

Examples of English metrical systems:

Metrical English poetry is essentially accentual-syllabic; that is to say, the lines can be divided into separate “feet”, with each foot consisting of either a pair or a triad of stressed and unstressed syllables.

The commonest metrical feet are **iamb**s (adjective: iambic), **trochees** (adj.: trochaic), **dactyls** (adj.: dactylic) and **anapests** (adj.: anapestic; the word is sometimes spelt anapaest).

An **iamb** is a two-syllable foot; it consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, as in the word “*about*”, the name “*Michelle*”, or the words “*so soon*”.

A **trochee** is also a two-syllable foot; it consists of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one, as in the word “*father*”, the name “*Peter*”, or the words “*do it*”.

A **dactyl** is a three-syllable foot; it consists of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones, as in the word “*syllable*”, the name “*Gregory*” or the words “*open it*”.

An **anapest** is a three-syllable foot; it consists of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one, as in the word “*intervene*” or the words “*in the soup*”.

A poetical line can be a combination of different feet (anapests and trochees, for example); however, most metrical poetry adopts just one kind of foot, with occasional substitutions. The commonest foot in English poetry is the iamb. Perhaps 75% or more of English metrical poetry is iambic, since it matches the usual speech patterns of the language.

When describing a metrical line we identify the number of feet and the kind of feet. If a line has four feet, it is **tetrameter**; if it has five feet, it is **pentameter**. These are the commonest lengths in English poetry, but you will also find examples of **dimeter** (two feet), **trimeter** (three feet), **hexameter** (six feet), **heptameter** (seven feet) and **octameter** (eight feet).

Iambic lines:

The commonest metrical line in English poetry is **iambic pentameter**. This is the meter adopted in Shakespeare’s plays, in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, in Dryden’s and Pope’s satirical poetry, in the sonnets and narrative poems of Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, Browning and countless 20th- and 21st-century poets (Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Anthony Hecht, David Mason, to name just a few).

Here is a line from a sonnet by Shakespeare:

“Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?”

The stresses are as follows:

“Shall **I** / compare / thee **to** / a **sum** / mer’s **day**?”

Obviously not all the stresses are equally strong; the preposition “to” is not stressed as forcefully as the word “day”. However, the basic iambic pattern is clear.

Here are more examples of iambic pentameter:

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more
Or close the wall up with our English dead.
(Shakespeare: *Henry V*)

Of Man's First Disobedience, and the Fruit
Of that Forbidden Tree, whose mortal taste
Brought Death into the World, and all our woe,
With loss of EDEN, till one greater Man
Restore us, and regain the blissful Seat,
Sing Heav'nly Muse...
(John Milton: *Paradise Lost*)

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea.
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.
(Thomas Gray: *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*)

The world is too much with us, late and soon.
(William Wordsworth: *Sonnet*)

Come down o Maid from yonder mountain height.
(Alfred Lord Tennyson: Lyric from *The Princess*)

I didn't make you know how glad I was
To have you come and camp here on our land.
(Robert Frost: "A Servant to Servants")

Here are examples of **iambic tetrameter**:

Had we but world enough and time,
This coyness Lady were no crime.
(Andrew Marvell: "To his Coy Mistress")

I wander thro' each charter'd street
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow...
(William Blake: "London")

Trochaic lines

Poems in trochaic meter are rarer than those in iambic meter. Trochees tend to sound very emphatic, giving a kind of strong marching or incantatory rhythm to the verse, which obviously is not suited to all kinds of poetry.

One example of a long poem in **trochaic tetrameter** is the 19th-century American epic poem *Hiawatha* by the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Longfellow wrote his poem in imitation of the Finnish epic, the *Kalevala*. The poem deals with Native American legends and Longfellow clearly wanted his poem to have a heavily marked exotic rhythm, different from most English poetry. Here is a sample line:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee...

This can be scanned:

By the / shores of / Gitche / Gumee,

Here is an extended passage:

By the shores of Gitche Gumee,
By the shining Big-Sea-Water,
Stood the wigwam of Nokomis,
Daughter of the Moon, Nokomis.
Dark behind it rose the forest,
Rose the black and gloomy pine-trees...
(H. W. Longfellow: *Hiawatha*)

Another poet who used trochaic meters for their heavy incantatory rhythm is Edgar Allan Poe. Here is a sample from a poem in **trochaic octameter**:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—
(E. A. Poe: “The Raven”)

In order to give a stronger ending to the line, poets sometimes cut short the final foot (as in the second and fourth lines in the passage from Poe above). This is called a “**catalectic**” line. Here is a stanza from a very famous poem written in **catalectic trochaic tetrameter**:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?
(William Blake: “The Tyger”)

The first line can be scanned:

Tyger! / Tyger! / burning / bright

The same meter was used by W. H. Auden in a section of his poem “In Memory of W.B. Yeats”:

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

And here is an example of **catalectic trochaic octameter**:

As for Venice and her people, merely born to bloom and drop,
Here on earth they bore their fruitage, mirth and folly were the crop: □
What of soul was left, I wonder, when the kissing had to stop?
(Robert Browning: “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”)

Triple meters: dactyls and anapests

Triple meters are usually used to give a sense of speed and lightness to the verse. Here is an example of **anapestic tetrameter**, used to convey the idea of swift movement:

The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold,
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold;
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea,
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.
(Lord Byron: *Hebrew Melodies*)

The first line can be scanned as follows:

The Assy / rian came **down** / like the **wolf** / on the **fold**

Here is an example of **dactylic hexameter**:

THIS is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic...
(H.W. Longfellow: *Evangeline*)

The first line can be scanned as follows:

THIS is the / **forest** pri / **meval**. The / **murmuring** / **pin**es and the / **hemlocks**

The final foot is a trochee, rather than a dactyl.

Very often triple meters are used for comic effect. Here is an example from a comic operetta:

When you're lying awake with a dismal headache, and repose is taboo'd by anxiety,
I conceive you may use any language you choose to indulge in without impropriety;
For your brain is on fire - the bedclothes conspire of usual slumber to plunder you:
First your counterpane goes and uncovers your toes, and your sheet slips demurely from
under you
(W.S. Gilbert: from *Iolanthe*)

Remember that it is rare for a long poem to be written in entirely regular meter; an occasional substitution is inevitable, in order to avoid monotony. Iambic lines, for example, often have an extra unstressed syllable in the last foot. Here is the opening line of Hamlet's most famous soliloquy:

To be or not to be; that is the question.

This can be scanned:

To **be** / or **not** / to **be**; / that **is** / the **question**.

The next line in the soliloquy has the same extra unstressed syllable and also has a trochee in place of an iamb in the first foot. This is a very common substitution in iambic lines:

Whether / 'tis **no** / bler **in** / the **mind** / to **suffer**...

The technical name for the final three-syllable foot in these two lines, consisting of an unstressed, stressed and unstressed syllable, is an **amphibrach**. There is no need to worry too much about this kind of foot; it is practically only ever found at the end of iambic lines.

Blank verse:

Unrhyming iambic pentameter, as in most of Shakespeare's plays, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, the narrative poems of Wordsworth, Tennyson, Frost etc., is known as **blank verse**. This should not be confused with **free verse**, which means poetry that follows no fixed metrical or rhyming schemes.