

Foot

Definition of Foot

The literary device “foot” is a measuring unit in poetry, which is made up of stressed and unstressed syllables. The stressed syllable is generally indicated by a vertical line (|), whereas the unstressed syllable is represented by a cross (X). The combination of feet creates [meter](#) in poetry. Later, these meters are joined for the composition of a complete poem. Therefore, a foot is the formative unit of the meter.

In poetry, there are various types of foot, each of which sounds differently. Some of the basic types of foot are given below:

Iamb: Combination of unstressed and stressed syllable – (daDUM)

Trochee: Combination of stressed and unstressed syllables – (DUMda)

[Spondee](#): Combination of two stressed syllables – (DUMDUM)

[Anapest](#): Combination of two unstressed and a stressed syllable – (dadaDUM)

[Dactyl](#): Combination of stressed and two unstressed syllables – (DUMdada)

Amphibrach: Combination of unstressed, stressed and unstressed syllable – (daDUMda)

Pyrrhic: Combination of two unstressed syllables – (dada)

There are two types of meter, which are known as *rising* meter and *falling* meter. Each type of meter uses a different type of foot. As the rising meters go from unstressed syllables to stressed ones, they mainly use iamb and anapest feet. On the contrary, the falling meters go from stressed syllables to unstressed ones, and mostly use trochee and dactyl feet.

Examples of Foot 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**.”

This [stanza](#) is taken from William Shakespeare’s well known play, *Twelfth Night*. It has been composed in iambic [pentameter](#). To make it easy to understand the unstressed and stressed combination of syllables, the stressed syllables are given in bold font.

Example #2: *King Lear* (By William Shakespeare)

“And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
Why should a **dog**, a **horse**, a **rat**, have **life**,
And thou no breath at all? Thou’lt come no more,
Never, **never**, **never**, **never**, **never**!
Pray you, undo this button: thank you, sir.
Do you **see** this? **Look** on **her**, look, **her** lips,
Look there, look there ...!”

This is yet another extract from Shakespeare’s another great play, *King Lear*. It is an appropriate example of trochaic pentameter. This has the combination of a stressed and unstressed syllable pattern – a pattern opposite to iambic.

Example #3: *The Destruction of Sennacherib* (By Lord Byron)

“The **Assyrian** came **down** like the **wolf** on the **fold**,
And his **cohorts** were **gleaming** in **purple** and **gold**;
And the **sheen** of their **spears** was like **stars** on the **sea**,
When the **blue** wave rolls **nightly** on **deep** Galilee.
Like the **leaves** of the **forest** when **Summer** is **green**,
That host **with** their **banners** at **sunset** were seen:
Like the **leaves** of the **forest** when **Autumn** hath **blown**, ...

For the **Angel** of **Death** spread his **wings** on the **blast** ...
And their **hearts** but once **heaved**, and **forever grew** still!”

This is a selection from Lord Byron’s poem, *The Destruction of Sennacherib*. It is one of the best examples of anapestic pattern of foot. In particular, it follows a tetrameter pattern, which consists of four anapests in a line. In this selection, anapests have been made bold. This entire poem follows the similar pattern. In each foot, two syllables are unstressed, while the third syllable is stressed.

Example #4: *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**.”

These lines have been taken from Lord Alfred Tennyson’s well known poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. It is an excellent example of the use dactyl pentameter. The dactyl follows a pattern of stressed, unstressed, and again unstressed syllables. As it is an elegiac poem, it uses dactyl pentameter, which suits elegies. The meter in this [verse](#) functions like a building block and provides a regular [rhythm](#).

Function of Foot

The function of foot is to provide the basic structure for the meter in a verse. As it is based on the combination of either two or three syllables, this combination creates musical rhythm. Therefore, it is the use of feet that brings rhythm to poetry – the reason that poetry is differentiated from [prose](#). Without the [repetition](#) of a particular foot in a verse, poetry would be no different from prose, as the important elements of rhythm and musical quality will be missing in the absence of foot.

