



The Canterbury Tales Reading Verse

Verse is writing arranged in a metrical rhythm and often containing words that rhyme. Although the modern translation sometimes loses the intended rhyme scheme, Chaucer actually wrote most of *The Canterbury Tales* in verse—specifically in couplets, where pairs of lines rhyme with each other. To achieve the desired rhyme and meter, Chaucer did not always follow usual English syntax—that is, words and phrases do not always appear in typical order. You can understand the meaning of the verse more easily if you rearrange the words and phrases into a more familiar order. For example, the opening lines:

When April with his showers sweet
The drought of March has pierced to the root,
(General Prologue, p. 3)

can be rearranged:

When April with his sweet showers
Has pierced the drought of March to the root,

Rearranging the words can also help you create the context to better understand an unfamiliar or archaic word. For example:

He could songs make and poetry indite,
(General Prologue, p. 7)

becomes:

He could make songs and indite poetry.

Rearranging words into the typical syntax (word order) helps you see that *indite* is a verb and likely means something like “write.”

Rearrange the following lines of verse to follow typical modern English syntax. You can move phrases from one line to another and change verb forms to agree with the new word order. Then, answer the questions about the excerpts.

Excerpt from Text	Your Version Based on Typical Modern Syntax
At night was come into that hostelry Well nine and twenty in a company Of sundry folk, by sheer chance fallen Into fellowship, and pilgrims were they all, Who toward Canterbury would ride. (General Prologue, p. 3) What does <i>sundry</i> likely mean?	
And to sum up briefly all his woe, So much sorrow had never a creature That is or will be so long as the world endures. His sleep, his appetite, his thirst was him bereft[.] (The Knight's Tale, p. 75) What does <i>bereft</i> likely mean?	

First I proclaim from where I come, And then my writs of indulgence I show, all and one. Our bishop's seal on my license, That show I first, my person to authorize[.] (The Pardoner's Tale, the Prologue, p. 485) What does <i>writs</i> likely mean?	
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RL-11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

Answer Key

Possible Student Responses

Note: Wording in students' answers may be different, but their responses should retain the meaning of the excerpt.

Excerpt from Text	Your Version Based on Typical Modern Syntax
At night was come into that hostelry Well nine and twenty in a company Of sundry folk, by sheer chance fallen Into fellowship, and pilgrims were they all, Who toward Canterbury would ride. (General Prologue, p. 3) What does <i>sundry</i> likely mean?	<i>At night twenty-nine sundry folk in a company came into that hostelry.</i> <i>They had fallen into fellowship by sheer chance, And they were all pilgrims who would ride toward Canterbury.</i> <i>Sundry means "various."</i>
And to sum up briefly all his woe, So much sorrow had never a creature That is or will be so long as the world endures. His sleep, his appetite, his thirst was him bereft[.] (The Knight's Tale, p. 75) What does <i>bereft</i> likely mean?	<i>And to sum up all his woe briefly,</i> <i>So long as the world endures, a creature never had so much sorrow.</i> <i>He was bereft of his sleep, his appetite, and his thirst.</i> <i>Bereft means "deprived of."</i>

First I proclaim from where I come, And then my writs of indulgence I show, all and one. Our bishop's seal on my license, That show I first, my person to authorize[.] (The Pardoner's Tale, the Prologue, p. 485) What does <i>writs</i> likely mean?	<i>First I proclaim where I come from, And then I show all my writs of indulgence. I show our bishop's seal on my license first, to authorize my person.</i> <i>Writs are "written formal commands."</i>
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