

Meter: The Rhythm of English Poetry

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In this lesson, we will learn about meter, or the rhythm of classical English poetry. In English poetry, meter is based on the combination of the number of syllables and the number of stresses in a line of poetry. This is called *accentual-syllabic verse*. In other languages, such as French and Japanese, only the number of syllables is counted. This is called *syllabic verse*.

If you learn this information, you will be able to better understand the poetry written in classical meters, and if you learn to write poetry with meter, you will possess a valuable skill. Like any skill, writing with meter takes practice, but including rhythm in your poems can make them more enjoyable to read. Like rhyme, meter provides a sense of fulfilled expectation and harmony. However, in this lesson, we will only be discussing meters and not rhymes. Many classical poets (including William Shakespeare in his plays and John Milton in *Paradise Lost*) wrote in meter and without rhymes. This type of poetry is called *blank verse*.

Once you learn how to use rhyme and meter, and learn how to combine them, if you wish, you will be well on your way to writing proficient classical poetry. If you are not interested in writing poetry, and just want to better appreciate the poetry you read, you will also benefit from learning about meter.

When discussing the meter of a line of poetry, we need to know the predominating foot and the number of feet in the line. The feet in English poetry have their etymological origins in the Greek language. A *foot* is a prescribed combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. The principal feet are the following. (An "S" represents a stressed syllable, and a "u" represents an unstressed syllable.)

Iamb (iambic foot): uS

Trochee (trochaic foot): Su

Anapest (anapestic foot): uuS

Dactyl (dactylic foot): Suu

Pyrrhic (pyrrhic foot): uu

Spondee (spondaic foot): SS

Amphibrach: uSu

Amphimacer: SuS

To specify the number of feet in a line of poetry, we use another word of Greek origin:

One foot: monometer

Two feet: dimeter

Three feet: trimeter

Four feet: tetrameter

Five feet: pentameter

Six feet: hexameter

Seven feet: heptameter

Eight feet: octameter

The most common type of meter in classical poetry is iambic pentameter. This meter contains 5 iambs (uS) and thus 10 syllables per line. Lines of poetry can also be written in anapestic (uuS) meter, trochaic (Su) meter, and dactylic (Suu) meter, but we will not be discussing those meters in this lesson.

A "perfect" line of iambic pentameter can be represented by the following:

uSuSuSuSuS

This means that every even-numbered syllable is stressed (S) and every odd-numbered syllable is unstressed (u). However, poets often introduce variations into their meter. Let's *scan* some lines by Alexander Pope and try to determine which syllables are stressed. Here is a *couplet* (two lines that end-rhyme) from his poem "An Essay on Criticism":

'Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill
Appear in writing or in judging ill;

Here are the lines separated into feet by vertical lines, with the stressed syllables underlined:

'Tis hard | to say, | if great-| er want | of skill
Appear | in writ-| ing or | in judg-| ing ill;

These lines appear to be in "perfect" iambic pentameter. You should note that a word can be split and fall into more than one foot (e.g., "writ-| ing").

With polysyllabic words, we can consult the dictionary to find out where the stresses fall if we are not sure. However, with monosyllabic words, we have to know where they come in the line, and which other words surround them to determine if they take a stress or not. Probably the only monosyllabic words that never take a stress are "a" and "an."

Here is another couplet from the same poem:

Nature affords at least a glimmering light;
The lines, though touched but faintly, are drawn right.

Here is one way to scan the lines:

Nature | affords | at least | a glimmer | ing light;
The lines, | though touched | but faint- | ly, are | drawn right.

In the 1st line above, we can see that Pope has substituted a trochee ("Nature": Su) for an iamb (uS) in the 1st foot. This is the most common substitution in iambic meter. He also substituted an amphibrach ("a glimmer": uSu) in the 4th foot. Depending on how you pronounce "drawn" in the 5th foot of the 2nd line, you could say that "drawn right" could be an iamb (uS) or a spondee (SS).

Here is another way to scan the 1st line:

Nature | affords | at least | a glimm- | ering light;

In this case, we have 1 trochee (Su), 3 iambs (uS) and 1 anapest (uuS). In a line of iambic meter, it is best to make at least a majority of the feet iambs. When this is not the case, we lose the iambic rhythm.

Here is another couplet from the same poem:

As things seem large which we through mists descry,
Dulness is ever apt to magnify.

