

# Meter

## Definition of Meter

Meter is a stressed and unstressed syllabic pattern in a [verse](#), or within the lines of a poem. Stressed syllables tend to be longer, and unstressed shorter. In simple language, meter is a poetic device that serves as a linguistic sound pattern for the verses, as it gives poetry a rhythmical and melodious sound. For instance, if you read a poem aloud, and it produces regular sound patterns, then this poem would be a metered or measured poem. The study of different types of versification and meters is known as “[prosody](#).”

## Meter and Foot

A meter contains a sequence of several feet, where each foot has a number of syllables such as stressed/unstressed. Hence, a meter has an overall rhythmic pattern in a line of verse, which a foot cannot describe.

## Types of Meter

English poetry employs five basic meters, including:

- Iambic meter (unstressed/stressed)
- Trochaic meter (stressed/unstressed)
- Spondaic meter, (stressed/stressed)
- Anapestic meter (unstressed/unstressed/ stressed)
- Dactylic meter (stressed/unstressed/unstressed)

Meter has two subdivisions: qualitative meter, and quantitative meter.

---

### Qualitative Meter

---

Qualitative meter contains stressed syllables with regular intervals, such as iambic [pentameter](#) containing even numbered syllables.

---

## Quantitative Meter

---

Quantitative meter, however, is based on syllabic weight, and not stressed pattern,s such as dactylic hexameters of classical Greek and classical Latin. However, classical Arabic and Sanskrit also have used this meter. Poets like Virgil used quantitative meter in *Aeneid*, and Homer used it in *Iliad*.

### Short Examples of Meter

People become what they believe.

(Trochaic meter)

Those who can dream it, they really can achieve it.

(Dactylic/Spondaic)

Don't search faults. Find remedies.

(Iambic meter)

When you give and accept gratefully, you feel blessed.

(Anapestic meter)

The safest place on planet earth.

(Iambic meter)

Be happy, be positive, be you.

(Spondaic meter)

Life is short to hold grudges.

(Trochaic meter)

If you know why to live, then you can tolerate anything.

(Dactylic meter)

All the news here is ready to print.

(Trochaic meter)

Because you're worth it.

(Iambic meter)

Bell lion not in doleful manner.

(Trochaic meter)

And they found some mice alive still.

(Anapestic meter)

Tough minds do shake the conscience of the week.

(Iambic meter)

The kids have gone, for they have left the nest.

(Iambic tetrameter)

He knows she will and you can tell.

(Iambic tetrameter)

### Meter Examples in Literature

---

### Example #1: *Twelfth Night* (By William Shakespeare)

---

“If music be the food of love, play on;  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.  
That strain again! it had a dying fall:  
O, it came o’er my ear like the sweet sound,  
That breathes upon a bank of violets ...”

This is an example of [iambic pentameter](#), which contains an unstressed syllable first, and a stressed syllable second. Shakespeare has played around with iambic pentameter a lot to create different effects. Here you can see each line consists of accented and unaccented syllables underlined.

---

### Example #2: *The Explosion* (By Philip Larkin)

---

“Shadows pointed towards the pithead:  
In the sun the slagheap slept.  
Down the lane came men in pitboots  
Coughing oath-edged talk and pipe-smoke  
Shouldering off the freshened silence.”

This extract contains trochaic meter in which stressed syllables are pronounced loudly. Larkin has written frequently in trochaic (accented/unaccented) tetrameter with four trochees.

---

### Example #3: *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (By Alfred Lord Tennyson)

---

“Half a league, half a league,  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.  
“Forward, the Light Brigade!  
Charge for the guns!” he said:

Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.”

This excerpt presents an example of dactylic meter that contains one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables.

---

**Example #4: *The Hunting of the Snark* (By Lewis Carroll)**

---

“Just the place for a Snark!” the Bellman cried,  
As he landed his crew with care;  
Supporting each man on the top of the tide  
By a finger entwined in his hair ...  
There was also a Beaver, that paced on the deck,  
Or would sit making lace in the bow:

Here you can see Carroll has used different types of anapestic meter, dimeter, [trimeter](#), and tetrameter. This type of meter has two unaccented syllables and a third accented syllable.

---

**Example #5: *Troilus and Cressida* (By William Shakespeare)**

---

Cry, cry! Troy burns, or else let Helen go.

Spondaic meter has two accented syllables. You can easily identify this type of meter because it contains both stressed syllables: “Cry, cry! Troy burns.”

---

**Example #6: *An Autumn Visit* (By Josie Whitehead)**

---

“Autumn is wearing her bright golden crown  
For this morning she’s coming to visit our town  
And wind, her best friend, will be joining her too.  
Will they have a nice day and just what will they do?”

This [stanza](#) has used a combination of iambic and anapestic meter. In [anapest](#), two unstressed syllables are followed by one stressed syllable, which rhymes the lines and add music to them

---

### Example #7: *Evangeline* (By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

---

“Bent like a laboring oar, that toils in the surf of the ocean,  
Bent, but not broken, by age was the form of the notary public;  
Shocks of yellow hair, like the silken floss of the maize, hung  
Over his shoulders; his forehead was high; and glasses with horn  
bows  
Sat astride on his nose, with a look of wisdom supernal.”

This poem is written in dactylic hexameter, with six dactyls in each line. The poet has combined dactylic hexameter with spondaic meter to give more rhythmic and uplifting reading experience to readers.

---

### Example #8: *Trees* (By Joyce Kilmer)

---

“I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree.  
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest...  
A tree that looks at God all day,  
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;  
  
A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair ...”

Each line in this example is following iambic tetrameterical pattern. Notice the very first line, in which the stress is placed on the second syllable “think,” but not on “I.” In this poem, the poet emphasizes the [comparison](#) between a tree and poem.

---

### Example #9: *Song* (By William Blake)

---

“I love the jocund dance,  
The softly breathing song,  
Where innocent eyes do glance,  
And where lisps the maiden’s tongue.

I love the oaken seat,  
Beneath the oaken tree,  
Where all the old villagers meet,  
And laugh our sports to see.”

This is an example of iambic trimeter. There are three iambs and six syllables, alternating three groups of unaccented and accented in each line.

---

#### Example #10: *The Song of Hiawatha* (By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)

---

“Should you ask me, whence these stories?  
Whence these legends and traditions,  
With the odors of the forest,  
With the dew and damp of meadows ...  
With their frequent repetitions,  
And their wild reverberations,  
As of thunder in the mountains?”

This unique poem has used trochaic meter as its major metrical foot, which is clearly adding music to the verses.

### Function of Meter

Though meter is a poetic device, playwrights as well as prose writers often use it to heighten the dramatic quality of the work, adding enchantment, mystery and emotion to their language. If you look carefully, you will notice metrical feet are not only suitable in poetry, but also in plays to achieve dramatic purposes. However, its basic function is to provide rhythm and uniformity, and to give a rounded and well-formed structure to the poetic work. Meter makes the tone of a language more lyrical. When a situation requires heightened language, the poets use meter for artistic effect. Besides, a meter has importance and value to the readers, which could, however, be lost if paraphrased or translated.