

# RHYTHM AND VERSE FORM WITH ALEC NEWMAN

Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to this thingy. The noble intention behind this monthly series of articles is to share the knowledge of metre, rhythm, and poetic form that I have acquired through unnecessary hard labour. This has driven me to insanity on at least four occasions, but the instructions contained herein should spare you from the frustrations I have suffered, and, indeed, the horror of the asylum.

This course will begin with a thorough examination of the Parnassian tradition, which is the preferred formal style of the Renaissance poets, the Augustan poets, the Romantics, and many of the Victorian poets. By studying the Parnassian tradition you will learn how to annotate metre in English and American poetry, and write metrical poetry with confidence. It is not my aim, however, to turn you into a Wordsworth, I merely hope to introduce, or refresh your memory, with a broad range of poetic styles. You may wish to pick and choose from the various poetic forms from around the world and use them to embellish your own style -- this is what I do. Once metre and rhythm has been covered we will move on to Hopkins's sprung-rhythm. This will involve looking at the metre and form of *Beowulf* and some other Anglo-Saxon poems, as well as Welsh poetics. You will then be ready to look at some difficult poetry by Thomas Hardy, the Modernists and Linguistically Innovative poets, such as Maggie O'Sullivan and Bill Griffiths.

At the end of each article will be a glossary of the technical terms used, a solutions section for the half-arsed exercises that I have set, and a section of notes recommending optional, further reading.

## METRE, RHYTHM AND SCANSION

We will begin with the form and rhythm of the Parnassians. Rhythm is a difficult kettle of fish. There are many texts on the subject, but none of them actually explain what a stress is. It would seem to be the assumption that we are born with an ear for that sort of thing, but I certainly wasn't, and it has taken me years to get the hang of it. After sixteen years of getting to grips with stress I found the *Oxford Dictionary of Pronunciation for Current English*, ISBN 0-19-860772-5, edited by Clive Upton, and costing £19.99. (**THIS HAS SOLD OUT, BUT LONGMAN DO ONE**) This is a brilliant book, it gives the recitation stress of every word in British English and American English. This is the only book you will need for the duration of this course, and with it you will be able to write rhythmic poetry or mark the scansion on a poem that you are reading. This is not the ideal way to go about it, because stress can be affected in connective speech, but if you use this method for a poetry essay you will not be challenged. This is the method we will be using for the next few months. Later in the course we will start to use complex linguistic theory and speech analysis software, which you will be able to download for free. Apart from the Dictionary, all other teaching resources will be provided in these articles. So off you go to Waterstone's or another leading purveyor of books.

Now you've made a successful trip to the bookstore, we will begin. According to the dictionary there are two levels of stressed syllable in the English language: a strong stress and a medium stress. There are also, of course, unstressed syllables. I will flick to random word in my copy and see what we come up with: Merrymaker. This word is represented in the dictionary thus:

'mɛrɪ , mɛɪkə(r)

This word is four syllables, as you can see. The higher mark that proceeds "mer", or "mɛr", indicates that this is a strong stress. The lower mark that proceeds "mak", or " , mɛɪk", indicates that this is a medium stress. The syllables "ry" and "er" are unmarked and are, therefore, unstressed syllables. Be careful, though, because when a word has only the one stress, and that is a medium stress, the dictionary gives it the higher mark. To make sure, you can look up other words that contain that syllable. An example of this is "in," which is stressed in "inward," but not in "inside." The syllable "in", then is a medium stress. Another problem is that the dictionary doesn't always give the stress level of a monosyllabic word, but you can look up a polysyllabic word containing that syllable to determine whether it is stressed or not.

There are some other phonetic rules that will help you as you start out. These will be explained in greater detail later in the course, but I will keep it simple for the moment. The first person pronoun "I" is rarely a stressed syllable, but "eye" is, because it actually sounds different to "I" when pronounced -- say them out loud a few times and you will get the idea. The conjunction 'and' is rarely a stressed syllable. "The" is rarely a stressed syllable. Do not panic if this doesn't make much sense yet. You will eventually develop an ear for stress whilst you mark the scansion using your dictionary as a crib. I struggled with stress for years before it suddenly became clear to me, but I think you will get it in a couple of months with these techniques.

