wall
She walks by the railing of a path in Kensington Gardens,
And she is dying piece-meal
 of a sort of emotional anemia.

And round about there is a rabble
Of the filthy, sturdy, unkillable infants of the very poor.
They shall inherit the earth.

In her is the end of breeding.
Her boredom is exquisite and excessive.

She would like some one to speak to her,
And is almost afraid that I
 will commit that indiscretion.

The Snow Man

by Wallace Stevens

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of the January sun; and not to think
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land
Full of the same wind
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Piano

by D. H. Lawrence

Softly, in the dusk, a woman is singing to me;
Taking me back down the vista of years, till I see
A child sitting under the piano, in the boom of the tingling strings
And pressing the small, poised feet of a mother who smiles as she sings.
In spite of myself, the insidious mastery of song
Betrays me back, till the heart of me weeps to belong
To the old Sunday evenings at home, with winter outside
And hymns in the cozy parlor, the tinkling piano our guide.

So now it is vain for the singer to burst into clamor
With the great black piano appassionato. The glamour
Of childish days is upon me, my manhood is cast
Down in the flood of remembrance, I weep like a child for the past.

La Figlia Che Piange (The Weeping Girl)

by T. S. Eliot

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair —
Lean on a garden urn —
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair —
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise —
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.
I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and a shake of the hand.

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight, and the noon's repose.

This Is Just To Say

by William Carlos Williams

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold

I, Too, Sing America

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare

Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Sometimes Mysteriously

by Luis Omar Salinas

Sometimes in the evening when love
tunes its harp and the crickets
celebrate life, I am like a troubadour
in search of friends, loved ones,
anyone who will share with me
a bit of conversation. My loneliness
arrives ghostlike and pretentious,
it seeks my soul, it is ravenous
and hurting. I admire my father
who always has advice in these matters,
but a game of chess won't do, or
the frivolity of religion.

I want to find a solution, so I
write letters, poems, and sometimes
I touch solitude on the shoulder
and surrender to a great tranquility.
I understand I need courage
and sometimes, mysteriously,
I feel whole.

The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner

by Randall Jarrell

From my mother's sleep I fell into the State,
And I hunched in its belly till my wet fur froze.
Six miles from earth, loosed from its dream of life,
I woke to black flak and the nightmare fighters.
When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.

Distant Light

by Walid Khazindar

loose translation by Michael R. Burch

Bitterly cold,
winter clings to the naked trees.
If only you would free
the bright sparrows
from your eloquent fingertips
and release a smile—that shy, tentative smile—
from the imprisoning anguish I see.
Sing! Can we not sing
as if we were warm, hand-in-hand,
shielded by shade from a too-bright sun?
Can you not always remain this way,
stoking the fire, more beautiful than necessary, and silent?
Darkness increases; we must remain vigilant
and this distant light is our only consolation—
this imperiled flame, which from the beginning
has been flickering,
in danger of going out.
Come to me, closer and closer.
I don't want to be able to tell my hand from yours.
And let's stay awake, lest the snow smother us.

A Blessing

by James Wright

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
And nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.
Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

The Layers

by Stanley Kunitz

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

When I look behind,
as I am compelled to look
before I can gather strength
to proceed on my journey,
I see the milestones dwindling
toward the horizon
and the slow fires trailing
from the abandoned camp-sites,
over which scavenger angels
wheel on heavy wings.

Oh, I have made myself a tribe
out of my true affections,
and my tribe is scattered!
How shall the heart be reconciled
to its feast of losses?

In a rising wind
the manic dust of my friends,
those who fell along the way,
bitterly stings my face.

Yet I turn, I turn,
exulting somewhat,
with my will intact to go
wherever I need to go,
and every stone on the road
precious to me.

In my darkest night,
when the moon was covered
and I roamed through wreckage,
a nimbus-clouded voice
directed me:
"Live in the layers,
not on the litter."
Though I lack the art
to decipher it,
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.
I am not done with my changes.

Song of Solomon

attributed to King Solomon
from the King James Bible

I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.
As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.
As the apple tree among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons.
I sat down under his shadow with great delight, and his fruit was sweet to my
taste.
He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love.
Stay me with flagons, comfort me with apples: for I am sick of love.
His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.
I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes,
and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor wake my love, till he please.

Wulf and Eadwacer (Anonymous Anglo-Saxon Ballad, circa 960 AD)

loose translation by Michael R. Burch

It is to the others as if someone robbed them of a gift.
They will kill him if he comes in force.
It is otherwise with us.

Wulf is on one island; I, on another.
That island is fast, surrounded by fens.
There are fierce men on this island.
They will kill him if he comes in force.
It is otherwise with us.

Wulf's far wanderings, I suffered with hope.
Whenever it rained and I woke disconsolate
the bold warrior came: he took me in his arms.
For me, that was pleasant, but it also was painful.
Wulf, O, my Wulf, my ache for you
has made me sick; your infrequent visits
have left me famished, unable to eat.
Do you hear, Eadwacer? A wolf has borne
our wretched whelp to the woods.
One can easily sunder what never was one:
our song together.

