In the version below, everything except punctuation marks and the last word in each sentence has been bricked out. This allows you to focus on the placing of punctuation and the types of punctuation used, without being distracted by the words.

1. How much can you notice about the sentences in this poem?

2. What can you deduce about the poem’s form and structure from this version alone?

How much can you notice about the sentences in this poem?

What can you deduce about the poem’s form and structure from this version alone?

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,

Looking as if she were alive.

I call That piece a wonder, now:

Frà Pandolf's hands worked busily a day,

and there she stands.

Will't please you sit and look at her?

I said 'Frà Pandolf by design,

for never read strangers like you

that pictured countenance,

The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

But to myself they turned (since no one

The curtain I have drawn for you,

but I)

And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

How such a glance came there;

so, not the first are you to turn and ask thus.

Sir, 'twas not her husband's presence only,

called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess' cheek:

perhaps Frà Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint must never hope to reproduce the faint half-flush that dies along her throat': such stuff was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough for calling up that spot of joy.

She had A heart – how shall I say?

– too soon made glad,

Too easily impressed;

she liked whate'er she looked on,

and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, 'twas all one!

My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,

The bough of cherries some officious fool

Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

She rode with round the terrace — all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,

Or blush, at least. But thanked men — good!

Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked

My gift of a nine-hundred-year-old name

With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech — (which I have not) — to make your will

Quite clear to such an one, and say, ‘Just this

Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

Or there exceed the mark’ — and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set

Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,

— E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose

Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,

Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;

Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands

As if alive. Will ’t please you rise? We’ll meet

The company below, then. I repeat,

The Count your master’s known munificence

Is ample warrant that no just pretence

Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed

At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go down,

sir. Notice Neptune, though, Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity, Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!
Teaching notes

The poem uses iambic pentameter and Browning arranges the poem into rhyming couplets. The poem also uses enjambment so that:

- most punctuation marks are within the lines and not at the end
- the rhyming couplets do not sound ‘forced’ or artificial or mechanical. Browning is trying to emulate the patterns of everyday speech while still working within a strict framework
- when reading the poem, the reader has to stop at other punctuation marks but not at the end of each line
- the careful crafting provides irony when the Duke modestly asserts that he has no ‘skill’ in ‘speech’ (lines 35–36).

Students’ comments on sentences might include:

- the lack of full stops at the ends of lines
- semi colons and colons indicating complex sentence structures
- speech marks indicating direct speech
- hyphens indicating an aside or extra information added
- sentences running on to other lines (higher ability students may use the correct terminology for this feature of the structure).

Students’ comments about the poem’s form and structure might include:

- the length of the poem: it might be one of the first times that students have encountered such a lengthy poem!
- there are no individual stanzas
- the lines start at the same point/are aligned from the left-hand side
- there is no vast variation in line length
- many of the lines contain ten words
- the lines that don’t contain ten words tend to include longer words - some students may comment on the use of syllables and begin to recognise iambic pentameter.

Browning’s use of rhyming couplets is not apparent in this version. You could go on to ask students whether the poem rhymes or not and, if they think it does, what the rhyme scheme is. If you’re showing the poem on a whiteboard, you can then reveal the last word in some lines by double-clicking on the word and selecting ‘no colour’ on the highlighting menu.

Very able students might also like to explore Browning’s control of the iambic pentameter, looking at how this underlying rhythm is almost disguised by the natural stress patterns of the words. Browning is able to convey the natural speech of a monologue within a tightly controlled form.
Reading the poem: further suggestions

- Whole class reading: Allocate numbers to students to indicate when it is their turn to read. Students read until they come to a full stop. The next student reads and so on. This is helpful to demonstrate what enjambment means and allows students to look at sentence length as well as line length.

- Look at sections or lines from the poem with the punctuation marks removed. Show the students the punctuation marks that have been removed and allow them to examine the effects of moving these about to create different effects. This could easily be transferred to an IWB to do as a whole class activity.

- Give students a copy of the poem or part of the poem where full stops have been placed at the end of each line. Repeat the whole class reading activity and compare this version with the original. Discuss the effect of removing the enjambment.