

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes



Rhythm in Poetry

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The image shows a piece of lined paper with a vertical red margin line on the left. The text is handwritten in black ink. It defines two poetic meters: the iamb and the trochee. The iamb is described as having two syllables, with the first being unstressed and the second being stressed. The trochee is also described as having two syllables, but with the first being stressed and the second being unstressed. The word 'meter' is written in a larger font and partially overlaps the definitions.

iamb [two syllables]
syllable 1 = unstressed
syllable 2 = stressed

meter

the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the line of a poem

trochee [two syllables]
syllable 1 = stressed
syllable 2 = unstressed

Meter refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in the line of a poem. There are many rhythmic patterns, but there are two types that poets frequently use. The iamb has two syllables. In these two syllables, the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed. The trochee also has two syllables. In these two syllables, the first syllable is stressed and the second syllable is unstressed.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

bold font = stressed syllable

normal font = unstressed syllable

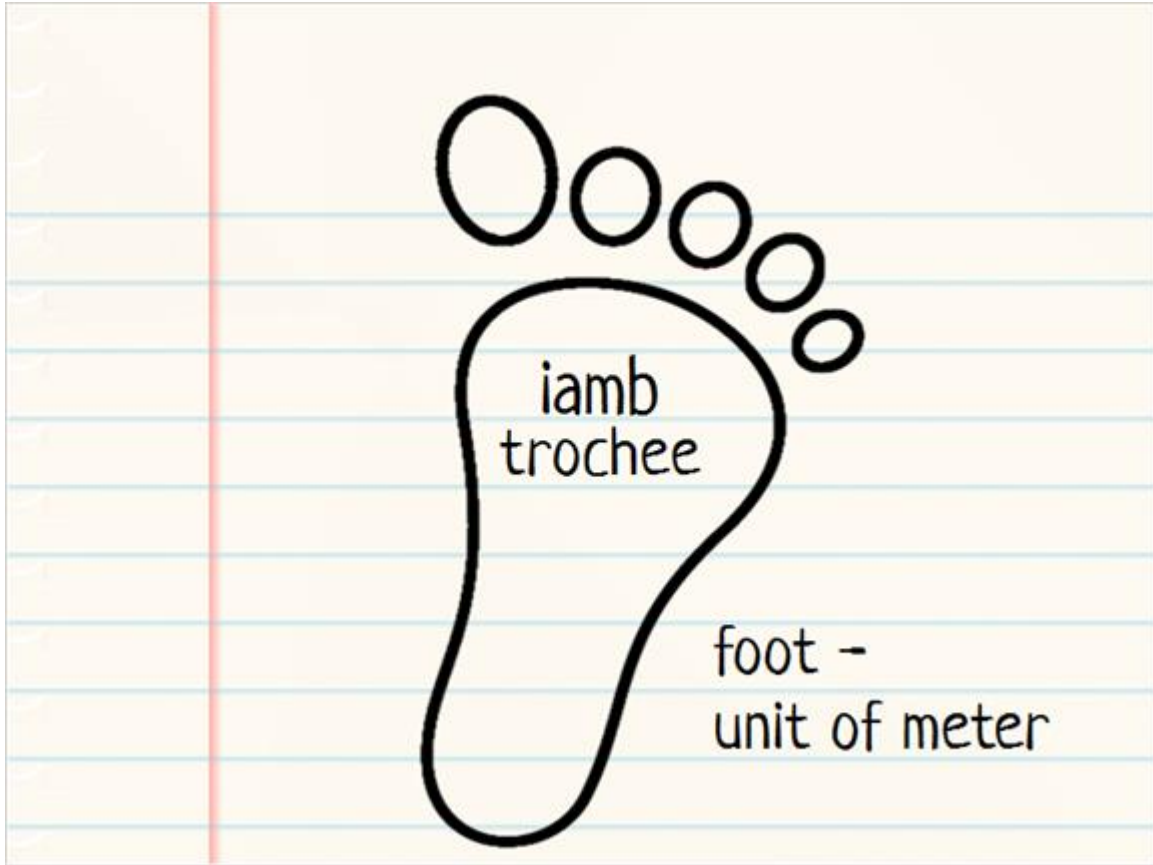
me/ter

↑ ↑

stressed unstressed

To help show where the stress goes in a line or word, you should bold the stressed syllable and leave the unstressed syllable in normal weight. For example, the word meter would be marked as shown here, with the stress on the first syllable.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes



