

## Rhythm, Meter, and Scansion Made Easy

I created this page as a quick reference for my students when studying rhythm. The sources I cited below were very helpful, especially X.J. Kennedy's book.

**rhythm:** the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line.

**meter:** the number of feet in a line.

**scansion:** Describing the rhythms of poetry by dividing the lines into feet, marking the locations of stressed and unstressed syllables, and counting the syllables.

Thus, when we describe the rhythm of a poem, we “scan” the poem and mark the stresses (/) and absences of stress (^) and count the number of feet.

In English, the major feet are:

**iamb** (^/)

^        / ^        /        ^        / ^        /        ^ / ^        / ^ /  
The    falling    out        of    faithful friends, renewing is of love

**trochee** (/^)

  / ^        / ^        /        ^        / ^  
Double, double    toil        and    trouble

**anapest** (^/^/)

^        ^        / ^        ^        /        ^        ^ /  
I        am    monarch    of        all        I        survey

**dactyl** (/^^)

  /        ^        ^        / ^^  
Take    her        up        tenderly

**spondee** (//)

**pyrrhic** (^^)

**Iambic** and **anapestic** meters are called rising meters because their movement rises from unstressed syllable to stressed; **trochaic** and **dactylic** meters are called falling. In the twentieth century, the bouncing meters--anapestic and dactylic--have been used more often for comic verse than for serious poetry.

**Spondee** and **pyrrhic** are called feet, even though they contain only one kind of stressed syllable. They are never used as the sole meter of a poem; if they were, it would be like the steady impact of nails being hammered into a board--no pleasure to hear or dance to. But inserted now and then, they can lend emphasis and variety to a meter, as Yeats well knew when he broke up the predominantly iambic rhythm of “Who Goes With Fergus?” with the line,

^    ^    /    /    ^    ^    /    /

And the white breast of the dim sea,

A frequently heard metrical description is iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs. This is a meter especially familiar because it occurs in all blank verse (such as Shakespeare's plays), heroic couplets, and sonnets.

Pentameter is one name for the number of feet in a line. The commonly used names for line lengths are:

<b>monometer</b>	one foot	<b>pentameter</b>	five feet
<b>dimeter</b>	two feet	<b>hexameter</b>	six feet
<b>trimeter</b>	three feet	<b>heptameter</b>	seven feet
<b>tetrameter</b>	four feet	<b>octameter</b>	eight feet

The scansion of this quatrain from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 shows the following accents and divisions into feet (note the following words were split: behold, yellow, upon, against, ruin'd):

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
That time | of year | thou mayst | in me | be hold |  
^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
When yel | low leaves, | or none, | or few, | do hang |  
^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
Up on | those boughs | which shake | a gainst | the cold, |  
^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /  
Bare ru | in'd choirs | where late | the sweet birds sang |

From this, we see the rhythm of this quatrain is made up of one unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable, called an iambic foot. We also see there are five feet per line, making the meter of the line pentameter. So, the rhythm and meter are iambic pentameter.

Yes, that's all very lovely, but why do we study rhythm? People have a basic need for rhythm, or for the effect produced by it, as laboratory experiments in psychology have demonstrated, and as you can see by watching a crew of workers digging or hammering, or by listening to chants and work songs. Rhythm gives pleasure and a more emotional response to the listener or reader because it establishes a pattern of expectations, and rewards the listener or reader with the pleasure that comes from having those expectations fulfilled, or the noted change in a rhythm, as in the Yeats example.

An argument might be raised against scanning: isn't it too simple to expect that all language can be divided into neat stressed and unstressed syllables? Of course it is. There are infinite levels of stress, from the loudest scream to the faintest whisper. But, the idea in scanning a poem is not to reproduce the sound of a human voice. A tape recorder can do that. To scan a poem is to make a diagram of the stresses and absence of stress we find in it. Studying rhythms, "scanning," is not just a way of pointing to syllables; it is also a matter of listening to a poem and making sense of it. To scan a poem is one way to indicate how to read it aloud; in order to see where stresses fall, you have to see the places where the poet wishes to put emphasis. That is why when scanning a poem you may find yourself suddenly understanding it.

In everyday life, nobody speaks or writes in perfect iambic rhythm, except at moments: “a HAM on RYE and HIT the MUSard HARD!” Poets don’t even write in iambic very long, although when they do, they have chosen iambic because it is the rhythm that most closely resemble everyday speech.

And even after this lengthy discussion of rhythm, it must be stated that most poems do not employ the same rhythm throughout. Variety in rhythm is not merely desirable, it is a necessity. If the beat of its words slips into a mechanical pattern, the poem marches robot-like right into its grave. Very few poets favor rhythms that go “a TROT a TROT a TROT a TROT” for very long. Robert Frost told an audience one time that if when writing a poem he found its rhythm becoming monotonous, he knew that the poem was going wrong and that he himself didn’t believe what it was saying.

Sources:

Holman, C. Hugh and William Harmon. *A Handbook to Literature*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986.

Kennedy, X.J. *Literature*. Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1987.

Can you scan these poem excerpts?

The morns are meeker than they were,  
The nuts are getting brown;  
The berry’s cheek is plumper,  
The rose is out of town.  
--Emily Dickinson

Bats have webby wings that fold up;  
Bats from ceilings hang down rolled up;  
Bats when flying undismayed are;  
Bats are careful; bats use radar;  
--Frank Jacobs, “The Bat”

You know that it would be untrue,  
You know that I would be a liar,  
If I was to say to you  
Girl, we couldn’t get much higher.  
Come on, baby, light my fire.  
Try to set the night on fire.  
--Jim Morrison, “Light My Fire”