

Prosody: Feet, Meter, Scansion

Meter

Meter is the systematic arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates a regular rhythmic pattern in poetry. Think of meter as poetry's heartbeat, a recurring pattern that gives verse its distinctive musical quality. Unlike the random rhythms of ordinary speech, poetic meter follows predictable patterns that create expectations and, when varied skillfully, can produce powerful emotional effects.

The word "meter" derives from the Greek *metron*, meaning "measure," reflecting its function as a measuring device for poetic rhythm. When we speak naturally, our words contain stressed (emphasized) and unstressed (de-emphasized) syllables. In metered poetry, these natural stresses are organized into regular patterns that repeat throughout the poem.

Foot

A foot is the basic building block of poetic meter, a single unit containing a specific arrangement of stressed and unstressed syllables. Just as music is built from repeated measures, poetry constructs its rhythm from repeated feet. Each foot typically contains two or three syllables arranged in a particular stress pattern. The term "foot" originates from classical prosody, where it referred to combinations of long and short syllables in Greek and Latin poetry. In prosody, this describes patterns of stressed (') and unstressed (˘) syllables.

The Two-Syllable Feet (Disyllabic Feet/Measure):

1. Iamb (˘'): The Foundation of English Poetry:

The iamb consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, creating a "da-DUM" pattern. Examples include words like **be**long, **re**port, and **por**tray.

The iamb holds special significance in English poetry for several reasons:

- A. Most common foot: It appears in the majority of English verse.
- B. Natural rhythm: Approximates ordinary English speech patterns, making it comfortable to read.

2. Trochee (˘): The Falling Rhythm:

The trochee reverses the iambic pattern with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one (DUM-da). Examples include **garden**, **market**, and **toothbrush**. This foot creates a falling rhythm that contrasts sharply with the rising motion of iambs.

3. Spondee (ː): The Emphasis Foot:

The spondee consists of two consecutive stressed syllables. Examples include compound words like **sunset**, **handshake**, and **rainstorm**.

Spondees serve important functions:

- A. Emphasis: Used to highlight important words or moments.
- B. Pacing: Slows down the rhythm for dramatic effect.
- C. Substitution: Rarely forms entire lines but appears as purposeful variations within other meters.

4. Pyrrhic (˘˘): The Controversial Foot:

The pyrrhic contains two unstressed syllables. However, this foot remains controversial. Edgar Allan Poe dismissed pyrrhics as "purely chimerical," questioning their existence in English poetry.

When used, pyrrhic feet:

- A. Speed up rhythm: Create flowing, accelerated movement.

B. Natural speech: Help maintain conversational patterns by avoiding artificial stress on prepositions or articles.

C. Substitution role: Appear within other metrical patterns rather than forming complete poems.

The Three-Syllable Feet (Trisyllabic):

1. Anapest (~~): The Galloping Meter:

The anapest places two unstressed syllables before one stressed syllable (da-da-DUM). Words like over**come**, under**stand**, and disre**gard** demonstrate this pattern. Anapests create an energetic, galloping rhythm.

2. Dactyl ('~): The Classical Foot:

The dactyl begins with a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones (DUM-da-da). Examples include **b**uttermilk, **e**lephant, and **h**andkerchief. This foot:

A. Classical heritage: Prominent in ancient Greek and Latin poetry, especially Homer's epics.

B. Liling quality: Creates a distinctive falling, musical rhythm.

C. Modern usage: Less common in English but still appears in narrative and experimental poetry.

3. Amphibrach (~'): The Bouncing Foot:

The amphibrach places a stressed syllable between two unstressed ones (da-DUM-da). Examples include words like cond**ition** and un**happy**.

The features of this foot are:

A. Limerick connection: Serves as the main foot in classical limericks.

B. Energetic quality: Creates bouncy, rhythmic movement ideal for light verse.

Building Lines from Feet:

1. Line Lengths:

The number of feet in a line determines its metrical designation:

- A. Monometer: 1 foot per line
- B. Dimeter: 2 feet per line
- C. Trimeter: 3 feet per line
- D. Tetrameter: 4 feet per line
- E. Pentameter: 5 feet per line (most common in English)
- F. Hexameter: 6 feet per line
- G. Heptameter: 7 feet per line
- H. Octameter: 8 feet per line

2. Naming Meters:

Meters combine the foot type with the line length:

- A. Iambic pentameter: five iambs per line (Shakespeare's sonnets)
- B. Trochaic tetrameter: four trochees per line (Poe's "The Raven")
- C. Anapestic trimeter: three anapests per line
- D. Dactylic hexameter: six dactyls per line (classical epics)

Line Endings: Masculine and Feminine:

1. Masculine Endings:

Masculine endings occur when lines conclude with a stressed syllable.