Cædmon's Hymn

loose translation by Michael R. Burch

Now we must honour heaven-kingdom's Guardian,
the might of the Architect and his mind-plans,
the work of the Glory-Father. First he, the eternal Lord,
established the foundation of wonders.
Then he, the first Poet, created heaven as a roof
for the sons of men, holy Creator,

Guardian of mankind. Then he, the eternal Lord,
afterwards made the middle earth for men, Master almighty.

In A Station of The Metro

by Ezra Pound

The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Dover Beach

by Matthew Arnold

The sea is calm to-night,
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
Only, from the long line of spray
Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery; we
Find also in the sound a thought,
Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Those Winter Sundays

by Robert Hayden

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.
I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,
Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.

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What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

When I Heard The Learn'd Astronomer

by Walt Whitman

When I heard the learn'd astronomer,
When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me,
When I was shown the charts and diagrams, to add, divide, and measure them,
When I sitting heard the astronomer where he lectured with much applause in
the lecture-room,
How soon unaccountable I became tired and sick,
Till rising and gliding out I wander'd off by myself,
In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

in Just-

by e. e. cummings

in Just-
spring when the world is mud-
luscious the little
lame balloonman

whistles far and wee

and eddieandbill come
running from marbles and
piracies and it's
spring

when the world is puddle-wonderful

the queer
old balloonman whistles
far and wee
and bettyandisbel come dancing

from hop-scotch and jump-rope and
it's
spring
and

the
goat-footed

balloonMan whistles
far
and
wee

Beginning My Studies

by Walt Whitman

Beginning my studies the first step pleas'd me so much,
The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic songs.

Buffalo Bill's defunct

by e. e. cummings

Buffalo Bill's
defunct
who used to

ride a watersmooth-silver
stallion
and break onetwothreefourfive
pigeonsjustlikethat
Jesus
he was a handsome man
and what i want to
know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

In The Dark Season

by Richard Moore

I

I fall out of the foliage of my feelings.
That is the beginning, the ending,
when the orange peels appear
from the shrinking lips of the snow
and broken bottles, still clinging to their labels,
in the gutter outside the church.
A silk stocking coils in the mud.
In the dark season, someone has sown
the seed of confusion. The church will graze
on the flowers, the fruits of love,
the soft nutritious pulp of remorse.
Do these events signify
summertime in another hemisphere?
One studied a new language in the darkness,
looked far down into the well,
into the hints of sunlight in its depths.

II

We are dead such a long time before
and will be dead such a long time after
this leaping into light
as a dolphin leaps from the sea
and carries the glare of that moment
back among the curious creatures
who have not known the light.
Don't tell me this is like Plato's cave;
I know that. But in death, our element,
who swims with us? Do we even?
If God is light...No, but there may be,
as the poet says, a soft monster
deeply sleeping among his thousand
arms under millennia
unnumbered, and enormous polypi.
I think we have been frightened into life
as fish leap from greater fish below.
We cry angrily in our cradles,
then overcome, grow tranquil through the years,
hopefully, ready ever for the depths
ever ready for us.

III

Yes, but of course, there is the need
for symmetry. Matter calls out
for antimatter, which forthwith
sings in the shadows. Thus, tonight
streetlight fingers new foliage
with breezes making light of it,

where unseen trunk divides itself
into a multitude of tips
above ground and below, as in
a mirror, strangers to each other,
two lives, depending on each other,
therefore the same life: in dark depth
and moisture one, in dry sunlight
the other: God and Satan, one,
female and male in each one, one.
Dolphins from darkness visit light.
Who from her glitter visits us?
These, lost inside you: look outside
in the not-you: you find them there.

Autumn

By T.E. Hulme

A touch of cold in the Autumn night—
I walked abroad,
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge
Like a red-faced farmer.
I did not stop to speak, but nodded,
And round about were the wistful stars
With white faces like town children.

Above the Dock

By T.E. Hulme

Above the quiet dock in midnight,
Tangled in the tall mast's corded height,
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.

Check out these modern poets for more inspirations: Mary Oliver, Ted Kooser, Karla K. Morton, Naomi Shahib Nye, Joaquin Zihuatenajo.

Writing Activity

Follow these steps to write your first free verse poem.

1. First, choose a subject/theme.
2. Write down a list of words which are related to the story.
3. Start writing and make sure you select the words that give proper accent and cadence to the overall poem. Carefully chosen words can help you create a poem that sounds like the situation, emotion, or object you are trying to portray.
4. Read your poem aloud so you can check if the sequences of your lines flow. There is no set rule so you can decide where to break your poem into stanzas. You may break at each new thought, very much like paragraphs but bear in mind that free verse is a rhythmic dance with voice and words.
5. Use imagery, and descriptive languages. For instance, you can use alliteration to create a particular mood, feeling or sound to the poem and personification to give a new breath of life to your subject matters. Focus on the five senses.
Alliteration: The repetition of usually initial consonant sounds in two or more neighboring words or syllables such as 'wild and woolly'.
Personification: The attribution of a personal nature or human characteristics to something non-human, or the representation of an abstract quality in human form such as 'wind howled'.

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