ELEMENTS OF POETRY

Poetry is a literary form characterized by a strong sense of rhythm and meter and an emphasis on the interaction between sound and sense. The study of the elements of poetry is called prosody. For an in-depth exploration of poetry and poetic forms, see the Poetry SparkChart.

RYTHM AND METER

Rhythm and meter are the building blocks of poetry. Rhythm is the pattern of sound created by the varying length and emphasis given to different syllables. The tone and feel of spoken language is called its cadence.

**Meter**

Meter is the rhythmic pattern created in a line of verse. There are four basic kinds of meter:

- **Accentual (strong-stress) meter:** The number of stressed syllables in a line is fixed, but the number of total syllables is not. This kind of meter is common in Anglo-Saxon poetry, such as Beowulf. Gerard Manley Hopkins developed a form of accentual meter called sprung rhythm, which had considerable influence on 20th-century poetry.

- **Syllabic meter:** The number of total syllables in a line is fixed, but the number of stressed syllables is not. This kind of meter is relatively rare in English poetry.

- **Accentual-syllabic meter:** Splits the number of stressed syllables and the number of total syllables is fixed. Accentual-syllabic meter has been the most common kind of meter in English poetry since Chaucer in the late Middle Ages.

- **Quantitative meter:** The duration of sound of each syllable, rather than its stress, determines the measure. Quantitative meter is common in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, and Arabic but not in English.

**THE FOOT**

The foot is the basic rhythmic unit into which a line of verse can be divided. When reciting verse, there usually is a slight pause between feet. When this pause is esp. pronounced, it is called a **caesura**. The process of analyzing the number and type of feet in a line is called **scansion**.

Here are the most common types of feet in English poetry:

- **Iamb:** An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable: **today**
- **Trochee:** A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable: **curry**
- **Dactyl:** A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables: **difficult**
- **Anapaest:** Two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable: **it is time**
- **Spondee:** Two successive syllables with strong stress: **stop, thief**
- **Pyrrhic:** Two successive syllables with light stress: **up to**

Most English poetry has four or five feet in a line, but it is not uncommon to see as few as one or as many as eight:

- **Monometer:** One foot
- **Dimeter:** Two feet
- **Trimeter:** Three feet
- **Tetrameter:** Four feet
- **Pentameter:** Five feet
- **Hexameter:** Six feet
- **Heptameter:** Seven feet
- **Octameter:** Eight feet

**TYPES OF ACCENTUAL SYLLABIC METER**

Accentual-syllabic meter is determined by the number and type of feet in a line of verse.

- **Iambic pentameter:** Each line of verse has five feet (pentameter), each of which consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (iamb). Iambic pentameter is one of the most popularmetrical schemes in English poetry.

- **Blank verse:** Unrhymed iambic pentameter. Blank verse bears a close resemblance to the rhythms of ordinary speech, giving poetry a natural feel. Shakespeare’s plays are written primarily in blank verse.

- **Spenserian stanzas:** Alternating tetrameter and trimeter, usually iambic and rhyming. Ballads, which is common in traditional folk poetry and song, enjoyed a revival in the Romantic period with such poems as Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.”

**FREE VERSE**

Verse that does not conform to any fixed meter or rhyme scheme. Free verse is not, however, less or unrestricted: its rules of composition are as strict and difficult as traditional verse, for they rely on less evident rhythmic patterns to give the poem shape. Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass is a seminal work of free verse.

**LINE AND STANZA**

Poetry generally is divided into lines of verse. A grouping of lines, equivalent to a paragraph in prose, is called a **stanza**. On the printed page, line breaks normally are used to separate stanzas from one another.

**TYPES OF RHYME**

One common way of creating a sense of musicality between lines of verse is to make them rhyme.

- **End rhyme:** A rhyme that comes at the end of a line of verse. Most rhyme poetry uses end rhymes.
- **Internal rhyme:** A rhyme between two or more words within a single line of verse, as in "Your words are a crime." By Gerard Manley Hopkins: "And all is seared with trade, blared, smeared with toil.
- **Masculine rhyme:** A rhyme consisting of a single stressed syllable, as in the rhyme between "far" and "tar."
- **Feminine rhyme:** A rhyme consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, as in the rhyme between "mother" and "brother."
- **Perfect rhyme:** An exact match of sounds in a rhyme.
- **Plant rhyme:** An imperfect rhyme, also called **oblique rhyme** or **off rhyme**, in which the sounds are similar but not exactly the same, as between "port" and "heart." Modern poets often use slant rhyme as a subtle alternative to perfect rhyme.

