



This in-class activity was developed in conjunction with Lightbox interviews with [A. E. Stallings](#) and [Erica Dawson](#). For more information, please see www.lightboxpoetry.com.

The Home-Law of the Poem

In her interview, A. E. Stallings describes “the home-law” of a poem—the manner in which its various parts fit and work together. In this activity, we’ll think about the home-law of two important forms in poetry, the sestina and the sonnet. How do these structures express the meaning of a poem? How do the laws of poetic form advance and enact ideas?

Part I

As a class, read the poems, “Sestina: Like” and “Fairy Tale Logic” by A. E. Stallings, aloud.

Part II

By yourself or with a partner, reread the poems.

What do you notice about them? What is being repeated? What rhymes? What patterns can you find between the sounds and structures of the poem? Is the poem broken up into stanzas? What determines the lengths of the lines? Where does the poem change, or turn? Can you track the poem’s shifts in thought?

What can you deduce about the rules, restraints, and requirements of the sestina and the sonnet? Using the poem, could you create a guide for writing a poem in this form? For this activity, the exact rules of traditional forms are less important than noticing everything there is to notice in these particular poems themselves.

Part III

Share your ideas about the laws of the sestina and the sonnet with the class. Have a discussion to challenge or augment a class list. For this part of the activity, you might take turns writing rules, restraints, and requirements on the board so everyone can see them.



Part IV

Now that you've discussed the formal structures of these poems, discuss how these structures—sonic, stanzaic, metric, poem-length, etc.—are related to what the poems are “about,” what they convey and how they convey it.

For instance, how do some of the rules you've deduced about the sestina form from “Sestina: Like” relate to the content of the poem? Why does Stallings, for example, choose to repeat the word “like” as often as she does in the poem? What does the sestina's apparent reliance on repetition have to do with our culture's obsession with “like”?

What words rhyme in “Fairy Tale Logic”? What patterns can you find? What do those patterns say about the words? What gets connected with what? Why is there a stanza break in the middle of the poem? What effect do those shapes, units, and ratios have on you as a reader?

Part V (Optional)

Now that you've organically deduced some parts of the “home-law” of the sonnet and the sestina, you might research these forms. Using the library or internet, find other examples of poems in these forms. What aspects were you able to deduce? What aspects didn't you notice at first? How do A. E. Stallings' poems conform to traditional expectations and where do they diverge?