

Introduction to Meter

A **stress** or **accent** is the greater amount of force given to one syllable than another. English is a language in which all syllables are stressed or unstressed, and traditional poetry in English has used stress patterns as a fundamental structuring device. **Meter** is simply the rhythmic pattern of stresses in verse. To **scan** a poem means to read it for meter, an operation whose noun form is **scansion**. This can be tricky, for although we register and reproduce stresses in our everyday language, we are usually not aware of what we're going. Learning to scan means making a more or less unconscious operation conscious.

There are four types of meter in English: **iambic**, **trochaic**, **anapestic**, and **dactylic**. Each is named for a basic **foot** (usually two or three syllables with one strong stress).

Iambic feet are feet with an unstressed syllable, followed by a stressed syllable. Only in nursery rhymes do we tend to find totally regular meter, which has a singsong effect. Here is a single line from Emily Dickinson that is totally regular iambic:

– / | – / | – / | – /
My life had stood – a loaded Gun –

This line serves to notify readers that the basic form of the poem will be iambic tetrameter, or four feet of iambs. The lines that follow are not so regular.

Trochees are feet with a stressed syllable, followed by an unstressed syllable. Trochaic meter is associated with chants and magic spells in English:

/ – | / – | / – | / –
Double, double, toil and trouble,
/ – | / – | / – | / –
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

An anapest consists of two unstressed syllables, followed by a stressed syllable. We find anapestic meter in “Annabel Lee,” though notice there are variations:

– – / | – – / | – – / | – /
It was many and many a year ago
– – / | – – | – /
In a kingdom by the sea

A dactylic foot contains one stressed syllable, followed by two unstressed syllables. It is relatively rare in English. A word like “murmuring” and “pussycat” are dactyls.

Iambs and anapests are called **rising meters**; trochees and dactyls, **falling meters**. Another kind of foot, which consists of two stressed syllables, is called the **spondee** or **strong foot**. Often poems will end lines with a single, stressed syllable, which we call a **monosyllabic foot**. If both syllables are unstressed, we call it a **weak foot**.

Going back to Donne's stanza from "Holy Sonnet 14," which we looked at in class, when we divide it into feet, we find that each line has five and that the feet are predominately iambic. Five iambic feet in a line is called **iambic pentameter**, the most popular verse form in the English language. Dickinson, on the other hand, favors **iambic tetrameter**, with four iambic feet per line, which is also the traditional meter for ballads. The names for number are Greek, so we have monometer for one foot, dimeter for two, trimeter for three, tetrameter for four, pentameter for five, hexameter for six.

If there is a pause within a poetic line, we call it a **caesura**. If a line ends with a full pause— usually marked by punctuation, we call it **end-stopped**. If there is no punctuation at the end of a line, so that a phrase keeps going into the next line, we say the line is **enjambéd**. Dickinson's line has a caesura, and it is end-stopped. Here's a couple of lines from Donne's poem, which are enjambéd:

Batter my heart, three-personed God, for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend.

Notice that there are multiple caesurae in each line. These lines are iambic pentameter.