

Iamb



DEFINITION

What is an iamb? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An iamb is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which one unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. The word "define" is an iamb, with the unstressed syllable of "de" followed by the stressed syllable, "fine": De-**fine**.

Some additional key details about iambs:

- Metrical patterns in poetry are called feet. An iamb, then, is a type of foot. The other feet are: [trochees](#), [anapests](#), [dactyls](#), and [spondees](#).
- Iambic pentameter—a line of poetry containing five iambs—is the most common meter in English poetry. It is the primary meter of many poetic forms, including the [sonnet](#), and is also the form of meter most often used by Shakespeare in his plays.
- The opposite of an iamb is a [trochee](#), a metrical foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (as in the word "**Po**-et").
- Oddly enough, the stress pattern of the word "iamb"—stressed unstressed—is that of a trochee.

How to Pronounce Iamb

Here's how to pronounce iamb: **eye**-am

Iambs in Depth

In order to understand iambs 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 iambs easier.

- **Poetry:** Also referred to as "verse," poetry is a genre of literature that consists of writing that is 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 first "stressed" syllable and the other two syllables ("pi" and "ly") are "unstressed."

- **Foot:** In poetry, a "foot" refers to the rhythmic units that make up lines of [meter](#). An iamb is one type of foot.
- **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).

Accentual vs Quantitative Verse and Iambs

The term iamb takes on a different meaning depending on the type of verse in which it's used: accentual verse or quantitative verse.

- **Iambs in accentual verse:** Accentual verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the stress, or emphasis, placed on certain syllables. Metered verse in English is almost *always* accentual verse. Iambs in accentual verse consist of the unstressed-stressed metrical pattern described so far.
- **Iambs in quantitative verse:** Quantitative verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the *length* of syllables, not from stress. Here "length" refers to the time it takes to pronounce each syllable. Iambs in quantitative verse consist of two syllables in which the second is pronounced for a longer duration than the first. Quantitative verse occurs most often in classical Greek and Latin poetry and is almost impossible to write in English.



EXAMPLES

The heartbeat-like rhythm of the iamb (da-**dum** da-**dum**) is neutral enough that it can be used to suit a variety of writing styles and subject matters. No matter the context, though, the even pacing of iambic meter has a way of allowing for and elevating conversational writing, lending the words more heft and intensity. Iambic meters—particularly iambic pentameter—are very common in both poems and in the blank verse that Shakespeare used throughout all of his plays. In each example of iambic meters below, we've highlighted the stressed syllables in **red** and the unstressed syllables in **green**.

Iambs in John Newton's "Amazing Grace"

The popular Christian hymn "Amazing Grace" was written in what is referred to as "common verse," a metrical pattern often used in lyrical compositions that is comprised of lines of 4 iambs (iambic tetrameter) alternating with lines of 3 iambs (iambic trimeter). This famous song is a great reminder that iambic verse is all around us in well-known songs, and is also a strong example of how iambic meter can be used to imbue words with a quality of gravity and grandeur.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found;
was blind but now I see.

Iambs in Tennyson's "Ulysses"

Lord Alfred Tennyson's well-known poem "Ulysses" is written in iambic pentameter, meaning that each line consists of five iambs. The poem is written as a dramatic monologue or [soliloquy](#) from the perspective of an aging Odysseus, the hero of the ancient Greek epic poem the [Odyssey](#), who is reflecting on his life. The iamb lends the poem a feeling of solemnity and intensity that is particularly palpable in the poem's stirring final words.

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.

Notice how Tennyson's use of iambic pentameter is irregular in lines 2 and 3. Throughout the long poem he intersperses [spondees](#) (a foot consisting of two stressed syllables) and [trochees](#) (a foot consisting of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable). This strategic irregularity has the effect of making Ulysses' speech both more labored and more human. Note also that, in line 3, the word "heaven" must be read as a single syllable—"heav'n"—in order for the line to retain the required ten syllables.

Iambs in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death"

This poem by Emily Dickinson is written in common verse—as the majority of Dickinson's poems were—alternating between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. Because Dickinson's poems often share the same metrical pattern as "Amazing Grace," they can be sung using the "Amazing Grace" melody. This poem addresses the subject of time by telling the story of taking a ride on Death's horse-drawn carriage, a somber subject matter—and one that the iamb's heartbeat-like rhythm is well-suited to.

Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

Iambs in Shakespeare's "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

[Sonnets](#) are fourteen-line poems written in iambic pentameter that follow a particular [rhyme scheme](#). Many of Shakespeare's sonnets

are, like this well-known example, love poems. Again, notice how the theme of the sonnet is matched by its rhythm: that of a beating heart.

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Iambs in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare also used iambic pentameter throughout many of his plays, including [Romeo and Juliet](#). The passage below exemplifies how the iamb can be used to write verse that sounds as natural as dialogue (since Shakespeare's plays were written for stage) without sacrificing the feeling of intense emotion needed to write a romance as epic as *Romeo and Juliet*'s.

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she...

Notice that, while Shakespeare's use of iambs is not strict throughout this passage, he begins and ends the passage with strong lines of regular iambic pentameter.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

The iamb is the most commonly used foot in English poetry because it is the most versatile. Compared to all other two-syllable and three-syllable feet, the iamb most closely mimics the rhythm of speech, so iambic meter is good for writing verse that sounds natural to the ear. Given its versatility, a writer might make use of iambic meter to create a conversational tone in a text (think of Shakespeare's [Romeo and Juliet](#)) just as often and as easily as they might use it to give a poem a greater sense of gravity and grandeur (think of Tennyson's "Ulysses"), or to imbue a song with a sense of awestruck reverence, as in "Amazing Grace." Iambic meters almost sometimes crop up in famous speeches or rhetoric, as a speaker or writer works to achieve a level of splendor, richness, or stateliness in their speech or writing. This famous line from the Declaration of Independence, for example, is a perfect line of iambic pentameter:

We hold these truths to be self-evident



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Iamb](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of iamb](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of iamb.

- [iambic pentameter in lyrics and common speech](#): An article that identifies incidences of iambic pentameter in song lyrics, as well as in comments made by celebrities and political figures.
- Iambic pentameter on YouTube
 - A short [video](#) that explains iambic pentameter and its use in the work of Shakespeare in 5 minutes
 - A reading of Tennyson's "[Ulysses](#)" will give you a sense of how iambic pentameter sounds when read aloud.
 - President Obama sings [Amazing Grace](#)

HOW TO CITE

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