

Puzzle Poetry
By Matthew Abate

I recently came across an old journal entry from March 2023:

Write a story with sections that start nine hours from one another—12:00am, 9:00am, 6:00pm, 3:00am, 12:00pm, 9:00pm, 6:00am, 3:00pm, and 12:00am. That story would span three days. The sections could then be rearranged to start three hours from one another—12:00am, 3:00am, 6:00am, ... 9:00pm, and 12:00am. This would create a new story, spanning one day.

I decided to run with this idea for the new work below, titled “Puzzle Poetry.” There are two poems, both constructed from the same nine passages rearranged.

Poem 1		Poem 2	
Monday	12:00am: My punishment? I'm glad you asked A long and tiresome fate	Saturday	12:00am: My punishment? I'm glad you asked A long and tiresome fate
	1:20pm: My actions constant vary only ever by the date Eight-hundred minutes in the week		5:20am: Three-hundred twenty minutes on the weekend do I wait And in between I cannot squeak
Tuesday	2:40am: I wait before each time I speak And count with fractions time amassed	Saturday	10:40am: A long unbroken silent streak Forever by time flies so fast
	4:00pm: See now my time one third has past And soon this segment's torment's sure to floridly abate		4:00pm: See now my time one third has past And soon this segment's torment's sure to floridly abate
Wednesday	5:20am: Three-hundred twenty minutes on the weekend do I wait And in between I cannot squeak	Sunday	9:20pm: Back soon I'll say to what I've said not ever to update So having nothing but critique
	6:40pm: My past the same, my future bleak A cumbersome and grueling task		2:40am: I wait before each time I speak And count with fractions time amassed
Thursday	8:00am: Done two thirds now. At last! Alas My counting cannot stop the clock, my punishment innate	Sunday	8:00am: Done two thirds now. At last! Alas My counting cannot stop the clock, my punishment innate
	9:20pm: Back soon I'll say to what I've said not ever to update So having nothing but critique		1:20pm: My actions constant vary only ever by the date Eight-hundred minutes in the week
Friday	10:40am: A long unbroken silent streak Forever by time flies so fast	Sunday	6:40pm: My past the same, my future bleak A cumbersome and grueling task
	12:00am: My punishment? I'm glad you asked		12:00am: My punishment? I'm glad you asked

On the left, passages are separated by thirteen hours and twenty minutes so that the full poem takes place over five days (weekdays, 120 hours). On the right, passages are separated by five hours and twenty minutes, so that the poem spans two days (weekend, 48 hours).

Monday: 12:00am
Monday: 1:20pm
Tuesday: 2:40am
Tuesday: 4:00pm
Wednesday: 5:20am
Wednesday: 6:40pm
Thursday: 8:00am
Thursday: 9:20pm
Friday: 10:40am
Saturday: 12:00am

Saturday: 12:00am
Saturday: 5:20am
Saturday: 10:40am
Saturday: 4:00pm
Saturday: 9:20pm
Sunday: 2:40am
Sunday: 8:00am
Sunday: 1:20pm
Sunday: 6:40pm
Monday: 12:00am

The narrator is a prisoner whose punishment changes from the weekdays to the weekends. He speaks once every 800 minutes during the week and once every 320 minutes on the weekends. In both arrangements the poems rhyme, and there are certain other intricacies—4:00pm, for example, doesn't move between the two arrangements, and the narrator exclaims "See now my time one third has past," noticing he's exactly one third of the way through the week (weekend). The same is true at 8:00am with "Done two thirds now. At last! Alas" These two lines couple with "And count with fractions time amassed" from 2:40am, which precedes the 4:00pm passage in Poem 1 and the 8:00am passage in Poem 2.

"And count with fractions time amassed"
"See now my time one third has past" or "Done two thirds now. At last! Alas"

Together, the poems create a long purgatory of infinitely repeated actions, patterns and rhymes. Indeed, I had quite a bit of fun putting this together.