For the next few months we will be looking at the Parnassian tradition, and in this poetic model the secondary stress is less important than in other models. Therefore, a syllable is either stressed or unstressed -- a medium stress counts as a stress. There are many methods for marking scansion, but for the moment we will use the traditional method for **accentual rhythm**, which is a "x" to mark unstressed syllables and a "/" to mark stressed syllables. Metric feet should be marked out with "[ ]", as shown bellow, but due to formatting issues I am going to use square brackets when we get to the poetry. When the scansion of "merrymaker" is annotated it will look like this:

/ x / x  
[merry]maker]

The metre here is trochaic. This will be explained in greater detail in the next section, which will focus on the sonnet.

## THE SONNET

Bill Griffiths once declared, or so I have been informed, that the sonnet was the worst thing that ever happened to the English Language. I happen to agree with this, to some extent, because I think that Anglo-Saxon and Old-English verse has greater versatility than iambic-pentameter and employs a combination of stresses to create sounds that are more charming to the ear. However, British poets have, unquestionably, composed wonderful poems in the sonnet form, and it is a form worth getting to grips with.

I'm going to give a brief history of the sonnet as we know it in Britain, but for God's sake don't quote this in an academic essay. My advise on scansion is sound as a pound, but everything else is from memory, which has been somewhat clouded by the excesses of city living. Anyway, an Italian fellow named Francesco Petrarca (1304 -1374) created a sonnet form that was fourteen lines long and had the rhyme scheme: abbaabba cdecde; or abbaabba cdccdc. This has become known as the Petrarchan sonnet. During the Renaissance it became fashionable for English gentlemen to do the grand-tour of Europe. Among these gentlemen tourists were Henry Howard the Earl of Surrey (1517 - 1547) and Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503 - 1542), who translated Patrarca's sonnets into English. This is how the form became popular in Britain. Poor old Henry Howard found it difficult to stick to the original rhyme scheme, there are fewer rhymes in the English language than in Italian, and so devised a new rhyme scheme: ababcdcdefefgg. This is now known as the Shakespearian sonnet, Henry Howard must be livid.

We are going to look at two sonnets, but before we do, let's consider some myths about the sonnet that tend to cause no end of trouble for anyone attempting to learn scansion. First of all, forget that dum de dum de dum ... nonsense you were taught at A-level.

### Myths

Each line of a sonnet is composed in iambic pentameter.

Every line contains ten syllables.

### Truths

Poets vary the rhythm from iambic-pentameter to convey feeling or reinforce meaning.

Lines are often longer or shorter than ten syllables. If it is longer it is hypercatalectic, if it is shorter it is catalectic.

You now have **hypercatalectic** and **catalectic** in your scansionist's toolbox, I think we should add the names of some metrical feet to them. Now, remember that "x" is an unstressed syllable and that "/" is a stressed syllable:

- iamb           |x/|
- trochee       |/x|
- spondee       |//|
- pyrrhic       |xx|
- dactyl         |/xx|
- anapaest      |xx/|
- amphibrach   |x/x|

There are other metrical feet, and you will find these listed in the glossary. I suspect we are now ready to look at the sonnets. We will begin with Shakespeare's famous one:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	a
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.	b
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	a
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.	b
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	c
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;	d
And every fair from fair sometime declines,	c
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;	d
But thy eternal summer shall not fade	e
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;	f
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,	e
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:	f
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,	g
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	g

