

# Blank Verse



## DEFINITION

What is blank verse? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Blank verse is the name given to poetry that lacks rhymes but *does* follow a specific [meter](#)—a meter that is almost always iambic pentameter. Blank verse was particularly popular in English poetry written between the 16th and 20th centuries, including the plays of Shakespeare. These lines from *Hamlet* are written in blank verse (note the lack of rhyme and the consistent meter of [unstressed/stressed](#) syllables): "It is not nor it cannot come to good, / But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue."

Some additional key details about blank verse:

- While blank verse almost always has a meter of iambic pentameter, it is possible for it to have a different meter.
- Only metered poetry that lacks rhyme can qualify as blank verse. Metered poetry that *has* rhymes is called [formal verse](#).

## Blank Verse Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce blank verse: **blank verse**

## Blank Verse in Depth

In order to understand blank verse in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms related to poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding blank verse easier.

- **Poetry:** Also referred to as "verse," poetry is a genre of literature that consists of writing that's arranged into lines that often follow a pattern of rhythm, [rhyme](#), or both. The three main types of poetry are:
  - **Formal verse:** Poetry with a strict meter (rhythmic pattern) and rhyme scheme.
  - **Blank verse:** Poetry with a strict meter but *no* rhyme scheme.
  - **Free verse:** Poetry without any strict meter or rhyme scheme.
- **Stress:** In poetry, the term stress refers to the emphasis placed on certain syllables in words. For instance, in the word "happily" the emphasis is on the first syllable ("hap"), so "hap" is the "stressed" syllable and the other two syllables ("pi" and "ly") are "unstressed."
- **Foot:** In poetry, a "foot" refers to the rhythmic units of stressed and unstressed syllables that make up lines of [meter](#). For example, an [iamb](#) is one type of foot that consists of one

unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, as in the word "De-**fine**."

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of lines of poetry. Poetic meters are named for the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

## Blank Verse and Iambic Pentameter

Since blank verse almost always involves the use of iambic pentameter, it's helpful to have a grasp of how that meter looks and sounds. Iambic pentameter is defined by two things:

- It has ten syllables per line.
- Its lines are made up of alternating unstressed/stressed syllables.

Here's an example of a line of iambic pentameter from one of Shakespeare's sonnets, with [unstressed](#) and [stressed](#) syllables highlighted:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

As you can see, the line contains a total of ten syllables, and follows a stress pattern of "da-**dum**, da-**dum**, da-**dum**, da-**dum**, da-**dum**."

## A Note on Metric Variations within Blank Verse

Writing *exclusively* in iambic pentameter can be both difficult and limiting for the writer, and can also become tiresome for the reader. For that reason, even poems written in strict meter might sometimes contain inconsistencies—or "variations"—in their meter.

For instance, a poem written in an iambic pentameter may suddenly substitute an [iamb](#) for a different foot—for example, a [trochee](#), the iamb's opposite—to create a pause, accommodate a certain word, or vary the poem's rhythm. Take the opening line of the poem "The Second Coming" by Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The first foot of the, "turning," is a trochee ("stressed-unstressed") rather than an iamb ("unstressed-stressed"). But every foot after the first is an iamb.

This sort of occasional substitution does not change the overall categorization of a poem's meter. In other words, meter is somewhat flexible—a poem written in iambic pentameter with occasional trochees interspersed is still said to be in iambic pentameter, since that's the poem's predominant meter. In addition, a poem written in iambic pentameter will still count as iambic pentameter even if some lines have nine or eleven syllables rather than the standard ten.



## EXAMPLES

The examples below draw from poetry written between the 16th and 20th centuries—the period when blank verse was the most commonly used form of poetry. In each example, we've highlighted the "unstressed-stressed" pattern of iambic pentameter to help you more easily identify the structure of the poetry.

### Blank Verse in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

Like all of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* is composed in blank verse. Shakespeare's prolific use of blank verse, in fact, arguably helped to popularize the form for centuries to come. In this passage, Hamlet curses his mother for remarrying so soon after her husband's death.

Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears  
 Had left the flushing in her gallèd eyes,  
 She married. O most wicked speed, to post  
 With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!  
 It is not nor it cannot come to good,  
 But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue.

### Blank Verse in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

This passage from Marlowe's tragic play, *Doctor Faustus*, contains a monologue spoken by Doctor Faustus, who has made a pact with the devil for earthly power during his life followed by an eternity in hell, in the final hour before his damnation. When Faustus says "thou" he is speaking to himself.

