

Rhythm in poetry

(adapted from 'poetry4kids')

When you read rhyming poetry, one of the things you might notice is how the words often have a rhythmical quality; that is, there is a pattern to the rhythm of the words that makes them pleasant to say and easy to remember. Sometimes the rhythm is a simple one, and sometimes it's more complex, but it's not there by accident. Poets arrange their words in such a way as to create those rhythmical patterns.

This is different from rhyme, which is created when similar sounding words are paired (cat/bat, funnel/ tunnel). When rhyming poems also have a rhythm in the words, they are much more enjoyable to read. By contrast, rhyming poems that do not have a rhythm are usually not as enjoyable to read.

You probably know that, in music, the rhythm of a song is the "beat," often created by instruments such as drums, bass guitars, etc. In fact, in popular music the drummer and bass guitarist in a band are often referred to as the "rhythm section" because they establish the rhythm for the rest of the musicians to follow. Unlike a song, poems don't have a rhythm section. There is no drummer or conductor establishing the rhythm. Instead, the rhythm is set by the "stresses" or "accents" in the words themselves.

1. *Stresses, accents and metre*

In most words that have more than one syllable, one of the syllables is pronounced more strongly than the others. We say that this syllable is "stressed" or "accented." For example, the word "apple" has two syllables – ap-ple – and the first syllable is pronounced more strongly than the second. That's why the word is pronounced "AP-pull" and not "ap-PULL."

If a word has just a single syllable, that syllable might be stressed, or it might not be. Generally, short words like "a" and "I" and "the" are not stressed. Nouns and verbs (things and action words), on the other hand are often stressed, even when they are just one syllable long.

The easiest way to tell if a word is stressed or not is to put it in a sentence and then read it aloud. Listen carefully to how you pronounce it to see if you can tell which words or syllables are stressed and which ones aren't. Let's take a look at an example. Read the following line and see if you can hear the stressed syllables. Try tapping your foot or hand as you catch the rhythm created by the stressed syllables

My mother ate an apple and my father ate a pear.

Could you hear that every other syllable was stressed? One way to write this to make it more obvious is to capitalize the stressed syllables and write the unstressed syllables in lowercase letters, like this:

my MOTH-er ATE an AP-ple AND my FATH-er ATE a PEAR.

These repeating patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables are called the 'Metre' of a poem. This is similar to the beat of a song which is its rhythm. In a poem the rhythm created by stressed and unstressed syllables is called its "metre." Metre is just another word for "rhythm in poetry." In general "metre" is used to refer to the actual patterns of the stressed and unstressed syllables, whereas "rhythm" is used to refer to the feeling created by the meter.

2. Syllables and feet

In certain types of poems, such as haiku, the writer counts the number of syllables in each line. In rhythmical poetry, however, poets don't count the number of syllables in each line; they count the number of "feet." A "foot" is the group of stresses and non-stresses you find in the metre of a poem.

Let's look again at the example:

my MOTH-er ATE an AP-ple AND my FATH-er ATE a PEAR.

In our example each foot is two syllables long. That is, each foot is made up of one unstressed syllable and one stressed syllable. If I were to draw a line between each foot in the line, it would look like this:

my MOTH | er ATE | an AP | ple AND | my FATH | er ATE | a PEAR.

This makes it easy to see that the line has seven feet. That is to say, the pattern of one unstressed syllable and one stressed syllable has been repeated seven times.

Poems can have any number of feet in their lines. The important thing is to pick a pattern and stick with it. When you write poems, your lines can have as few or as many feet as you like. For example, here's a very short poem which each line has just two feet:

My cat is nice.
My cat is fat.
My cat is cute.
I like my cat.

With the stresses and the feet, it would look like this:

my CAT | is NICE.
my CAT | is FAT.
my CAT | is CUTE.
i LIKE | my CAT.

Exercise 1

Try to write a similar short poem in which in each line, the first word is unstressed, the second stressed, the third unstressed and the fourth stressed. You can choose any subject you like .

3. Using rhythm

You might need to write what you want to say differently in order to find a good rhythm. For example, if you wrote:

My mother said I should go to the store

you'd find it doesn't have much of a rhythm. What's the problem? If you look at which syllables are stressed and which ones aren't, you can see that the rhythm doesn't stay the same for the entire line.

my MOTH-er SAID i should GO to the STORE

If you rewrite the line to keep the meaning but change the rhythm you might come up with:

My mother sent me to the store
(*my MOTH-er SENT me TO the STORE*)

This is a regular rhythm which makes the words flow much better.

Exercise 2

Write the first short sentence that comes into your head. Read it aloud. If it doesn't have any rhythm, try to write it again, keeping the same meaning as much as possible but changing the words to create a simple rhythm (for example, like the one above with a pattern of unstressed, stressed throughout the line).