**RHYME SCHEMES**

Rhymes do not always occur between two successive lines of verse. Here are some of the most common rhyme schemes.

- **Couplet:** Two successive rhymed lines that are equal in length. A **heroic couplet** is a pair of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter. In Shakespeare’s plays, characters often speak a heroic couplet before exiting, as in these lines from Hamlet: "The time is out of joint. Cursed sprite, / That ever I was born to set it right." 
- **Quatrain:** A four-line stanza. The most common form of English verse, the quatrain has many variants. One of the most important is the **heroic quatrains**, written in iambic pentameter with an AABB rhyme scheme.
- **Tercet:** A grouping of three lines, often bearing a single rhyme.

- **Terza rima:** A system of interlaced tercets linked by common rhymes: ABA BCB CDC etc. Dante’s Inferno interchanges rima in The Divine Comedy. The form is hard to maintain in English, although there are some notable exceptions, such as Percy Bysshe Shelley’s "Ode to the West Wind."

**OTHER TECHNIQUES**

- **Punctuation:** Like syllable stresses and rhyme, punctuation marks influence the musicality of a line of poetry.
- **Shape:** When there is a break at the end of a line derived by a comma, period, semicolon, or other punctuation mark, that line is **end-stopped**.
- **In enjambment,** a sentence or clause runs on to the next line without a break. Enjambment creates a sense of suspense or excitement and gives added emphasis to the word at the end of the line, as in John Keats’s "Ode to a Nightingale": "Thy plaintive anthem fades / Past the near meadows, over the still streams."
- **Repetition:** Words, sounds, phrases, lines, or elements of syntax may repeat within a poem. Sometimes, repetition can enhance an element of meaning, but at other times it can dilute or dissipate meaning.
- **Alliteration:** The repetition of sounds in initial stressed syllables (see Figures of Speech, below).
- **Assonance:** The repetition of vowel sounds (see Figures of Speech, above).
- **Refrain:** A phrase or group of lines that is repeated at significant moments within a poem, usually at the end of a stanza.

**POETIC FORMS**

Certain traditional forms of poetry have a distinctive stanza length combined with a distinctive meter or rhyme pattern. Here are some popular forms.

- **Haiku:** A compact form of Japanese poetry written in three lines of five, seven, and five syllables, respectively.
- **Limerick:** A lighthearted five-line poem with an ABCAB rhyme scheme in which the first, second, and fifth lines have three feet and the third and fourth have two feet.

- **Vivace rima:** In English, an eight-line stanza with iambic pentameter and the rhyme scheme ABABCCDC. This form is difficult to use in English, where it is hard to find two rhyming triplets that do not sound childish. Its effect is majestic yet simple. William Butler Yeats’ poem “Among School Children” uses ottava rima.
- **Sestina:** A six-line stanza followed by a three-line stanza. The same six words are repeated at the end of lines throughout the poem in a predetermined pattern. The last word in the last line of one stanza becomes the last word of the first line in the next. All six endwords appear in the final three-line stanza. Sir Philip Sidney’s Arcades contains examples of the sestina.

- **Sonnet:** A single-stanza lyric poem containing fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter. In some formulations, the first eight lines (octave) pose a question or dilemma that is resolved in the final six lines (sestet). There are three predominant sonnet forms.
  - **Italian or Petrarchan sonnet:** Developed by the Italian poet Petrarch, this sonnet is divided into an octave with the rhyme scheme ABBAABBA ABABCC and a sestet with the rhyme scheme CDECDE or CDCDCD.
  - **Shakespearean sonnet:** Also called the English sonnet or Elizabethan sonnet, this poetic form, which Shakespeare made famous, contains three quatrains and a final couplet. The rhyme scheme is ABABCCDEEF EE.
  - **Spenserian sonnet:** A variant that the poet Edmund Spenser developed from the Shakespearean sonnet. The Spenserian sonnet has the rhyme scheme ABAB BBCD CCCC EE.

- **Ballad:** A nineteen-line poem made up of five tercets and a final quatrain in which all the stanzas carry one of only two rhymes. There are two reprises, alternating between the ends of each tercet and then forming the last two lines of the quatrains. Dylan Thomas’s "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night" is a famous example.