Now hast thou but one bare hour to live,  
 And then thou must be damn'd perpetually!  
 Stand still, you ever-moving spheres of heaven,  
 That time may cease, and midnight never come;  
 Fair Nature's eye, rise, rise again, and make  
 Perpetual day; or let this hour be but  
 A year, a month, a week, a natural day,  
 That Faustus may repent and save his soul!

Notice how the first line contains just nine syllables instead of ten (it begins on a stressed syllable, meaning that the line's first [iamb](#) has "dropped" its first, unstressed syllable). The regular use of iambic pentameter picks back up in the second line. Notice also how in the fifth line, an iamb is replaced with a [spondee](#) (two stressed syllables) to accommodate the repetition of "rise, rise."

### John Milton's *Paradise Lost*

Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost* retells the Biblical story of the first man and woman's fall from grace, and their subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden. This passage is excerpted from the book's final chapter.

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!  
 That all this good of evil shall produce,

And evil turn to good; more wonderful  
 Then that which by creation first brought forth  
 Light out of darkness! full of doubt I stand,  
 Whether I should repent me now of sin  
 By mee done and occasiond, or rejoyce  
 Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring,  
 To God more glory, more good will to Men  
 From God, and over wrauth grace shall abound.

Note the metric variation in the middle of the first line. In this case, what would normally be the fourth iamb of the line is instead a [trochee](#) ("stressed-unstressed") to accommodate the appearance of the second instance of "goodness" in the line. Additionally, the fifth and sixth lines each begin with trochees rather than iambs.

### Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Tennyson's famous poem, written from the perspective of an aged Ulysses, is an example of perfect iambic pentameter—in this excerpt from the end of the poem, there is not a single variation from the poem's standard iambic pentameter.

It may be that the gulfs will wash us down:  
 It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,  
 And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.  
 Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'  
 We are not now that strength which in old days  
 Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are;  
 One equal temper of heroic hearts,  
 Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
 To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

### W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming"

This famous poem by Yeats is written in blank verse. Note, however, how the first word of the poem creates a metric variation in the line, since the stress pattern of the word "[turning](#)" makes the word a trochee. Because a trochee is stressed-unstressed, beginning the poem with it means that the first syllable is stressed. This gives the poem a more forceful opening—which is appropriate, given the magnitude of the poem's subject matter: Yeats is describing post-war Europe as an apocalyptic landscape. The excerpt shown here includes the first eight lines of the poem.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.

Note that in the sixth line, "ceremony" must be pronounced in three syllables rather than four for the iambic pentameter to be

uninterrupted, so elision is used to blend the Y at the end of the word "ceremony" into the O at the beginning of the word "of." The resulting pronunciation of those two words would be something like "cer-uh-moan-yuv."

### Robert Frost's "Mending Wall"

"Mending Wall" is a famous poem by Robert Frost—who, writing in the 20th century, is among the more modern examples of poets who wrote in blank verse. Here are the final lines of the poem:

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,  
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

Note two things about this excerpt: the second line begins with two trochees instead of the usual iambs, and the final line has an extra unstressed syllable at the end, a feature known in poetry as a "feminine ending."



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Blank verse is such a common form that some scholars estimate as much as three-quarters of all English poetry written between the 16th and 20th centuries was written in blank verse. The form lends itself to writing long narrative poems and plays, since iambic pentameter has a rhythm that mimics the natural cadence of speech, and it's therefore quite easy to listen to for extended periods of time without fatiguing the listener. For instance: however difficult it may be for modern readers to understand the language of Shakespeare's plays, it's hard to deny that the rhythm of his writing lends itself well to dialogue.

Apart from the rhythm of blank verse being well-suited to longer narratives and dialogue, the simple fact that blank verse doesn't have to rhyme means that writers are much less constrained than they would be when writing in [formal verse](#), so a poet might choose to write in blank verse as a way of giving their writing more structure than [free verse](#), without restricting themselves too much by imposing a rhyme scheme on their work.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Blank Verse](#): A helpful guide to blank verse, which goes into greater depth concerning the history of its use.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Blank Verse](#): A basic definition of the term.
- [Shakespeare and blank verse](#): A great video that explains the use of iambic pentameter in the context of Shakespeare's work.
- [The final scene](#) of the 1993 film adaptation of Shakespeare's [Much Ado About Nothing](#), which gives you a sense of how natural blank verse can sound when spoken.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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