

# Counting Syllables, Shaping Poems: Reflections



JoAnne Growney

Girls who change  
lightbulbs change  
everything!

One of my mental habits is to try to find connections between disparate facts, events, and preferences and a consequence of this habit is that I find more and more links between two of my favorite subjects, poetry and mathematics. My career was in mathematics (a professor at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania) but I have also been able, after my children were grown, to find time for reading and writing and sharing poetry. In retirement, I've investigated a variety of math-poetry linkages, including the French group *[OULIPO](#)*, a group of mathematicians and poets who engaged in and invented some new math-and-literature connections. My growing desire to share what I'd been learning led me to begin, in 2010, a blog, "[Intersections – Poetry with Mathematics](#)," which continues to this day (with more than a thousand postings).

Some mathematical patterns in poetry are pleasing to the ear and match with body rhythms. The ten-syllable lines of the sonnet each occupy one breath—with each line composed of five iambs (da-DUMs), matching the beats of the human heart. The fourteen-line sonnet thus draws the reader not only into an excursion for the mind but also for the physical self. Occasionally I attempt the difficult task of writing a sonnet or a villanelle (which has the same ten-syllable-per-line pattern as the sonnet and has also some repetition of lines) and feel proud when I achieve that complex blend of sound with meaning.

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But poetic patterns simpler than the sonnet suit me better when I have an idea that I want to shape and share quickly AND in well-chosen words. I have observed that by following a pattern of syllable counts my word-choices are constrained in a way that helps them to be imaginative and effective. As a sample of this, I offer below a couple of syllable-square poems from a collection published about a year ago by *Math Horizons* under the title, “[Give Her Your Support](#).” Here are two samples from that article:

Little Women	Smart Girl Speculating
In school, many Gifted math girls. Later, so few Famed math women!	Last Sunday’s paper had an essay by a clown who said “as long as I play dumb people let me do what I want.” And I cannot stop wondering.

To publicize my math-poetry blog, I have often posted links on Twitter; during the pandemic Twitter became even more special—particularly in April which is National Poetry Month. National Public Radio (to which I often listen) regularly celebrates the arts and in April, NPR issued a call for poetry postings on Twitter (requiring poems with less than 280 characters). And I began to explore, including some thoughts about the coronavirus AND some notions focused on April as National Mathematics and Statistics Awareness Month.

My Twitter handle is @MathyPoems and here are several of my tweets.

On April 2: **A Coronavirus Fib**

Don’t  
touch  
me with  
your fingers—  
use your heart—we must  
keep bodies distant and stay safe!

A “Fib” is a 6-line poem whose syllable-counts follow the Fibonacci numbers.

On April 3: **A Fib for the Season**

Birds  
sing.  
Trees bud.  
Daffodils  
and tulips open.  
My eyes and nose and heart love spring!

On April 4: **Smart Girl Speculating** (shown above, offered on Twitter untitled)

On April 13: **Pandemic** (a Haiku)

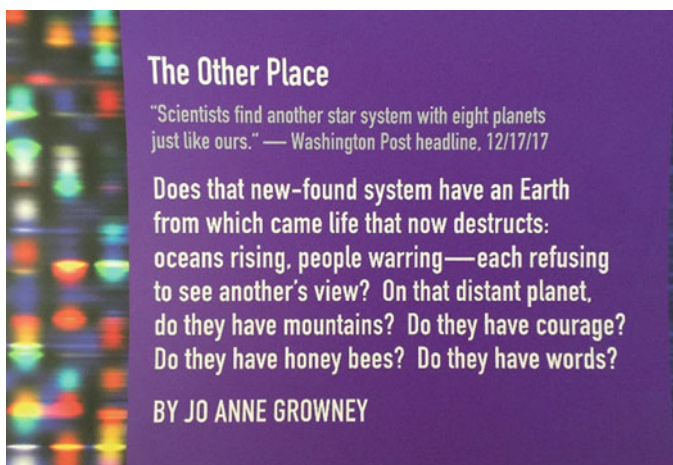
Exponential growth:  
small numbers doubling quickly—  
a world upended!

On April 17: The  $3 \times 3$  syllable square with which this article began appeared as a Tweet

On April 24: Quarantine—  
that other world  
in which no moments  
notice where I am.

And so on . . .

One of my ongoing concerns is climate change and I can't resist voicing that concern here and sharing a poem, "The Other Place," that appears on a poster in my study—a poem that was a contest winner in 2018 and appeared on busses in Arlington, Virginia.



For Twitter explorers I invite visits to my postings found [using my Twitter handle @MathyPoems](#), and I encourage all with a bit of interest in the many connections that exist between mathematics and poetry to visit my blog, "[Intersections – Poetry with Mathematics](#)."

**Additional Notes** Information about the establishment of **National Poetry Month** (which happened in 1996) is available at the website for the Academy for American poets [at this link](#).

President Reagan in April, 1986 established **National Mathematics Awareness Week** and this celebration in 1999 evolved into **National Mathematics Awareness Month** and in 2017 grew into **Mathematics and Statistics Awareness Month**. Details for the 2020 Celebration [are available here](#).



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