Both the iamb and the trochee are both units of meter called feet. There is usually more than one foot in a line, so there is a special naming convention to indicate how many feet a line of poetry contains.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

monometer	one foot
dimeter	two feet
trimeter	three feet
tetrameter	four feet
pentameter	five feet
hexameter	six feet

This chart outlines the names for lines of poetry with different number of feet.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

from "The Song of Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
name of foot
"By the ~~shores of Gitche Gumee~~"
meter of poem
8 syllables = four feet
four trochees
trochaic tetrameter

To name the meter of a poem or a line of poetry, you put the name of the foot with the number of feet. Take a look at this line from "The Song of Hiawatha" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

"By the shores of Gitche Gumee"

The stressed syllables are already highlighted for you. Since the line has eight syllables, or four feet, and each foot is a trochee, the meter of this line is trochaic tetrameter.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

from "To Autumn" by John Keats

"To swell the gourd and plump the hazel shells"

10 syllables = five feet
five iambs

iambic pentameter

Now, take a look at this example from "To Autumn" by John Keats.

"To **swell** the **gourd** and **plump** the **hazel shells**"

Again, the stressed syllables are highlighted for you. Since the line has ten syllables, or five feet, and each foot is an iamb, the meter of this line is iambic pentameter.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

Steps for Determining Meter

- ① Count the number of syllables in each line; use slash marks
- ② Look for stresses in words with more than one syllable
- ③ Look at little words (a, of, and, the)
- ④ Look for a pattern and repeat it; check your pattern out loud

from "Dr. Faustus" by Christopher Marlowe

"Was / this / the / face / that / launch'd / a / thou / sand / ships /"

ten syllables (five sets of iambs) **IAMBIC PENTAMETER**

When trying to determine the meter of a poem, you should follow a set of steps to make sure that you identify it correctly.

First, count the number of syllables in each line. Keep in mind that poets might use something called poetic license, which is basically permission to break rules, so you want to see if there is a total that comes up the most. Show where the syllable breaks are by inserting slash marks. Here is a line from Christopher Marlowe's play "Dr. Faustus".

"Was / this / the / face / that / launch'd / a / thou / sand / ships /"

You can see that this line is broken into ten syllables.

Next, look at the words that have more than one syllable. Try putting the stress on different syllables in these words until you find the one that fits. In this line, read the word *thousand* and try to stress each part of the word. Listen to the difference. It is easy to tell that the stress falls in the first syllable of the word.

You can also look at the little words, like *a*, *of*, *and*, and *the*. Most of the time, these words are unstressed. Begin to mark those words, using a breve, which is this symbol, for the unstressed syllable, and an ictus, which looks like this, for the stressed syllable, and then see if there is a pattern:

Notice the pattern with the words "a thousand" - this should be the same pattern for the entire line.

Try to repeat it through the line, alternating a stress and an unstress through the line, and then say it aloud, exaggerating a little.

"Was / **this** / the / **face** / that / **launch'd** / a / **thou** / sand / **ships** /"

You will notice that it seems to fit. This pattern is five sets of iambs, so it is iambic pentameter.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

SCANSION

Analyzed the rhyme ✓

Marked the stresses ✓

Identified the meter ✓

What you have just done is scansion; you have analyzed the rhythm of a line of poetry, marked the stresses, and identified the meter.

Module 5: Poetry

Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

from "A Psalm of Life" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

/ / / /

\ \ \ \

"Tell / me / not / in / mourn / ful / num / bers" / bers /"

four trochees TROCHAIC TETRAMETER

Now, try to analyze the meter on this line from "**A Psalm of Life**" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

"Tell me not in mournful numbers"

First, try to separate the syllables.

