

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.