They create:

- A. Finality: A sense of completion, like "a door closing shut".
- B. Strength: Emphatic conclusion to the line.

Example : "Shall I compare thee to a summer's ****day****?" (stressed on "day").

2. Feminine Endings:

Feminine endings occur when lines end with an unstressed syllable.

They create:

- A. Continuation: A sense of flow into the next line.
- B. Gentleness: Softer conclusion than masculine endings.

Example: "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and wea-ry".

Metrical Variations and Substitutions:

Perfect adherence to a single meter can sound mechanical. Skilled poets use substitutions, replacing expected feet with different ones, to create emphasis and avoid monotony.

1. Common Substitutions:

A. Trochaic Substitution: The most frequent variation, especially at line beginnings.
Example: "**B**atter my heart, three-personed God" places initial stress on "Batter" instead of following iambic pattern.

B. Spondaic Substitution: Adds weight and emphasis. Tennyson's "**B**reak, **b**reak, **b**reak / On thy cold gray stones, O Sea!" uses spondees for dramatic effect.

C. Pyrrhic Substitution: Maintains natural speech by avoiding artificial stress on function words. In "not in / the hands / of boys / but in / their eyes," the pyrrhic substitution prevents awkward emphasis on "in".

Catalexis: The Art of Incompleteness:

Catalexis refers to the omission of one or more syllables at the end of a poetic line, creating metrical incompleteness.

1. Types of Catalexis:

- A. Catalectic: missing one syllable (most common).
- B. Brachycatalectic: missing two syllables.
- C. Hypercatalectic: having an extra syllable.

2. Effects of Catalexis:

- A. Tension: Creates sense of incompleteness or anticipation.
- B. Variation: Prevents mechanical regularity.
- C. Emphasis: Draws attention to the truncated/shortened line.

Scansion: The Analysis Process:

Scansion is the systematic method of analyzing and marking metrical patterns in poetry. The process involves:

1. Mark syllables: Identify all syllables in each line.
2. Determine stress: Mark which syllables receive stress.
3. Group into feet: Divide syllables according to metrical patterns.
4. Identify meter: Name the prevailing foot type and line length.
5. Note variations: Mark substitutions and irregularities.

Common Rules to Identify Stressed Syllables:

1. Monosyllabic content/lexical word = always stressed.

Example: **cat**, **run**, **big**, **short**.

2. Polysyllabic words (Words with more than one syllable) = one primary stress (sometimes plus secondary stress).

Example: beau-**ti**-ful, de-mo-**cra**-cy.

3. Stress in Disyllabic Words (Words with two syllables):

A. Nouns & Adjectives: Stress usually on the first syllable.

Nouns: **T**able, **P**icture, **W**indow.

Adjectives: **C**lever, **H**appy, **Q**uiet.

B. Verbs & Prepositions: Stress usually on the second syllable.

Verbs: Re**lax**, Be**gin**, Ex**port**.

Prepositions: Be**tween**, **A**mong, With**in**.

4. Stress in Three-Syllable Words (Words with three syllables):

A. If the last syllable is -tion, -sion, -ic, -ity, -ical), stress usually falls on the penultimate syllable.

Example: crea**tion**, geo**logic**.

B. If the last syllable is -eer, -ese, -oon, -ade, -que, stress usually falls on the final syllable.

volun**teer**, Japan**ese**, ballo**on**, lemon**ade**, uniqu**e**.

C. If none of the above, stress often on the first syllable.

Example: **A**nimal, **C**inema, **L**ondoner.

5. Suffix-Based Stress Rules:

Certain endings attract stress; others repel it.

A. Stress-attracting suffixes (stress on the suffix itself):

-ee → employ**ee**, refuge**ee**.

-eer → engine**er**, mountaine**er**.

-ese → Japan**ese**, Siame**se**.

-ette → cigare**tte**, casset**te**.

B. Stress-fixing suffixes (stress before the suffix):

-sion, -tion → ext**en**sion, attr**ac**tion.

-ity → act**iv**ity, possib**il**ity.

-graphy → phot**o**graphy.

-meter → therm**om**eter.

-logy → **bi**ology.

6. Prefixes:

A. Most prefixes are unstressed:

Example: un**h**appy, dis**l**ike, re**t**urn, im**p**ossible.

B. Some exceptions: under'stand, 'afterthought, 'overnight.

7. Compound Words:

A. Compound nouns: Stress usually on the first element.

Example: **p**ostman, **b**lackboard, **f**ootball.

B. Compound adjectives/verbs: Stress usually on the second element.

Adjectives: old-**f**ashioned, bad-**t**empered.

Verbs: over**f**low, under**s**tand.

Note:

1. Content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) → stressed.

2. Function words (articles, prepositions, conjunctions, auxiliary verbs, pronouns) → unstressed.