

# Trochee



## DEFINITION

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

A trochee is a two-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable. The word "poet" is a trochee, with the stressed syllable of "po" followed by the unstressed syllable, "et": **Po**-et.

Some additional key details about trochees:

- Metrical patterns in poetry are called feet. A trochee, then, is a type of foot. The other feet are: [iamb](#)s, [anapests](#), [dactyls](#), and [spondees](#).
- The opposite of a trochee is an iamb, which is the most common metrical foot and consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (as in the word "De-**fine**").
- Strict trochaic meter—that is, meter written using only trochees—is a rare metrical form in English because the stress pattern of the trochee is the inverse of that of speech, making it difficult to write with.
- The stress pattern of the word "trochee"—stressed unstressed—is itself that of a trochee.

## How to Pronounce Trochee

Here's how to pronounce trochee: **tro**-key

## Trochees in Depth

In order to understand trochees in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms about poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding trochees 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 trochee 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, *trochaic tetrameter* is a type of meter that contains four trochees per line (thus the prefix "tetra," which means four).

## Accentual vs Quantitative Verse and Trochees

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

- **Trochees 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. Trochees in accentual verse consist of the the stressed-unstressed metrical pattern described so far.
- **Trochees 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. Trochees in quantitative verse consist of two syllables in which the first is pronounced for a longer duration than the second. Quantitative verse occurs most often in classical Greek and Latin poetry and is almost impossible to write in English.



## EXAMPLES

The metrical pattern of a trochee is said to have a "falling rhythm" because the emphasis comes at the beginning of the foot: "**da**-dum **da**-dum." This falling rhythm is the exact opposite of the [iambic](#) "rising rhythm" that is more common in both poetry and speech, so the cadence of trochaic meter tends to sound a little unnatural to the ear. While for this reason trochees are relatively rare in most poetry, the "downward" motion and "backward" orientation of trochees actually makes them a popular foot for writing about dark subjects like madness and death. In the examples of trochaic verse below we've highlighted the stressed syllables in **red** and the unstressed syllables in **green**.

## Trochees in Poe's "The Raven"

Edgar Allen Poe's work deals frequently with the subjects of madness and death, so it's fitting that Poe often uses the trochee. One of the most well-known trochaic poems ever written is Poe's "[The Raven](#)," which is about a grieving young man's encounter with a talking raven and his slow descent into madness.

And the **Raven**, **never** **flitting**, **still** **is** **sitting**, **still** **is** **sitting**  
On the **pallid** **bust** of **Pallas** **just** **above** **my** **chamber** door;

And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is dreaming,  
 And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;  
 And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor  
 Shall be lifted—nevermore!

Notice how lines 2, 4, 5 and 6 all end on stressed syllables, breaking the stressed-unstressed pattern of trochaic meter. This is called catalexis—when the final syllable of a line is dropped to create a pause or a rhyme. Trochaic poems are often full of catalectic lines simply because it is difficult to rhyme on an unstressed syllable.

### Trochees in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Though Shakespeare typically writes in iambic pentameter, he used trochaic meter to give an eerie and ominous feeling to the spells he wrote for the witches in [Macbeth](#).

Double, double toil and trouble;  
 Fire burn, and caldron bubble.  
 Scale of dragon; tooth of wolf;  
 Witches' mummy; maw and gulf...

The backward stress pattern of trochees is effective not only for making the words of witches sound even more unearthly, but for giving them the kind of incantatory rhythm that is used in so many magic words, like [Hocus pocus](#) and [Open Sesame](#).

### Trochees in Auden's "In Memory of W.B. Yeats"

W.H. Auden's short [elegy](#) for the poet W.B. Yeats uses the plaintive tone created by the downward emphasis of the trochee as he expresses sadness over a friend's death. Here's an excerpt of four lines from the poem:

Earth, receive an honoured guest;  
 William Yeats is laid to rest:  
 Let this Irish vessel lie  
 Emptied of its poetry.

Notice again how the unstressed syllable is dropped from the end of each line to enable rhyming. Generally speaking, it is much more common to end lines, as well as poems, on stressed syllables because it creates a pause that gives a sense of completion.

### Trochees in Millay's "Sorrow"

Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote the poem "Sorrow" in trochaic meter, emphasizing the marked downward beat of the poet's mood. She invokes the image of rain in the first line, drawing a parallel to the falling rhythm of the trochee. This is the first six lines of the poem:

Sorrow like a ceaseless rain  
 Beats upon my heart.  
 People twist and scream in pain, —  
 Dawn will find them still again;  
 This has neither wax nor wane,  
 Neither stop nor start.

Note how the final unstressed syllable at the end of each line is omitted, resulting in what's called a "broken" foot. This technique is called catalexis and is used, in this case, to make the poem's rhyme scheme possible. The final foot of each line is counted as a foot despite its "silent" final syllable. Therefore, it would still be said that the poem is written in trochaic tetrameter (four trochees making up eight syllables per line) alternating with trochaic trimeter (three trochees making up six syllables per line), even though the poem alternates between lines of five and seven syllables.

### Trochees in Dr. Seuss's "Green eggs and Ham"

In his popular children's book "Green Eggs and Ham," Dr. Seuss writes one character's speech in trochees, while the other he writes in [iambics](#). The stress pattern of trochees is the opposite of iambs, so the difference can be thought of as a metrical reflection of the two character's clashing personalities and perspectives. The optimistic "iambic" character keeps offering the pessimistic "trochaic" character to try something new (a nice dish of green eggs and ham), while the "trochaic" character keeps refusing.

"Do you like green eggs and ham?"  
 "I do not like them, Sam-I-Am!"

More generally, the unusual, inverted rhythm of the trochee serves to accentuate the stress pattern of words, making them easier to remember. This makes trochees good for children's books, such as "[One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish](#)" and nursery rhymes like "[Baa Black Sheep](#)" and "[Mary Had a Little Lamb](#)," all of which use trochaic meter.

### Trochees in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

In this passage from Shakespeare's [King Lear](#), King Lear's daughter has just been killed before his very eyes. Although the play is written, like most of Shakespeare's plays, in iambic pentameter, Shakespeare substitutes trochees for all five iambs in the final line to demarcate a heightening of emotion and to create the tone of a wail.

And my poor fool is hang'd! No, no, no life!  
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life,  
 and thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,  
 never, never, never, never, never!



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

The word "trochee" comes from the Greek word for "wheel"—a word that, in the original Greek, is also associated with the action of running. This helps to explain the rolling or cascading effect that trochaic meter can bring to verse, as though the end of each foot, without an emphasized syllable to create a pause, is running directly into the beginning of the next foot. The result is that trochaic meter has a strong forward momentum that can often make the meter feel incessant.

At the same time, a trochee's "falling rhythm" also makes it feel plaintive, restive, or mournful, like a wail. These qualities together make trochaic meter particularly well-suited to texts with grim subjects. However, it should be noted that poems written in strict trochaic meter are fairly uncommon in English verse because the trochee's unusual stress pattern makes it a challenge to write with. Instead, trochees appear most frequently in poems whose primary meter is not trochaic. In these cases, trochees are used as an irregular foot—deliberately out of place amid a more natural sounding meter—in order to add emphasis or create a variation in the established rhythm.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Trochee](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Trochee](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of trochee.
- Trochees on YouTube
  - A short [video](#) that explains trochees in under 2 minutes
  - A reading of Poe's "[The Raven](#)" will give you a sense of how trochaic meter sounds when read aloud.
  - The witches' curse from the 1971 film version of "[Macbeth](#)"

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Bergman, Bennet. "Trochee." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

### Chicago Manual

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