The correct syllable separation is shown here.

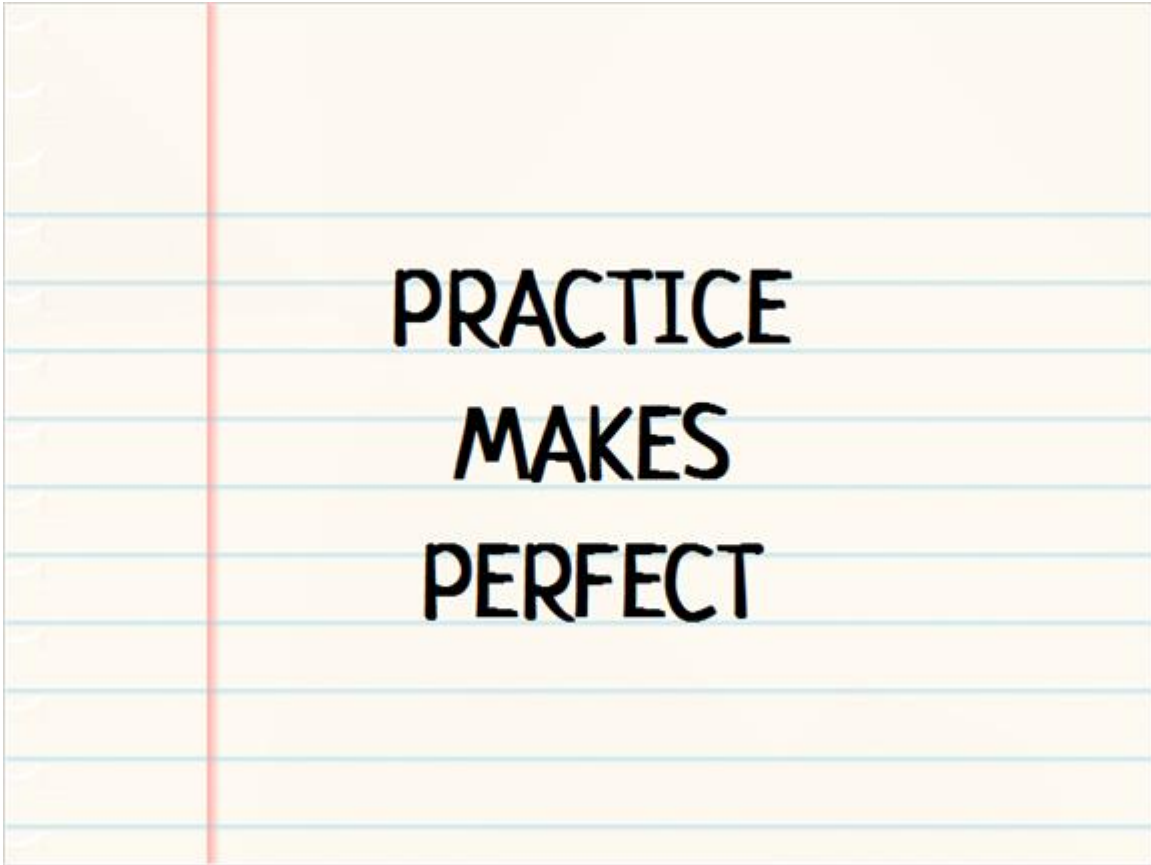
Next, decide where the stress goes in the two-syllable words and fill in the un-stresses for the little words.

Finally, finish the pattern through the entire line. The correct scansion is shown here.

This line has four trochees, so it is trochaic tetrameter.

Module 5: Poetry
Topic 5 Content: Rhythm in Poetry Notes

1.11 Wrap-Up



Some poems will have the same meter in every, but others may alternate a line of iambic pentameter iambic pentameter with a line of iambic trimeter. Scanning poems can be a little confusing at times, but it will get easier as you practice.