4. Showing rhythm: scanning poetry

We don't normally show rhythm by using capital letters. We use a system called "scansion". The process of marking the stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem is called "scanning."

The most common method of scanning a poem is to place marks above the syllables to indicate whether they are stressed or unstressed. The mark for a stressed syllable is a slash ("/") and the mark for an unstressed syllable is a dash ("-"). Using these two simple symbols, we can mark lines of poetry to see their rhythms, like this:

- / - / - / - /
My puppy punched me in the eye.

Now, just by looking at the dashes and slashes, you can easily see that this line of poetry has a repeating rhythm. The first syllable is unstressed, the second is stressed, the third is unstressed, and so on. In other words, the line alternates between stressed and unstressed syllables.

Exercise 3

Go back to the example above (*My mother sent me to the store*). Mark dashes and slashes to show where the stresses and unstressed syllables fall.

Now do the same with the line of poetry you wrote yourself. If you like, make up a few more and 'scan' them all.

5. Counting feet

Most poetic feet contain a single stressed syllable, and one or two unstressed syllables. So you can usually count the number of feet in a line of poetry simply by counting the dashes after you scan it. Knowing this, we can see that the line "My puppy punched me in the eye" contains four feet, and each foot is two syllables long. Let's take a look at another example.

- / - - / -
I didn't go camping.

This **line** has **two feet** (because there are two stressed syllables in the entire line), and each **foot** has **three syllables** (unstressed – stressed – unstressed). The first foot is “I didn’t” and the second foot is “go camping.” If we were to scan the entire stanza (a paragraph or verse of a poem), it would look like this:

- / - - / -
I didn't go camping.
- / - - / -
I didn't go hiking.
- / - - / -
I didn't go fishing.
- / - - / -
I didn't go biking.

Notice that each of the four lines in this stanza have the same rhythm. That is, they have the same number of feet, and the same placement of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Exercise 4

Have a go at writing a four line poem like the one above: try to keep to the same rhythm (unstressed/stressed/ unstressed) and same number of feet per line (2 feet, with each one containing the three syllables making the rhythm).

When you've done, scan it to check you are right.

6. Iambics

The most common poetic foot in the English language is known as the “iamb.” An iamb is two syllables, where the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed. For example, the word “today” is an iamb because the stress falls on the second syllable, like this:

- /
today

When a poem is written using iambs, we say that it is “iambic.” For example, the following line is iambic.

- / - / - / - /
Today I had a rotten day.

You’ll notice that an iamb does not have to be a whole word; it can be made up of syllables from two different words, such as “I had.”

One easy way to remember that this kind of foot is called an “iamb” is to think of the words “I am.” If you were to say the words “I am” over and over, they would be in iambic. That is, the stresses would fall on the same syllables as in an iambic poem, like this:

- / - / - / - /
I am, I am, I am, I am.

When you decide on a rhythm for your poem, it's a good idea to choose a pattern and stick with it. That doesn't mean that every line needs to have the exact same number of feet, or even the exact same rhythm. But it is helpful to practice writing poems this way until you get good at it. For example, the poem "Today I Had a Rotten Day" has four iambs in every line. Here's how it starts:

- / - / - / - /
Today I had a rotten day.
- / - / - / - /
As I was coming in from play,
- / - / - / - /
I accidentally stubbed my toes
- / - / - / - /
and tripped and fell and whacked my nose.

You can write your lines as long or as short as you like. For example, the poem "My Lunch" contains just two iambs per line, beginning like this:

- / - /
A candy bar.
- / - /
A piece of cake.
- / - /
A lollipop.
- / - /
A chocolate shake.

Exercise 5

Write a line about anything (perhaps your day) with four iambs, like 'Today I had Rotten Day', above. When you've scanned it to make sure it's correct, try to add three more lines. Try to rhyme line 1 with line 2 and line 3 with line 4. Scan it all to check it's in iambs.

7. Common measure

One of the most common rhythms in English-language poetry is called "**common measure.**" Poems written in common measure have four-line stanzas with alternating lines of four and three iambic feet, and rhymes on every other line. Here's an example of common measure from the poem "My Puppy Punched Me in the Eye:"

- / - / - / - /
My puppy punched me in the eye.
- / - / - /
My rabbit whacked my ear.
- / - / - / - /
My ferret gave a frightful cry
- / - / - /
My donkey kicked my rear.

Notice how the first and third lines of this stanza have four iambs, while the second and fourth lines have three iambs. Also notice that the first line rhymes with the third line, and the second line rhymes with the fourth. Common measure can also be written with only the second and fourth lines rhyming. Common measure poems are sometimes written as couplets (pairs of rhymed lines) with seven iambs.