Of course, it would be possible to create other poem-pairs like this, with different numbers of passages, timestamps, and story-time lengths. The constraints of my writing were

1. In each arrangement, the time-distance between passages should be constant.
2. Both poems should begin and end with the same 12:00am passage. Otherwise, there should be no repeated timestamps.
3. It should not be the case that the passages appear in the same order in both poems—some rearrangement is necessary.

As a demonstration of when this would not be the case, imagine splitting the week and weekend with two passages:

Monday: 12:00am	Saturday: 12:00am
Wednesday: 12:00pm	Sunday: 12:00am
Saturday: 12:00am	Monday: 12:00am

On the right, every time stamp is 12:00am (Violates Rule 2), and on the left, there is a passage at 12:00pm that has no counterpart on the right (Violates the premise). Now, imagine splitting the week and weekend with three passages.

Monday: 12:00am	Saturday: 12:00am
Tuesday: 4:00pm	Saturday: 4:00pm
Thursday: 8:00am	Sunday: 8:00am
Saturday: 12:00am	Monday: 12:00am

Here there is no rearrangement, the passages appear in the same order in both poems (Violates Rule 3).

As it turns out there are only two valid ways of splitting the week and weekend up using my constraints. The first method (demonstrated above) uses nine passages that arrange 800 minutes apart in one poem and 320 minutes apart in the other. In this case, passages do not

change their position modulo 3—for example, the 1:20pm passage above appears in position two in Poem 1, and moves to position eight on Poem 2. This facilitates creating an interesting rhyme scheme using, e.g., three rhymable suffixes, two of which appear in each passage.

There is actually a second way of splitting the week and weekend, which I did not pursue, that would use 27 passages, spaced 4 hours 26 minutes and 40 seconds apart in the first poem, and 1 hour 46 minutes and 40 seconds apart in the second poem.

Monday:	12:00:00 am	Saturday:	12:00:00 am
Monday:	4:26:40 am	Saturday:	1:46:40 am
Monday:	8:53:20 am	Saturday:	3:33:20 am
Monday:	1:20:00 pm	Saturday:	5:20:00 am
Monday:	5:46:40 pm	Saturday:	7:06:40 am
Monday:	10:13:20 pm	Saturday:	8:53:20 am
Tuesday:	2:40:00 am	Saturday:	10:40:00 am
Tuesday:	7:06:40 am	Saturday:	10:40:00 am
Tuesday:	11:33:20 am	Saturday:	2:13:20 pm
Tuesday:	4:00:00 pm	Saturday:	4:00:00 pm
Tuesday:	8:26:40 pm	Saturday:	5:46:40 pm
Wednesday:	12:53:20 am	Saturday:	5:46:40 pm
Wednesday:	5:20:00 am	Saturday:	9:20:00 pm
Wednesday:	9:46:40 am	Saturday:	11:06:40 pm
Wednesday:	2:13:20 pm	Sunday:	12:53:20 am
Wednesday:	6:40:00 pm	Sunday:	2:40:00 am
Wednesday:	11:06:40 pm	Sunday:	4:26:40 am
Thursday:	3:33:20 am	Sunday:	6:13:20 am
Thursday:	8:00:00 am	Sunday:	8:00:00 am
Thursday:	12:26:40 pm	Sunday:	9:46:40 am
Thursday:	4:53:20 pm	Sunday:	11:33:20 am
Thursday:	9:20:00 pm	Sunday:	1:20:00 pm
Friday:	1:46:40 am	Sunday:	3:06:40 pm
Friday:	6:13:20 am	Sunday:	4:53:20 pm
Friday:	10:40:00 am	Sunday:	6:40:00 pm
Friday:	3:06:40 pm	Sunday:	8:26:40 pm
Friday:	7:33:20 pm	Sunday:	10:13:20 pm
Saturday:	12:00:00 am	Monday:	12:00:00 am

This arrangement also facilitates constructing poems using three rhymable suffixes.