As things | seem large | which we | through mists | descry,
Dulness | is ev- | er apt | to mag- | nify.

In the 2nd line, we can see that Pope substituted a trochee ("Dulness": Su) in the 1st foot. Also note that Pope inverted the normal syntax (reversed the normal grammatical order) in the first line to put the rhyming verb "descry" at the end of the line. (The normal word order would look like this: "As things seem large which we descry through mists,") This is called *syntactical inversion*. Sometimes

inversions can make our poetry harder to read and understand, so they should be eliminated if possible.

Here is a couplet by Jonathan Swift (from his poem "Stella's Birthday"). Swift usually wrote in iambic tetrameter (4 iambs and 8 syllables per line):

Your generous boldness to defend
An innocent and absent friend;

Your gen-erous bold-ness to | defend
An inn-ocent | and ab-sent friend;

We can see that Swift has substituted an anapest ("erous bold": uuS) in the 1st line (2nd foot) and a pyrrhic ("ocent": uu) in the 2nd line (2nd foot), unless we promote the syllable "cent" to make the foot an iamb ("ocent": uS)

Here is a quatrain (4-line stanza) in iambic pentameter from Shakespeare's Sonnet 18. Before you look at how I scanned the quatrain, try to scan the lines and underline the stressed syllables and write a vertical line between the feet. Did you find any substitutions for iambs (uS)?

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;

Shall I | compare | thee to | a summ- | er's day?
Thou art | more love- | ly and | more temp- | erate:
Rough winds | do shake | the dar- | ling buds | of May,
And summ- | er's lease | hath all | too short | a date;

The only substitution that I found was a spondee ("Rough winds": SS) for an iamb (uS). We also have to promote the last syllable of "temperate" to make it fit into the iambic meter.

You will notice that Shakespeare inserted the word "do" in line 3 so that "do shake" would fit into the iambic meter. In this case, "do" is called an *expletive*. It is not necessary for the meaning, but was only inserted to complete the meter. In writing poetry, it is best to avoid these expletives by revising our lines.

The key to writing in iambic meter is to start by using mostly one- and two-syllable words, since they are easier to fit within the iambic grid.

Now let's practice writing in iambic meter. Let's start by writing a sentence on any subject or by selecting a sentence from a book. Let's try to find one that doesn't have words that cannot be paraphrased (such as proper nouns). Below are some examples. I will first take a sentence from the back of my book on Wordsworth:

"A detailed and provocative general introduction and a textural introduction precede the texts."

Since we are just trying to practice writing in iambic meter, it doesn't matter if the sentence we end up with doesn't have much similarity to the original sentence. The sentence I selected has many polysyllabic words. Let's see what we can do with it. The first 4 syllables fit into iambic meter:

a de- | tailed and

We can change "provocative" (uSuu) to "exciting" (uSu) and continue with "introduction" (SuSu):

a de- | tailed and | excit- | ing in- | troduc- | tion

A detailed and exciting introduction...

Now we have a line of iambic pentameter with an extra unstressed syllable at the end (uSuSuSuSuSu). This additional syllable is called *hypercatalexis* and it can be added without changing the meter from iambic pentameter.

Let's try another sentence. Here's Proverbs 3:1 (NIV):

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,

With a little revising, we can turn this into iambic pentameter:

My son, do not forget my teaching, but
retain all my commands within your heart,

My son, | do not | forget | my teach-| ing, but
retain | all my | commands | within | your heart,

You can see that I used synonyms for "keep" and "in." It is useful to have a dictionary and a thesaurus nearby when you are paraphrasing texts or revising your poems.

Here's Proverbs 3:2 (NIV):

for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.

With a little revising, we can make it fit into iambic pentameter:

for they'll prolong your life for many years
and bring you peace and great prosperity.

for they'll | prolong | your life | for man-| y years
and bring | you peace | and great | prosper-| ity.

In this paraphrase, I "promoted" the last syllable ("ty") so that it would fit into the meter. I also changed "they will" to the contraction "they'll" and added the words "for" and "great" to make the verses fit into iambic meter.

Now, you can try a few sentences on your own. If you have too few syllables or too many, you can make your sentence into iambic tetrameter (4 feet, 8 syllables) or iambic hexameter (6 feet, 12 syllables). If you don't know where to start, try using some more verses from proverbs. You can also try converting into iambic meter part of an essay that you have written. Have fun!