

Spondee



DEFINITION

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

A spondee is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which both syllables are stressed. The word "downtown" is a spondee, with the stressed syllable of "down" followed by another stressed syllable, "town": **Down-town**.

Some additional key details about spondees:

- Metrical patterns in poetry are called feet. A spondee, then, is a type of foot. The other feet are: [iamb](#)s, [trochee](#)s, [anapest](#)s, [dactyl](#)s.
- Spondees do not provide the basis of a metrical line in poetry. Writing a poem using only spondees would be nearly impossible because it would mean that every syllable of the poem would have to be stressed.
- The opposite of a spondee is a pyrrhic, a metrical foot consisting of two unstressed syllables. There are no examples of pyrrhic words in English because English is an accentual language in which every word has at least one syllable that receives emphasis.

How to Pronounce Spondee

Here's how to pronounce spondee: **sp**on-dee.

Spondees in Depth

In order to understand spondees better, 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 spondees 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](#). A spondee 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). However, there are no spondaic meters, as it would be essentially impossible to write a poem entirely in spondaic feet.

Spondees and Irregular Feet

Because it's essentially impossible to write anything using only stressed syllables, the spondee is never the primary foot in any poem—the foot that makes up the majority of a poem of metered verse. But poets do sometimes use the spondee as an "irregular foot," a foot that appears as a kind of "change of pace" in a poem based on a different foot, such as an [iambic](#) meter.



EXAMPLES

The word "spondee" comes from a Greek and Latin word associated with offering a drink or a toast, synonymous with the verbs "to engage oneself" and "to promise." It follows, then, that the unusual stressed-stressed pattern of the spondee (**da-dum**) is used to engage the reader, to create emphasis on certain words, and to stir emotion. In the examples below, we've highlighted the stressed syllables of spondees in **red** (normally we highlight unstressed syllables in **green**, but because by definition, no unstressed syllables can be part of a spondee there are no green highlights).

Spondees in Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break"

Perhaps the most well-known example of spondaic meter comes from Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem "Break, Break, Break." Tennyson wrote the poem as an elegy after the death of his friend and fellow poet, Arthur Hallam. Each stanza of the poem begins with a spondee, creating a rhythm that mirrors both the crashing of waves and the relentless heartache of mourning.

Break, break, break,

On thy cold grey stones, O Sea!

And I would that my tongue could utter

The thoughts that arise in me.

Spondees in Shakespeare's "Troilus and Cressida"

"Troilus and Cressida" was written, like so many of Shakespeare's plays, in iambic pentameter. However, in this passage Shakespeare substitutes spondees for iambs to highlight the news that the city of Troy is burning, introducing a feeling of panic and alarm.

Cry, cry! Troy burns, or else let Helen go.

Notice how, although two spondees have been substituted for two iambs at the beginning of the sentence, the line is still in iambic pentameter because it retains ten syllables and is primarily made of iambs (it's three iambs and two spondees).

Spondees in Hopkins's "Pied Beauty"

Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote this poem in praise of God for having created all things beautiful on earth. In these, the final lines, the poet makes heavy use of spondees to create a feeling of growing excitement.

With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Notice how nearly every word of the first line receives its own emphasis, making each adjective in the list seem more vivid and heavy with meaning.

Spondees in Milton's "Samson Agonistes"

John Milton wrote "Samson Agonistes" about one of the Bible's most iconic figures, Samson. In the following passage, as Samson is lamenting his dark fate, Milton makes use of spondees to accentuate the stormy emotional state of Samson's dramatic monologue.

O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total eclipse
Without all hope of day!



WHY WRITERS USE IT

As a spondee's pattern of emphasis is so unnatural in the English language, whole poems are not written in spondees. Instead,

spondees appear almost exclusively as irregular feet inside lines or verses whose primary meter is something else, such as iambic meter. A writer might insert a spondee to create emphasis, or simply to accommodate a word whose stress pattern doesn't adhere to the predominant metrical pattern of the poem. However, the stressed-stressed pattern of spondees, when they appear in the midst of more common feet, can have a striking effect. Therefore, spondees are often used to highlight moments of crisis or rapture in a text with an otherwise consistent stress pattern, since the double-stressed syllable of the spondee has a way of sticking out to the ear. Spondees often appear in passages in which the speaker is in a state of heightened emotion—no matter whether the emotion is one of reverence, as in Hopkins's "Pied Beauty," or of grief, as in Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break."



OTHER RESOURCES

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

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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