

Iambic Pentameter

Definition of Iambic Pentameter

Iambic [Pentameter](#) is made up of two words, where pentameter is a combination of ‘pent,’ which means *five*, and ‘[meter](#),’ which means *to measure*. Iambic, on the other hand, is a metrical foot in poetry in which a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed syllable. It means iambic pentameter is a beat or foot that uses 10 syllables in each line. Simply, it is a rhythmic pattern comprising five iambs in each line, like five heartbeats.

Iambic pentameter is one of the most commonly used meters in English poetry. For instance, in the excerpt, “When I see birches bend to left and right/Across the line of straighter darker trees...” (*Birches*, by Robert Frost), each line contains five feet, and each foot uses one iamb.

Examples of Iambic Pentameter in Literature

Example #1: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

“Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
In such an honour named. What’s more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the time,
As calling home our exiled friends abroad
That fled the snares of watchful tyranny;
Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen...
So, thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crown’d at Scone.”

Notice the pattern of underlined accented, and unaccented syllables, which are iambic pentameter in these lines of “Macbeth,” a play by Shakespeare.

Example #2: *Ode to Autumn* (By John Keats)

“Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run...
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.”

In this ode, the rhyme scheme is ABAB CDEDCCE. The meter is iambic pentameter, having five iambs comprising a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable in each line as underlined.

Example #3: *Holy Sonnet XIV* (By John Donne)

Batter my heart three-personed God, for you
as yet but knock, breathe, shine and seek to mend.
That I may rise and stand o’erthrow me and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.

Donne has also used five groups of accented and unaccented syllables in each line. Though the first line does not follow the rule, the purpose is to start the poem with a bang, with the combination of iambic pentameter.

Example #4: *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...
Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:
‘Tis not so sweet now as it was before.

That, notwithstanding thy capacity...
But falls into abatement and low price,
Even in a minute: so full of shapes is fancy
That it alone is high fantastical.”

This is another great example of iambic pentameter. In this example, there are five iambs (stressed / unstressed) in each line giving a smooth flow in reading.

Example #5: *My Last Duchess* (By Robert Browning)

THAT’S my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands...
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ’twas not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot...

Browning has written this poem as a dramatic lyric in which lines rhymed in iambic pentameter. These are heroic couplets that keep speaker’s speech into tidy packages, though his thoughts are somewhat unruly.

Function of Iambic Pentameter

Iambic pentameter is commonly used in poetry and verse forms. Many Elizabethan dramatists, such as John Donne and William Shakespeare, used this form in their poems and poetic plays to keep up decorum and grandeur of the language. Modern authors, too, use it for writing serious poems. Its major function, therefore, is to give less rigid, but natural flow to the text. Also, this form accommodates intonation and pace of language, allowing an underlying meter to make impacts on readers.