

Meter



DEFINITION

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

Meter is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of some poetry. These stress patterns are defined in groupings, called feet, of two or three syllables. A pattern of unstressed-stressed, for instance, is a foot called an [iamb](#). The *type* and *number* of repeating feet in each line of poetry define that line's meter. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five [iambs](#) per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

Some additional key details about meter:

- The study and use of meter in poetry is known as "prosody."
- A poem can use a single meter throughout, or it can have different meters in different places. Meter can be analyzed on the level of a whole poem, a [stanza](#), a line, or even a single foot.
- The way meter is measured depends on the language in which a poem is written. Meter in English verse is accentual, meaning it is derived from the emphasis placed on certain syllables.

How to Pronounce Meter

Here's how to pronounce meter: **mee-ter**

Types of Poetic Meter

Meter is a combination of the type and number of feet it contains. The name of a meter is a combination of those two attributes. The two lists below, which show common feet and common numbers of feet per line, make up the "building blocks" of meter.

The most common feet found in metered poetry are:

- [Iambs](#) (unstressed-stressed)
- [Trochees](#) (stressed-unstressed)
- [Spondees](#) (stressed-stressed)
- [Dactyls](#) (stressed-unstressed-unstressed)
- [Anapests](#) (unstressed-unstressed-stressed)

The most common number of feet found in lines of poetry are:

- Monometer (one foot)
- Dimeter (two feet)
- Trimeter (three feet)
- Tetrameter (four feet)

- Pentameter (five feet)
- Hexameter (six feet)

The name of a meter is based on the foot it uses (stated as an adjective, with an "-ic" at the end), and the number of feet in the line. So a line with four dactyls would be "dactylic tetrameter." Note that the total number of syllables can be different even for lines that have the same number of feet, because some feet have two syllables while others have three. A line of iambic pentameter has 10 syllables, because it has five iambs, each of which have two syllables. Dactylic pentameter has 15 syllables, because it has five dactyls, each of which has three syllables.

Popular Meters

While there are many combinations of possible meters (trochaic dimeter, anapestic hexameter) that can be written, some are more common than others. Meters that often appear in poetry are:

- **Iambic pentameter:** Many of the most important works of English verse—from Chaucer to Roethke—are written in iambic pentameter, a type of meter that contains five [iambs](#) per line. The unstressed-stressed pattern of the iamb (da-**dum** da-**dum**) closely mimics the natural rhythm of speech, making it a versatile foot for composing poetry. Geoffrey Chaucer popularized iambic pentameter in the 14th century with [The Canterbury Tales](#), and William Shakespeare later cemented the popularity of the form by writing some of the English language's greatest works of literature ([Romeo and Juliet](#), [Hamlet](#), [Macbeth](#), etc.) in iambic pentameter. Though iambic pentameter has a long history in English, it's also still used in more modern poetry—Theodore Roethke's poem "The Waking," excerpted below, is a more recent example of a poem written in iambic pentameter.
- **Common meter:** A metrical pattern often used in lyrical compositions, comprised of lines of four iambs (iambic tetrameter) alternating with lines of three iambs (iambic trimeter). This meter has been used for centuries for a range of purposes—from Christian hymns and the Romantic poems of Wordsworth, to television theme songs, and its popularity over that time earned it the name "Common meter."

Poems are written using many other sorts of meters as well, of course, but the two above are the most common.

Metered Poetry and Free Verse

Many poems include meter, but not all do. In fact, poetry can be broken down into three types, based on whether it includes meter and [rhyme](#). The three main types of poetry are:

- **Formal verse:** Poetry that has both a strict meter and rhyme scheme.
- **Blank verse:** Poetry that has a strict meter, but doesn't have a rhyme scheme.
- **Free verse:** Poetry that has neither any strict meter or rhyme scheme.

Metric Variations Within Metered Poems

Although some poems written in meter use the same metrical pattern throughout the entire poem, it's also normal for a poem written in formal or blank verse to contain different types of meter or metrical feet within it. The Common meter described just above, for instance, alternates lines of iambic tetrameter (four iambs per line) and iambic trimeter (three iambs per line).

Metric variation can also occur *within* a line of a poem. For instance, a poem written in an iambic meter may suddenly substitute an [iamb](#) with 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. This kind of substitution does not change the overall categorization of a poem's meter. In other words, meter is flexible—a poem written in iambic pentameter with occasional trochees interspersed is still said to be in iambic pentameter, since that is the poem's predominant meter.

Meter vs. Metrical Form

Not all poems that use meter have an overall metrical form such as "iambic pentameter." Some writers make up their own metrical forms, combining different feet to make a pattern of their own design, or interspersing meter at irregular intervals throughout a poem that doesn't follow any strict metrical conventions. Although poems such as these can be said to *use* meter, they would not be said to *have* a meter (or a metrical form), since what's usually meant by saying that a poem has a meter is that it follows a predetermined metrical pattern, such as common meter, or iambic pentameter, or even something less common like dactylic hexameter.

Meter in Accentual vs Quantitative Verse

The stress patterns that form the basis of meter are measured differently depending on the language in which a poem is written. In some languages meter is accentual, while in others it is quantitative.

- **Meter 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, because English is a language whose rhythm derives from stress, rather than from other factors like syllable length.
- **Meter 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. In quantitative verse, for example, an iamb consists of two syllables in which the second is pronounced for a longer

duration than the first. Quantitative verse occurs most often in classical Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit poetry, and it is almost impossible to write in English.