I don't want to spend too long discussing this poem, because the next one we are to discuss is more appropriate for anyone wishing to compose a sonnet in twenty-first century English, but this will

give you a good grounding in the Shakespearian sonnet tradition. I have added the spaces between the lines myself so I can explain the parts of the Shakespearian sonnet with greater clarity, normally there would be no spaces. The rhyme scheme breaks the sonnet into four sections, or **stanzas**. The first rhyming group “abab” is four lines long, and is known as a **quatrain**. The second and third rhyming groups are also **quatrains**. The last two lines are a **rhyming couplet**. One of the things that characterises the sonnet form is that the mood of the poem changes after the eighth line. To simplify this to the extreme: the poet could discuss his love of cheese in the first eight lines, and then in the last six lines contemplate the dangers of cholesterol associated with cheese consumption. The moment at which the mood changes is known as the **volta**. In this sonnet the **volta** occurs when the poet reveals that the subject of the poem is not like summer after all, because their “eternal summer shall not fade”(l.8) into autumn. The first eight lines, before the **volta**, are known as the **octave** or **octet**. The six lines following the **volta** are the **sestet**.

When you begin annotating the scansion of a poem in iambic pentameter it might be easiest to start with the lines containing ten syllables and leave the hypercatalectic and catalectic lines until the end. Take your ten syllable long lines and mark them into feet of two syllables, here is one I prepared earlier:

[Shall I][compare][thee to][a summ][er’s day?]

We can now mark the stresses. If we look up “shall” in our dictionary we can see that it exists in both a strong and a weak form. I will explain this later in the course, but for the moment it is easiest to confirm that “shall” is stressed by looking up “shallow” and “shallowness.” We know that “I” is rarely stressed, so we can mark “shall” with a “/” and “I” with a “x” in the first foot. When we look up “compare” from the second foot we see that it is the second syllable that is stressed. The third foot is a bit tricky, so we will come back to that when we have done the rest of the line. The next foot is “[a summ]” with “summer’s” crossing over the last two feet. The dictionary tells us that the first syllable of “summers” is stressed. Therefore “a” must be unstressed. We already know that the first syllable of the last foot, “er’s” is unstressed, but we can make sure that “day” is the stress by looking up words containing that syllable. “Day” is stressed in some words, but unstressed in others, so we can assume that it is a medium stress and mark it as a stress. Let’s return to that third foot. If you read the line aloud you may notice that there is a dominant rhythm developing that makes you put emphasis on the “to.” Sometimes it is really just a matter of judgement, and it is often possible to get away with the stock phrase: “the dominant iambic rhythm promotes the second syllable of the third foot to a stress, thus making it an iamb.” We now have a line that has been annotated like this:

[ / x][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]  
 [Shall I][compare][thee to][a summ][er’s day?]

If you would care to look at the list of metrical feet that I have given above we can now name the feet of this line: The first foot is a trochee and the other feet are iambs. As an exercise you may wish to annotate the remainder of the sonnet yourself. My annotated version, and an explanation, will be given in the solutions section of this web-page. An important point I have neglected to mention is that if there is a medium stress in the same foot as a strong stress it is the strong stress that we mark as a stress.

The next sonnet I want you to look at is Arthur Symons's (1865-1945) 'The Opium Smoker'. This is from page 29 of the Fyfield Books edition of 'Arthur Symons Selected Writings', which is well worth buying. You will notice from the rhyme scheme that this is a Petrarchan sonnet:

I am engulfed, and drown deliciously.	a
Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light	b
Golden with audible odours exquisite,	b
Swathe me with cerements for eternity.	a
Time is no more. I pause and yet I flee.	a
A million ages wrap me round with night.	b
I drain a million ages of delight.	b
I hold the future in my memory.	a
Also I have this garret which I rent,	c
This bed of straw, and this that was a chair,	d
This worn-out body like a tattered tent,	c
This crust, of which the rats have eaten part,	c
This pipe of opium; rage, remorse, despair;	d
This soul at pawn and this delirious heart.	c

Again, I have added the spaces myself. In the **octave** or **octet** the poet describes the delightful effects that opiates have upon the mind. After the **volta** the mood of the poem changes and in the **sestet** the poet describes the terrible effects that opium has upon the body, and one's finances. You will notice that the rhymes are not quite right, because the poet uses **consonance**, rather than full rhyme. This is particularly evident in lines 12 and 14 where the consonant 't' is all that links lines 11 and 12. The first two **stanzas**, or rhyme groups, that form the **octave** are **quatrain**s, and the last two **stanzas** that form the **sestet** are **tercets**.

