

Poetic Form 1: Metre

What is metre?

Metre is made up of:

1. Syllables: syllables are composed of a vowel, usually accompanied by one or two consonant sounds.
2. A metrical foot is composed of a number of syllables
3. A sequence of feet makes up a metre.
4. The metre is the overall rhythmic structure of the poem.

What is a syllable?

Vowels

a,e,i,o,u – but there are far more vowel sounds than these five letters. A vowel is a sound which you can make by breathing through your vocal chords and out of your mouth: ah, ooh, oh, eee, air, or.

Consonants

A consonant is any letter which isn't a vowel. Remember that we're not just talking about individual letters like d, m, g, f. English contains a lot of consonantal clusters like str (as in "strong").

A	Vowel only
Me	Consonant + vowel
On	Vowel + consonant
Cat	Consonant + vowel + consonant
Ship	Consonant + vowel + consonant (sh = consonantal cluster)
Gnome	Consonant + vowel + consonant (gn = consonantal cluster) – <i>note that the first and last letters are not pronounced</i>

Syllables

A syllable is a single beat in the rhythm of speech. Each beat contains a vowel sound and, usually, one or two consonant sounds as well. These are all syllables.

Polysyllabic words

All the words in the box above are monosyllabic ie. words with just one syllable. Most English words however are polysyllabic ie. more than one syllable.

Lon – don = 2 syllables

Man – ches – ter = 3 syllables

No – tting – ham – shire = 4 syllables

What is stress?

Syllables can be either stressed or unstressed. A stressed syllable is emphasised more than an unstressed one. Understanding stress is essential to being able to analyse metre.

/ stressed syllable

˘ unstressed syllable

Spotting the difference between unstressed and stressed syllables gets easier with practice. Stress in polysyllabic words:

photograph

photography

photographic

Note:

- A stress never follows another stress.
- Finding more than two unstressed syllables in a row is very rare.
- Words often start with a stressed syllable.

Monosyllabic words can be either stressed or unstressed, depending on their place in the sentence:

I am a mole and I live in a hole.

All these stressed (/) and unstressed (˘) syllables are broken down into patterns of feet. A foot is a unit of two or three syllables, usually a mixture of stressed and unstressed syllables, and is then repeated to create a regular rhythm. Here are the four most common feet:

˘ / iamb I had to go inside to get a coat

/ ˘ trochee Fountain head and source of rivers

˘ ˘ / anapaest The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold

/ ˘ ˘ dactyl Woman much missed, how you call to me, call to me

The number of feet per line is indicated by the following words:

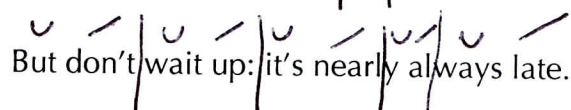
monometer = one foot	hexameter = six feet
dimeter = two feet	heptameter = seven feet
trimeter = three feet	octameter = eight feet
quatrameter = four feet	nonameter = nine feet
pentameter = five feet	decametre = ten feet

The iambic pentameter

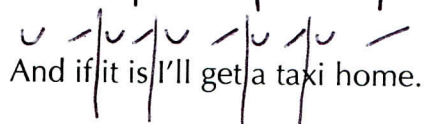
The iambic pentameter is the most common metre of all and has five iambs in each line. It's the easiest to write because it is the closest to natural speech rhythms. It's very easy to speak in iambic pentameter without wrenching the language out of shape. We do it every day:



I'm going to catch the 8.15 tonight.



But don't wait up: it's nearly always late.



And if it is I'll get a taxi home.

Find the stresses in these two lines:

I've put your hankies in the bottom drawer.

He comes there every morning after twelve

What is free verse?

Free verse is poetry that is written without metre or rhyme, though still of course, has form in the shape of line endings.

What is blank verse?

Blank verse is unrhymed iambic pentameter.