

Metered Poetry

There are two basic of poetic meter with which you should be familiar:

- 1) **Accentual-Syllabic Verse** (also called syllable stress verse)
- 2) **Accentual Verse** (also called strong-stress verse)

This handout uses the following symbols for metrical scansion:

- / indicates a stressed syllable
- ˘ indicates an unstressed syllable

Accentual-Syllabic Verse:

Most metered poetry written in modern English uses accentual-syllabic verse.

A line of accentual-syllabic verse can be described using two words (e.g. iambic pentameter).

- The first word refers to a “foot,” a specific pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.
- The second word indicates how many times the foot is repeated in each line.

There are several common feet:

Iamb:	˘	/	
Trochee:	/	˘	
Anapest:	˘	˘	/
Dactyl:	/	˘	˘

Everyday example:

Become
Notice
Interrupt
Mulligan

These four are not the only feet, but they are the most common. A more complete (and needlessly extensive) list of feet is available here: <http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/feet.html>.

The standard terms for the number of feet per line use Greek or Latin numerical prefixes, followed by the root word “meter.”

Dimeter	Two feet per line
Trimeter	Three feet per line
Tetrameter	Four feet per line
Pentameter	Five feet per line
Hexameter	Six feet per line
Heptameter	Seven feet per line
Octameter	Eight feet per line

Here are some examples of putting it all together:

Iambic Pentameter:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

[This excerpt contains the first four lines of Shakespeare’s sonnet 73. Iambic pentameter is the most famous form of accentual-syllabic verse largely because Shakespeare used it for almost everything he wrote.]

Here are the first two lines with scansion marks:

˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
That	time	of	year	thou	mayst	in	me	be	hold
˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
When	yel	low	leaves,	or	none,	or	few,	do	hang

Anapestic Tetrameter:

˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/
’Twas	the	night	be	fore	Christ	mas,	when	all	through	the	house
˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/	˘	˘	/
Not	a	crea	ture	was	stir	ring,	not	ev	en	a	mouse;

Accentual Verse:

Accentual verse was the predominant form of meter in Old English and Middle English poetry. In a poem written in accentual verse, every line has the same number of accented syllables:

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum
Þéodcýninga þrym gefrúnon
hú ðá æþelingas ellen fremedon
Oft Scyld Scéþing sceaþena þréatum

[This example contains the first four lines of *Beowulf* in Old English.]

/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘
Hwæt! Wé Gár den a in gear da gum
/ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘
Þéod cyn ing a þrym ge frún on

Note that the lines are not the same length, but both have four stressed syllables.

Accentual verse has regained some prominence in recent years due largely to heavy use of the meter in rap, hip-hop, and other forms of popular music. Here's an example from Ludacris:

/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ /
Lit tle Ni cole is on ly ten years old
˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ ˘ / /
She's stea dy try in' to fig ure why the world is so cold
/ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘
Why she's not pret ty and no bod y seems to like her
/ ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘
Al co hol ic step dad al ways wan na strike her

Other terms:

Ballad Stanza: A four-line stanza. Lines 1 & 3 are tetrameter; lines 2 & 4 are trimeter. It is usually (but not always) iambic. Typically, Lines 2 and 4 rhyme. Sometimes, ballad stanza is written in a two line form in which each line has seven feet. You may also see an accentual-verse form of ballad stanza, in which lines 1 & 3 have four stressed syllables while lines 2 & 4 have three stressed syllables.

This form was common for folk ballads and imitations of them. It is still so common you have probably heard countless examples without realizing it. The most famous example is probably "Amazing Grace."

Sonnet: A 14-line lyric poem. In English, sonnets are typically iambic pentameter. There are three standard rhyme schemes for sonnets, each named for an author who made it famous: Shakespearean, Spenserian, Petrarchan. Each of these forms also has conventions regarding structure and organization. I recommend the following website for more information:

<http://www.sonnets.org/basicforms.htm>.

Catalectic line: A line of poetry that is missing its final syllable. For instance, consider the following line from William Blake: "Tyger! Tyger! burning bright"

This rhythm of the line is clearly trochaic, but the line is only 7 syllables. The final unstressed syllable is missing. This is therefore an example of trochaic tetrameter with catalectic lines.