Exercise 6

Try to write a four line poem in common measure. You can choose either of the rhyme schemes mentioned above. Scan it to make sure you have the correct number of feet and correctly stressed or unstressed syllables within the feet.

8. Line length

a) Iambic pentameter

Sometimes when people talk about studying poetry, they will mention “**iambic pentameter.**” You already know what “iambic” means (an iamb is a two-syllable poetic foot with the stress on the second syllable). What about the pentameter? In English, we have different prefixes for indicating numbers. For example, “uni-” and “mono-” mean “one,” “bi” and “di” mean “two,” “tri-“ means “three,” and so on. In poetry, we refer to the number of feet in each line by adding one of these prefixes to the word “meter.” For example, if a poem has just one foot per line, we say it is “monometer.” Here’s a list of the names for each line length:

1	Mono-	Monometer
2	Di-	Dimeter
3	Tri-	Trimeter
4	Tetra-	Tetrameter
5	Pent-	Pentameter
6	Hex-	Hexameter

So, if a poem has five iambs in each line, we call that “**iambic pentameter.**” If it has four iambs per line we call that “**iambic tetrameter,**” if it has three we call it “**iambic trimeter**” and so on.

Here is an example of iambic trimeter:

*When I was one-and-twenty
I heard a wise man say,
'Give crowns and pounds and guineas
But not your heart away.*

Here is an example of iambic tetrameter:

*I wandered, lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er dales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils.*

Iambic tetrameter looks like this:

da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM | da DUM

if YOU | would PUT | the KEY | inSIDE | the LOCK

Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter very frequently, though he doesn't often use it with rhyming words. Instead, he writes in what is called 'blank verse'. A blank verse is simply a poem of iambic pentameter that contains a non-rhyming pattern of lines. See if you can spot the iambic pentameter pattern here (it's more difficult without the rhymes to help):

*But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.*

*Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;*

Exercise 7

Scan the verses given above, using the information about iambs as a guide. Remember, iambs always start with an unstressed syllable! Be careful to mark syllables where necessary not just whole words.

Exercise 8

Have a go at writing a four line poem using either iambic trimeter, tetrameter or pentameter. Scan it to check it is correct.

b) The trochee

The reverse of the iamb is called the "trochee". Like the iamb, the trochee is a **two-syllable foot**, but instead of being stressed on the second syllable, trochees are stressed on the **first** syllable. For example, the word "today" is an iamb because we emphasize the "day" not the "to" (we say "to-DAY," not "TO-day."). But the word "candy" is a trochee, because we emphasize the "can" and not the "dy." (It's pronounced "CAN-dee," not "can-DEE.")

When a poem is written using trochees, we say it is "**trochaic**". In fact, the word "trochee" is trochaic because it is pronounced "TRO-key" with the stress on the first syllable. If we were to say the word "trochee" over and over, it would look like this:

/ - / - / - / -
Trochee, trochee, trochee, trochee

Here's a very silly poem written entirely in trochaic. Here's how it starts:

/ - / - / - /
 Gerbil, gerbil, on the run
 / - / - / - /
 in your wheel, that looks like fun.
 / - / - / - /
 You must be in awesome shape.
 / - / - / - /
 Are you trying to escape?

Now you might notice that the final foot of each line in this poem only has one syllable (run / fun, shape / cape). It's perfectly okay to drop the final unstressed syllable in trochaic lines in order to have "single rhymes" instead of "double rhymes" at the ends of the lines. Poets often do this (they call it "catalexis").

A famous trochaic poem is William Blake's "The Tyger" which begins like this:

/ - / - / - /
 Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
 / - / - / - /
 In the forests of the night

Do you see how the beginnings of each two-syllable foot are stressed? This is what makes these poems trochaic.

Given what you know about trimeter, tetrameter and pentameter, can you work out what the rhythm of 'Tyger, Tyger' might be called? (clue: you need to work out how many trochees each line has – remember the catalexis or you might get it wrong!).

Trochaic rhythm is not used very often in English-language poetry because this rhythm tends to make long poems a little boring and nursery-rhyme like to read. Usually, only short poems like "Tyger, Tyger" are written in trochaic; otherwise readers might get tired of reading after a while.

Exercise 9

Try writing a poem of your own in trochaic rhythm. Start with a two-syllable word like "monkey," "apple," "pickle," etc. Write it down, and then see if you can write a whole trochaic line, like this:

/ - / - / - /
 Monkey, monkey, in a tree.

Rhyme your poem by adding another line with the same number of trochaic feet and a rhyming word at the end, like this:

/ - / - / - /
 Monkey, monkey, in a tree.
 / - / - / - /
 Throwing pears and plums at me.

See if you can manage four lines, all trochaic, with a rhyming pattern of your choice.