

# Scansion Overview

**What is scansion?** A system of scansion is a way to mark the metrical patterns of a line of poetry. In classical poetry, these patterns are based on the different lengths of each vowel sound, and in English poetry, they are based on the different stresses placed on each syllable. In both cases, the meter often has a regular foot.

**How do I read scansion marks?** Over the years, many different systems have been established to mark the scansion of a poem. Classical notation uses a macron for long syllables and a breve for short syllables. Now the macron is commonly replaced with an ictus above a long syllable.

**What are "feet"?** A "foot" is a collection of two or three syllables. There are different types of feet:

**iamb** (- /) - Two-syllable foot where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable.

**trochee** (/ -) - Two-syllable foot where stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable.

**pyrrhic** (- -) - A two-syllable foot where both syllables are unstressed.

**spondee** (/ /) - A two-syllable foot where both syllables are stressed.

**What is "meter"?** Meter defines the number of feet in a single line of poetry. For example:

monometer - One foot

dimeter – Two feet

trimeter – Three feet

tetramter – Four feet

pentameter – Five feet

hexameter - Six feet

heptameter - Seven feet

octameter - Eight feet

**So what is "iambic pentameter"?** As you saw in the previous section, "iambic" means to have two syllables, one stressed and one unstressed. Pentameter indicates there are ten syllables in the line. So iambic pentameter means that it is poetry written in a ten-line, alternating stress structure.

**What is "rhythm"?** The rhythm of the line is the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables over the course of the line or passage. It may be regular or irregular, which usually conveys information about the speaker and their feelings or motivations.

**Antithesis** A figure of speech in which words and phrases with opposite meanings are balanced against each other. An example of antithesis is "To err is human, to forgive, divine." (Alexander Pope)

**Assonance** The repetition or a pattern of similar sounds, especially vowel sounds: "O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo"

**Blank verse** Poetry that is written in unrhymed iambic pentameter. Shakespeare wrote most of his plays in blank verse.

**Caesura** A natural pause or break in a line of poetry, usually near the middle of the line. There is a caesura right after the question mark in the first line of this sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways."

**Conceit** A fanciful poetic image or metaphor that likens one thing to something else that is seemingly very different. An example of a conceit can be found in Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"

**Consonance** The repetition of similar consonant sounds, especially at the ends of words, as in lost and past or confess and dismiss.

**Couplet** In a poem, a pair of lines that are the same length and usually rhyme and form a complete thought. Shakespearean sonnets usually end in a couplet.

**Free verse, vers libre** Poetry composed of either rhymed or unrhymed lines that have no set meter.

**Lyric** A poem, such as a sonnet or an ode, that expresses the thoughts and feelings of the poet. A lyric poem may resemble a song in form or style.

**Metaphor** A figure of speech in which two things are compared, usually by saying one thing is another, or by substituting a more descriptive word for the more common or usual word that would be expected. Some examples of metaphors: the world's a stage, he was a lion in battle, drowning in debt, and a sea of troubles.

**Prose** the ordinary language people use in speaking or writing, which has no meter (as opposed to verse).

**Sonnet** A lyric poem that is 14 lines long. English (or Shakespearean) sonnets are composed of three quatrains and a final couplet, with a rhyme scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. English sonnets are written generally in iambic pentameter.

**Verse** A single metrical line of poetry, or poetry in general (as opposed to prose).