

Pentameter

Definition of Pentameter

Pentameter is a literary device that can be defined as a line in [verse](#) or poetry that has five strong metrical feet or beats. There are different forms of pentameter: iamb, trochaic, dactylic, and anapestic. The most commonly used pentameter in English is iambic. It also can be described as a line that consists of ten syllables, where the first syllable is stressed, the second is unstressed, the third is stressed, and so on until it reaches the 10th line syllable. For instance:

“Shall I comPARE thee TO a SUMmer’s DAY?”

([Sonnet 18](#), by William Shakespeare)

Types of Pentameter

- Iamb pentameter
- Trochaic pentameter
- Anapestic pentameter
- Dactylic pentameter

Examples of Pentameter 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 excerpt has an [iambic pentameter style](#) (unstressed/stressed pattern), the stressed syllables shown in bold. Here we can see that each line has five beats, and stress is placed on the second syllable.

Example #2: *Canterbury Tales* (By Geoffrey Chaucer)

“Whan **that** **ap**ril with **his** shoures **soo**te
The **dro**ghte of **mar**ch hath **per**ced **to** the **roo**te,
And **bath**ed **ev**ery **vey**ne in **swi**ch **li**cour
Of **whi**ch **vertu** engendred **is** the **flou**r;
Whan **ze**phirus eek **with** his **swee**te breeth.
To **fer**ne halwes, **kow**the in **son**dry **lon**des;
Of **Engel**ond, to **Caun**terbury they **wen**de,
The **hoo**ly **blis**ful **mar**tir **for** to **se**ke
That **hem** hath **hol**pen, **whan** that **they** were **see**ke.”

This is another example of iambic pentameter. Here, each foot is called an “iamb,” and contains two syllables, wherein the first syllable is unaccented and the second is accented. Through this unstressed/stressed pattern, emphasis has been added to the words.

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’er**throw** me and **bend**
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new...”

Iambic pentameter examples are rich in Donne’s poems. Here, in this extract, the second and third lines follow this pattern perfectly. There are ten syllables, where the first syllables are unstressed followed by stressed syllables.

Example #4: *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 excerpt is a perfect example of trochaic pentameter, which follows a stressed/unstressed pattern that is opposite to iamb [meter](#). The syllables are perfectly alternating between unstressed and stressed syllables in the fourth line.

Example #5: *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 is an example of [dactyl](#) pentameter, which follows a stressed/unstressed/unstressed pattern. It is an elegiac poem, since dactyl pentameter exists mostly in elegies. This meter is functioning as a building block, and gives a regular [rhythm](#) to the poem.

Function of Pentameter

Pentameter widely governs the individual lines in poems, couplets, and verses, and provides a structural form to a poem. It also determines the speaking style and rhythm. Pentameters also give arrangement to words through the regular use of accents on the syllables, and helps in emphasizing the specific words which a poet wishes to. This is the major reason for variation in the text through stressed/unstressed patterns.