We will now look at a technique for analysing difficult lines. When a line is **hypercatalectic** or **catalectic**, or just plain hard to do, it is best to mark the stresses before you mark the metrical feet. Have a go at annotating these difficult lines, using your dictionary, and then name the feet using the list.

I am engulfed, and drown deliciously.  
 Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light  
 Golden with audible odours exquisite,  
 I drain a million ages of delight.

When you have annotated the first line using your dictionary you may have something that looks like this:

[x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x x ]  
 [I am][ engulfed,][ and drown][ delic][iously.]

Phonologically this line consists of an iamb, an iamb, an iamb, an iamb, and a pyrrhic. The weak stressed conclusion might give us what is known as a **feminine end**. This could convey a sigh of ecstasy from the opium addict. However, it is also possible to argue that the dominant iambic rhythm promotes the last syllable of the line to a weak stress and, therefore, makes the last foot an iamb. Even if we accept that the line does conclude with a weak stress, the poet is still using phonological sound patterns to make language expressive, because the weak stress still sounds like a sigh in comparison to the other strong stresses in the line. The second line should look something like this:

[ / / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x x ][ / / ]  
 [Soft mus][ic like][ a per][fume, and][ sweet light]

I have a spondee, an iamb, an iamb, a pyrrhic and a spondee. One could argue that the rhythm has broken down to convey the disordered mind of the high opium addict. This may be confirmed by the next line where the rhythm becomes completely chaotic:

[ / x ][ x / ][ xx / ][ x x / x ]  
 [Golden][ with aud][ible od][ours exquisite,]

The rhythm here is so unstable that it is impossible to come up with a definitive metre. I would suggest that it is a trochee, an iamb, an anapaest and a third paeon, but this is open to debate. What I would like to draw your attention to is the fact that to compensate for the second line having six stresses the third line only has four. You should have noticed that this is a **hypercatalectic** line.

The last line is also **hypercatalectic** and should look like this when scanned:

[x / ][ x / ][ xx / ][x / ][ x / ]  
 [I drain][ a mill][ion age][s of][ delight.]

Which gives us an iamb, an iamb, an anapaest, an iamb and an iamb. If you would like to work out the metre for the rest of the poem you will find my annotated version in the solutions section.

## CONCLUSION

You are now the proud owner of the *Oxford English Dictionary of Pronunciation*. This enables you to mark the scansion of any poem in British and American English. It will also allow you to compose metrical verse, because you can look up the words in your own poetry and write lines with five beats. In this day and age I don't think there is any reason to write in strict iambic pentameter, but it is fun to try. You also have the technical terms to discuss your sonnets with authority. This is very important, because if you understand the classical tradition you can get away with putting a urinal in a gallery and calling it art. Good luck with your sonnet composing, and I look forwards to seeing you for next months instalment -- same Bat-day, same Bat-time, same Bat-place.

## GLOSSARY

**accentual rhythm:** rhythm that is created by using stress. English, German, and Northern European languages are stressed. Southern European languages are not quite so stressed and so rely on the length of each syllable to create rhythm -- this is known as quantitative-rhythm.

**catalectic:** when a line of poetry has fewer syllables than expected.

**feminine-end:** when a line ends with an unstressed syllable.

**hypercatalectic:** when a line has more syllables than expected.

**iambic pentameter:** a line composed with five iambs.

**masculine-end:** a line that concludes with a stressed syllable.

**octave or octet:** the first eight lines of a sonnet that is divided by a volta.

**Petrarchan sonnet:** this has fourteen lines with the rhyme scheme: abbba abbba cde cde or abbba abba cdc cdc.

**quatrain:** four lines linked by a rhyme scheme.

**Shakespearian sonnet:** fourteen lines with the rhyme scheme: ababcdcdefefgg

**sestet:** the six lines of a sonnet that occur after the volta.

**stanza:** people are a bit anal about the use of this term and prefer to reserve it for rhyme groups or sections of blank and free-verse that are actually separated by line breaks. However, a quatrain is a stanza, and a tercet is also a stanza. So stuff them.

