

Rhythm & Meter

meter |'mi:tə| (Brit. **metre**) *noun*

the rhythm of a piece of poetry, determined by the number and length of feet in a line.

Each line of a poem will have its own structure, and the *meter* is the rhythm and sound pattern of a line of poetry. The rhythm is important as it gives the poem its sound and differentiates it from prose.

To understand rhythm and meter, we first need to understand syllables & feet.

Syllable A syllable is a single unit of sound in a word, consisting of a vowel sound with or without surrounding consonants.

For example:

- “Bottle” has 2 syllables: *Bo - ttle*
- “Magnificent” has 4 syllables: *Mag - ni - fi - cent*
- “Spring” has 1 syllable: *Spring*

Note:

When a syllable is emphasised, it is called a **stressed syllable**. Think about the word ‘water’ – it is made up of 2 syllables (*wa + ter*), but on which do you place more emphasis? Probably the first. Therefore, this is known as the stressed syllable, and the other is the unstressed syllable.

Foot A foot is a combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. There are many different possible combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables, and thus many different types of feet.

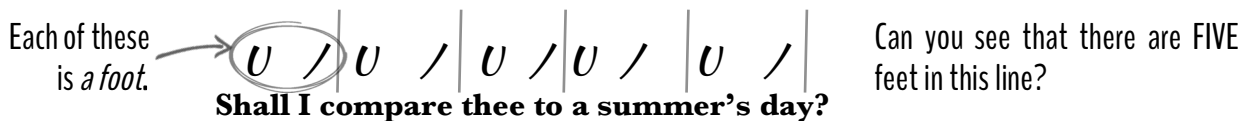
When studying poetry and determining meter, we use the following symbols to mark the syllables:

- / for a stressed (or ‘heavy’/‘loud’/‘strong’) syllable
- U for an unstressed (or ‘light’/‘weak’/‘quiet’) syllable

For example:

U / U / U / U / U /
Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

The pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables creates a unit called a **foot**. Look at the example above. You can clearly see there is a repeating pattern of unstressed, stressed; unstressed, stressed; etc. Each unit (of unstressed, stressed) is called a foot. See below:



Types of Feet – Different combinations of stressed and unstressed syllables (or ‘feet’) have certain names.

- Iamb:** A foot with two syllables; an unstressed followed by a stressed (as in ‘reduce’ or ‘shall I’)
- Trochee:** A foot with two syllables; a stressed followed by an unstressed (as in ‘banjo’ or ‘mermaid’)
- Spondee:** A foot with two syllables; both stressed (as in ‘birds sing’)
- Anapest:** A foot with three syllables; two unstressed followed by one stressed (as in ‘overcome’)
- Dactyl:** A foot with three syllables; one stressed followed by two unstressed (as in ‘capital’)
- Amphibrach:** A foot with three syllables; one unstressed, followed by a stressed, followed by an unstressed (as in ‘archaic’)
- Cretic:** A foot with three syllables; one stressed, followed by an unstressed, followed by a stressed (as in ‘trampoline’)

Meter - The meter is the **number of feet** in a line.

- Monometer:** A line with 1 foot
- Dimeter:** A line with 2 feet
- Trimeter:** A line with 3 feet
- Tetrameter:** A line with 4 feet
- Pentameter:** A line with 5 feet
- Hexameter:** A line with 6 feet
- Heptameter:** A line with 7 feet
- Octameter:** A line with 8 feet

So a line of poetry with 5 feet, all of which are iambs (as in the example earlier), would be called a line of **iambic pentameter**. Which, by the way, is the most common metric pattern in formal poetry!

Syllables, Feet & Meter

'Scansion' is the act of scanning a line of poetry to determine its rhythm and meter.

Complete the following exercises to make sure that you understand syllables, stress, feet and meter.

Exercise 1 – Complete the table below, identifying the number of syllables, stress & foot type in each word.

	Word	No. Syllables	Stress	Foot Type		Word	No. Syllables	Stress	Foot Type
Ex	Difficult	3	/ U /	<i>Cretic</i>	6	Persuade			
1	Decided				7	Seventeen			
2	Behold				8	Random			
3	Laptop				9	Holiday			
4	Detective				10	Capital			
5	Criminal				11	Accepted			

Exercise 2 – The syllables of the following poetic lines have been identified for you. You must identify the type of foot, the number of feet & therefore the meter.

	Line	Foot type	No. Feet	Meter
Ex	/ U / U / U / U / U There they are, my fifty men and women - Robert Browning, "One Word More"	<i>Trochee</i>	5	<i>Trochaic Pentameter</i>
1	U / U / U / U / U / Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May - William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 18"			
2	/ U U / U U Half a league, half a league - Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Charge of the Light Brigade"			
3	U / U / U / When here the spring we see - Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Christabel"			
4	/ U / U / U / U Tell me not, in mournful numbers - Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life"			
5	U U / U U / U U / That he sings in his boat on the bay! - Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Break, Break, Break"			
6	U / U U / U U / U There was a young lady of Niger - Edward Lear, "There was a Young Lady of Niger"			
7	/ U / U / U / U / U / U / U / U / U Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary - Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven"			
8	U U / U U / U U / U U / U For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams - Edgar Allan Poe, "Annabel Lee"			