

The Rhythm of Poetry

The way a poem moves is called its rhythm. All poetry has a rhythm. It may be **metrical**, (with counted beats per line), **free verse** (with no fixed pattern of meter or rhyme), or even **prose** (ordinary written language).

Our everyday speech has rhythm, or meter. The most common meter in poetry, **iambic meter**, is often used in everyday speech. Iambic meter consists of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (sounding like *ta-dum*).

Example: I **don't** know **why** you **never** make your **bed**.

Shakespeare used this natural rhythm in much of his poetry. The example above is a pentameter, the most common length of iambic meter. A pentameter contains five iambic feet in a line (five sets of an unstressed and a stressed syllable).

Each time your voice rises and falls with a group of two or three syllables with the accent on one of the syllables that is called a **poetic foot**. Think of it as a way of walking through the poem. The example above contains five poetic feet. How many poetic feet are there in each line of the following poem? _____

I **knew** a **man** who **had** a **plan**
to **build** a **robot** **strong** and **grand**
But **when** the **robot** was **all** **done**
He **found** it **did** the **work** of **none**.



The rhythm of a poem often creates a response in readers.

Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water.

Jack fell down and broke his crown, and Jill came tumbling after.

Even tiny children enjoy the regular beat, or rhythm, of nursery rhymes. To figure out the meter of this popular nursery rhyme, decide which syllables are stressed, or on which syllables your voice sounds louder or higher. Those are the accented syllables. To mark meter, place a long mark — over accented (stressed) syllables and a short mark ∪ over unaccented (unstressed) syllables:

— ∪ — ∪ — ∪ —
Jack fell down and broke his crown.

Notice that each metrical foot is made up of a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. This is **trochaic meter**, one of the most commonly used meters.

Mark the stressed and unstressed syllables in this first verse of "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

Mary had a little lamb.

Its fleece was white as snow.

And everywhere that Mary went

The lamb was sure to go.

Name _____

The Rhythm of Poetry (cont.)

Make up your own nursery rhyme that contains trochaic meter, the meter used in "Jack and Jill."

Another common meter is **anapestic meter**. The anapest consists of two unaccented syllables and one accented syllable which results in a kind of galloping sound.

Example: In the **morning** the **sun** shines so **warm** on my **face**.

A very familiar poem written in anapestic meter begins, "'Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house...."

Dactylic meter consists of one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

Example: **Where** are the **flowers** that **bloom** in the **spring**?

Mark the meter on this familiar jump-rope rhyme which combines several different meters.

Down in the valley where the green grass grows,

There sat Edna, sweet as a rose.

She sang, she sang, she sang so sweet

Along came Ted and kissed her on the cheek.

How many kisses did he give her? One, Two..."

Read the following poem.

Listen to the rise and fall of your voice

*Mary Martha Mumblety-peg
Had an ache in her left leg.*

*She had a pony with the gout
And seven limping pigs about.*

*She called the doctor for advice
But he just said, "Stay home! Eat rice!"*