**tercet:** three lines linked by a rhyme scheme.

**volta:** the moment at which the argument or tone of a sonnet changes.



## METRICAL FEET

<b>Iamb</b>	X/	X= unstressed and / = stressed syllables
<b>Trochee</b>	/X	
<b>Spondee</b>	//	
<b>Pyrrhic</b>	XX	
<b>Anapaest</b>	XX/	
<b>Dactyl</b>	/XX	
<b>Amphibrach</b>	X/X	
<b>Amphimacer</b>	/X/	
<b>Bacchius</b>	X//	
<b>Antibacchius</b>	//X	
<b>Molossus</b>	///	
<b>Tibrach</b>	XXX	
<b>Tetrabrach</b>	XXXX	
<b>Dispondee</b>	////	
<b>Diamb</b>	X/X/	
<b>Ditrochee</b>	/X/X	
<b>Ionic minor</b>	XX//	
<b>Ionic major</b>	//XX	
<b>Antispast</b>	X//X	
<b>Choriamb</b>	/XX/	
<b>First Paeon</b>	/XXX	
<b>Second Paeon</b>	X/XX	
<b>Third Paeon</b>	XX/X	

<b>Fourth Paeon</b>	XXX/
<b>First epitrite</b>	X///
<b>Second epitrite</b>	/X//
<b>Third epitrite</b>	//X/
<b>Fourth epitrite</b>	///X

## SOLUTIONS

### Exercise 1:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	a
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.	b
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	a
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
And summer's lease hath all too short a date.	b
[ / x ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	c
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;	d
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ / x ][ x / ]	
And every fair from fair sometime declines,	c
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;	d
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
But thy eternal summer shall not fade	e
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;	f
[ x / ][ / / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,	e
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:	f
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,	g
[ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	g

In the second line “and” is marked as a stress. There is no reason for this, other than the dominant iambic rhythm promoting it. If you look at all the other times this conjunction is used you will see that it is unstressed. The last syllable of this line is promoted by the same effect.

In the seventh line “[sometime][declines]” is a trochee followed by an iamb. The two, unexpected, consecutive stresses create a declining sonic effect to reflect the subject matter of the line.

In line eleven [Death brag] is a spondee, and gives the line a dramatic effect.

You probably noticed from reading your dictionary that “men”, in line 13, doesn’t normally carry a stress. Indeed, the rhyming couplet is very difficult to annotate and relies, in part, upon the dominant rhythm to work.

All the other lines are in iambic pentameter.

## Exercise 2:

I am engulfed, and drown deliciously.	a
Soft music like a perfume, and sweet light	b
Golden with audible colours exquisite,	b
[ / /][ x /][x x /][x /][x x]	
Swathe me with cerements for eternity.	a
[ / x][ x / ][x / ][x /][x / ]	
Time is no more. I pause and yet I flee.	a
[x /][xx /][x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
A million ages wrap me round with night.	b
I drain a million ages of delight.	b
[x / ][x /][x / ][ x /][xx]	
I hold the future in my memory.	a
[ / x ][x / ][ x /][ x / ][x / ]	
Also, I have this garret which I rent,	c
[ x /][ x / ][x / ][ x /][x / ]	
This bed of straw, and this that was a chair,	d
[ x / ][ x /][x / ][x /][ x / ]	
This worn-out body like a tattered tent,	c
[ x / ][x / ][x / ][ x /][x / ]	
This crust, of which the rats have eaten part,	c
[ x / ][x /][x x / ][ x / ][ x / ]	
This pipe of opium; rage, remorse, despair;	d
[ x / ][x / ][ x /][ x /][xx / ]	
This soul at pawn and this delirious heart.	c

The main thing to notice about the rhythm of this sonnet is that it is very chaotic in the octet when the poetic subject is high on smack, but when the poetic subject comes down, after the volta, and assesses his situation with sober eyes the rhythm becomes, almost, strictly iambic. There is a

trochee at the beginning of the first line of the sestet, and an anapaest in lines 13 and 14, but each line is ordered and concludes with a definite masculine-ending.