

# Dactyl

## Definition of Dactyl

Dactyl is a metrical foot, or a beat in a line, containing three syllables in which the first one is accented, followed by second and third unaccented syllables (accented/unaccented/unaccented) in quantitative [meter](#), such as in the word “*humanly*.” In dactyl, we put stress on the first syllable, and do not stress second and third syllables, try to say it loud: “HU-man-ly.” Dactyl originates from the Greek word *dáktylos*, which means “finger,” because it is like bones of human fingers, beginning from a central long knuckle, which is followed by two short bones.

## Opposite to Anapest

Dactyl is opposite to anapestic meter, as dactyl in a quantitative meter consists of a first stressed syllable, and then two unstressed syllables (stressed/unstressed/unstressed), such as a dactyl from Longfellow’s poem *Evangeline*: “**Loud** from its **rocky caverns**, the deep-**voiced** neighboring ocean.” However, [anapest](#) in a quantitative meter that contains first an unstressed syllable, followed by two stressed syllables (unstressed/stressed/stressed), such as William Cowper’s anapestic line from his poem *Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk*, “I must finish my journey alone.”

## Examples of Dactyl in Literature

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Example #1: *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (By Alfred Lord Tennyson)

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“**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**.”

In this poem, Tennyson has used dactylic meter perfectly. Notice this dactylic pattern as one accented syllable, followed by two unaccented syllables. Dactylic syllables give [rhythm](#) and pause while reading, thus laying emphasis on certain words.

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**Example #2: *Evangeline* (By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow)**

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“**THIS** is the **forest** **primeval**. The **murmuring** **pin**es and the  
**hem**locks,  
**Bearded** with **moss**, and in **garments** **green**, **indistinct** in the  
**twi**light ...

**Distant**, **secluded**, still, **the** little **village** of **Grand–Pre** ...

**Dikes**, that the **hands** of the **farmers** had **raised** with labor  
**incessant** ...

**Leaped** like the **roe**, when he **hears** in the **woodland** the [voice](#) of  
the **hun**tsman? ...

**Darkened** by **shadows** of **earth**, but reflecting an **image** of **heaven**?  
...

**List** to the **mournful** tradition, still **sung** by the **pin**es of the **forest**  
... “

This is a very popular example of dactylic meter appearing in combination with spondaic meter. Look at the words shown in bold, with a stress pattern of one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables.

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**Example #3: *The Lost Leader* (By Robert Browning)**

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**“Just for a handful of silver he left us,  
Just for a riband to stick in his coat—  
Found the one gift of which fortune bereft us,  
Lost all the others she lets us devote;  
They, with the gold to give, doled him out silver,  
So much was theirs who so little allowed:  
How all our copper had gone for his service!”**

Browning has used dactylic meter to create a great rhythmic effect. Most of the lines of the above verses contain four dactyls.

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**Example #4: (*Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking* (By Walt Whitman))**

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**“Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking  
Out of the mockingbird’s throat, the musical shuttle  
Out of the Ninth-month midnight ...”**

Whitman is using dactyl in the phrase, “Out of the ...” as a pulse riding throughout this poem, which is generating a starting point for each new line.

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**Example #5: *Higgledy Piggledy* (By Ian Lancashire)**

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**“Higgledy piggledy,  
Bacon, lord Chancellor.  
Negligent, fell for the  
Paltrier vice.**

**Bribery toppled him,  
Bronchopneumonia  
Finished him, testing some  
Poultry on ice.”**

This is a perfect example of a double dactyl poem. It is constructed of two quatrains, each consisting of dactylic dimeter lines. Here, the first line is a nonsense phrase, and the second one is a proper name, while the sixth line

is a single double-dactylic word. Double dactyl creates rhythm and [humor](#) in this poem.

## **Function of Dactyl**

Dactyl meter is rare in English poetry, as its prolong use has distorted the normal accent of words. Also, it gives the lines a jerky movement. The major purpose of dactylic rhythm is to create lilting movement and a break. Apart from this, it makes poems pleasing, as intrinsically it is delightful, and makes it more meaningful by using stressed and unstressed patterns. As far as the origin of its usage is concerned, Greek and Latin have introduced this metrical form in classical epic poetry for melody. However, later in the nineteenth century, it started appearing regularly after poets like Algernon Charles Swinburne and Robert Browning successfully used it.