

exploring poetic forms



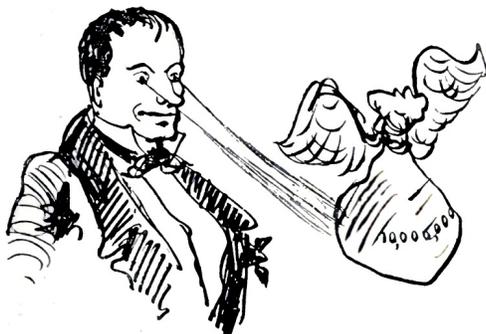
The pantoum originated in Malaysia in the fifteenth-century as a short folk poem, typically made up of two rhyming couplets that were recited or sung. This *pantun berkait*, a series of interwoven quatrains, is believed to have derived its repetition of lines from the rhythmic beating of the Malaysian tom-tom. However, as the pantoum spread, and Western writers altered and adapted the form, the importance of rhyming and brevity diminished.

The modern pantoum is a poem of any length, composed of four-line stanzas in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza serve as the first and third lines of the next stanza. The last line of a pantoum is often the same as the first.

Famous Pantoums

- "Parent's Pantoum" by Carolyn Kizer
- "Pantoum" by John Ashbery
- "Iva's Pantoum" by Marilyn Hacker
- "Harmonie du soir" by Charles Baudelaire
- "Pantoum of the Great Depression" by Donald Justice
- "Baby's Pantoum" by Anne Waldman

The pantoum was especially popular with French and British writers in the nineteenth-century, including Charles Baudelaire and Victor Hugo, who is credited with introducing the form to European writers. The pantoum gained popularity among contemporary American writers such as Anne Waldman and Donald Justice after John Ashbery published the form in his 1956 book, *Some Trees*.



A self-portrait drawn by French poet Charles Baudelaire

Outline for the pantoum form

Line 1 – a
Line 2 – b
Line 3 – a
Line 4 – b

Line 2 – b
Line 5 – c
Line 4 – b
Line 6 – c

Line 5 – c
Line 7 – d
Line 6 – c
Line 8 – d

Line 7 – d
Line 9 – a
Line 8 – d
Line 1 – a

Notice that the second line of the current stanza appears as the first line of the following stanza, and the fourth line of the current stanza appears as the third line of the following stanza.

The only guideline for your rhyme scheme is that the rhymes should alternate. You could use an alternating abab//baba rhyme scheme throughout, or present a new rhyme in each stanza as I have illustrated above.

Remember that there is no limit to the number of stanzas in a pantoum, but the first line of the poem must also be the last line.

There is something magical and mysterious about the pantoum form. As repeated phrases are revised with different punctuation and placed in a new context, you can watch how the same words shift in meaning. Let's look at an example. In John Ashbery's poem, "Pantoum," changing the punctuation in one line radically alters its meaning and tone.

"Why the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying."
is repeated as

"Why, the court, trapped in a silver storm, is dying!"

1. *Why is this significant?*
2. *How can this effect be used to contrast the meanings in football or baseball cheers and chants?*
3. *How might the pantoum offer an interesting vehicle for social critique? Explain in a journal entry.*

incantation



(NOUN) a series of words said as a magic spell or charm

An incantation is created by a pantoum's interlocking pattern of rhyme and repetition; as lines reverberate between stanzas, they fill the poem with echoes. This intense repetition also slows the poem down, halting its advancement. As explained in *The*

Making of a Poem, "the reader takes four steps forward, then two back," making the pantoum a "perfect form for the evocation of a past time.

Write a pantoum that makes use of the incantation effect.