- **Other types of meter:** In still other languages, such as French and Chinese, meter is based solely on the number of syllables in a line, and not on the stress pattern or length of syllables.



EXAMPLES

The examples below show diverse uses of meter in poetry. Some of these poems have a meter and follow it strictly, while others have a meter but deviate from it by making use of metric variation in particular lines. Some of these poems make use of metrical feet but don't adhere to an overarching meter, and still others are written in free verse but make use of meter just to add emphasis and musical effect in certain places. In each example, we've highlighted the stressed syllables in **red** and the unstressed syllables in **green**.

Meter in Roethke's "The Waking"

Theodore Roethke's well-known poem "The Waking" (from 1953) is a [villanelle](#) in iambic pentameter. It is a good example of the strict use of meter, as every foot is an iamb. This poem is also a good example of a modern poet using a traditional meter. Note that this poem also follows a [rhyme scheme](#), in which the first, third, and fourth lines all rhyme. The excerpt below is a single stanza from the longer poem.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should know.
 What falls away is always. And is near.
 I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
 I learn by going where I have to go.

Meter in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

Shakespeare used iambic pentameter throughout many of his plays, including [Romeo and Juliet](#). Shakespeare usually wrote his plays in [blank verse](#), meaning that the plays employ meter but don't have a rhyme scheme.

If I profane with my unworshiest hand
 This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:
 My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
 To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Notice how Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter is *not* strict throughout this passage, deviating from the prescribed pattern of five iambs per line in lines 4 and 5. In line 4, the second foot ("two blush") is a spondee (stressed-stressed) rather than the unstressed-stressed of an iamb, while in line 5 the third foot ("touch with") is a trochee rather than an iamb.

Meter in Dickinson's "'Hope' is the thing with feathers"

The majority of Emily Dickinson's poems, this one included, are written in common meter, a pattern that alternates between iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter.

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
 And on the strangest Sea -
 Yet - never - in Extremity,
 It asked a crumb - of me.

Common meter is also the metrical pattern of the famous song "Amazing Grace," as well as many other well-known songs and hymns. As a result, most of Dickinson's poems can be sung using the "Amazing Grace" melody.

Meter in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

Walt Whitman is best known for helping to pioneer [free verse](#) poetry, but his free verse often included occasional [metered](#) lines. Here he uses a near-perfect line of dactylic hexameter seemingly out of the blue—the lines before and after this example are not dactylic at all.

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in
 the dimness,
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

Anapests in Masefield's "Sea Fever"

The choppy, arhythmic meter of John Masefield's poem "Sea Fever" is a strong example of a poet matching a poem's form to its content (using an irregular rhythm to evoke seasickness), as well as an example of multiple types of metrical feet being used within the same poem. The two lines shown here are an excerpt from the longer poem.

I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the
 sky
 And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by...

The first line of the poem follows the pattern *iamb-iamb-anapest-iamb-anapest-iamb-anapest* when broken up as follows: I must / go down / to the seas / again, / to the lone- / ly sea / and the sky.

A close reading of the second line of the poem shows that some poems' meters are open to interpretation. Without changing the stress pattern at all, the second line can be broken up into feet in a couple different ways. For example, the metrical pattern could be read as *iamb-iamb-anapest-trochee-iamb-iamb-iamb* if the line were broken up as follows: And all / I ask / is a tall / ship and / a star / to steer / her by. But the metrical pattern could also be read as *iamb-iamb-pyrrhic-spondee-anapest-iamb-iamb* if broken up this way: And all / I ask / is a / tall ship / and a star / to steer / her by. The difference

between these two interpretations depends solely on how the words "a tall ship and" are broken into separate feet.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

To understand why metered verse is such a strong and influential tradition, it helps to begin by looking at its origins in ancient Greek and Roman epic poetry. These long poems (such as Homer's [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#), and Virgil's [Aeneid](#)) were typically spoken aloud in group settings, often with some form of musical accompaniment. Writing the words with a uniform rhythm made it easier not only to recite the long poems alongside music, but also to commit the words to memory. This was a time when literacy was uncommon and poetry existed primarily as an oral tradition, so being able to memorize verses was very important to the survival of storytelling. The later practice of applying different rhyme schemes to verses made the task of memorizing them for recital even easier. Meter continues to be a useful tool for memorization, which is why writers of nursery rhymes, children's books, and songs have continued to employ meter, even as it has fallen out of popularity with many contemporary poets.

Generally speaking, as literacy levels have risen over time, meter has become less a tool for memorization and more a way of elevating the tone of poetry and making it aesthetically beautiful so as to distinguish it from everyday language. The mark of a highly skilled writer of metrical verse is that they are able to use meter to create a rhythm that matches the content of what they're writing—perhaps using a light and upbeat foot (like the [anapest](#)) to write a love poem, a foot with a heavy and plaintive tone (like the [trochee](#)) to write a poem about death, or some elaborate mix of the two to write a poem about insanity. By selecting a meter that matches the content of a poem, the poet has a degree of control and precision in guiding a readers' experience of the work that is simply not attainable in [free verse](#) or prose.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Meter](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Meter](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of meter (spoiler, it comes from a Greek word that simply means "to measure").
- Meter on YouTube
 - This short [video](#) explains meter in under 3 minutes, even if its humor is kind of lame.
 - A [musical overview](#) of iambic pentameter and some of the types of feet used in Shakespeare's writing
 - A more [in-depth look](#) at meter and the different types of feet used in writing metrical verse.

HOW TO CITE

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