

How to Write an Elegy



The modern elegy is a poem written to commemorate the life and death of a special person. The subject may be very close to you or be a person you admired from afar. In a broader sense, an elegy can be any reflective piece of verse with a lamenting tone.

- **Definition**

Elegy comes from the Greek word for *lament*. Initially it referred to any poem written in elegiac couplets: one line of dactylic hexameter followed by a line of dactylic pentameter. An ancient elegy could be written on any topic whatsoever, yet the falling rhythm lent itself to melancholy themes. Catullus' 101 mourns the falling of his brother.

The term grew away from a particular verse form and came to mean a poem expressing loss. Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, written in 1751, is composed in iambic pentameter. Walt Whitman's *O Captain! My Captain!*, written about the death of Abraham Lincoln, *uses* in a more loose iambic form. Regardless the meter and rhyme, the elegy became the poem of mourning.

It should not be confused with *eulogy*, which is a speech delivered at a funeral. An *ode* is a poem of praise. The subject does not have to be dead. An *epitaph* is a short piece of text that could be placed on a tombstone.

- **Three Basic Themes**

The elegy traditionally deals with three themes in the following order:

Lament – Express what is missing from the world now that this person gone. What do you wish you had done before they passed on? Why is this a powerful loss for you and the world as a whole?

Grief – How does this death make you feel? What did you do when you learned about it? How did others react? What physical metaphors describe your emotions?

Praise – Celebrate what this person did for the world? In what ways will they be remembered? What did they build? Who did they teach? How will you never be the same?

Of course, this is your elegy. Build it how you think it should be built, but free-write on these themes to see what ideas come out.

• **Getting Started**

You can write an elegy three basic ways: about someone you knew personally, about a person you knew distantly or about a broad mournful theme. Identify which of these is your subject. Then free-write about it. If you're writing about someone close to you, I'm sorry for your loss. Honor them with a unique and detailed description of your relationship. Recall specific times you spent together, conversations, gifts and occasions. How has your life improved because you were touched by this person? What will never be the same? How will you, your friends and your family carry on their memory?

If you're writing about an important figure you did not know personally, document how you came to know the person. What did they build, say, write, invent or otherwise create that affected you? Where were you when you first were struck by this person? How would your life be different without them? Collect quotes and other details that convey your point.

If you're writing about the idea of loss or a sensation of lament, bleed all of that out onto paper. Get your feelings out and be as specific as possible. Go off on tangents. Speak your mind in symbolic details. It is never enough to tell someone how you feel. Make them feel it. Put them in the picture with you. Your poem is a tool for communication, not simply personal purging.

• **Your Audience**

This is a means to identify your feelings and remember the good times. Your memories will start to fade unless you find a way to solidify them. Write down, in journal or verse, the things about your friend that are special, memorable and irreplaceable. Feel free to write as if the person was with you. Make fun of them if you need to. Make fun of yourself. Use a tone appropriate for the two of you without regard for what others think. This is about a real person, not a body in formal dress arranged in a casket. Be honest and bold. The deceased deserves it.

• **Your Form**

The style you choose will have a lot to do with the tone you decide to take. A more serious form could be appropriate, but think about a sing-song rhyme scheme if you're elegizing Dr. Seuss.

- For an extra challenge, you can go classic and use the dactylic hexameter/pentameter form.
- Iambic pentameter is always effective in English. If you're not in the mood to be bold, this could be a solid choice. Perhaps a sonnet.
- Free-verse is good for recreating the patterns of human speech. If you can remember, read or listen to the words of your subject, see if you can use line-breaks to make a poem with the right cadence.
- Did your subject have a favorite poem or type of poetry? Can you bring their favorite music into your verse? Select a form that would represent them the best.

Overall, think deeply and write thoroughly about your subject. Find specific details that sum up his or her meaning to you and this planet. Create a piece of written art that communicates this to a person than never knew them. Make your subject proud.

Terms to Know:

Elegiac couplet

An elegiac couplet is a pair of sequential lines in poetry in which the first line is written in **dactylic hexameter** and the second line in **dactylic pentameter**.

Dactylic hexameter/pentameter.

Greek and Latin poems follow certain rhythmic schemes, or **meters**, which are sometimes highly defined and very strict, sometimes less so. Epic poetry from Homer on was recited in a particular meter called the **dactylic hexameter**. It is fair to say that the dactylic hexameter defines epic.

The word **dactylos** is Greek for "finger" (and for "toe" as well, which picks up on the notion of feet, below). The **dactyl** is therefore a snippet of rhythm that resembles, at least aurally, a finger. It has a rhythmic shape consisting of one long syllable (noted as **—**), which represents the long bone, or phalanx, of the finger, plus two short syllables (**u u**), which represent the two short phalanges.

Pentameter- means 10 syllables/ 5 stressed

Hexameter- 12 syllables, six stressed

Iambic Pentameter:

This is the style used by Shakespeare for his sonnets. You may choose to write a **sonnet** for your elegy.

The iambic pentameter consists of:

Ten syllables in each line

Five pairs of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables

The **sonnet** consists of four quatrains and a couplet, with the following rhyming scheme:

abab

cdcd

efef

gg