Rhythm

Definition of Rhythm

The word rhythm is derived from *rhythmos* (Greek) which means, "measured motion." Rhythm is a literary device that demonstrates the long and short patterns through stressed and unstressed syllables, particularly in verse form.

Types of Rhythm

English poetry makes use of five important rhythms. These rhythms are of different patterns of stressed (/) and unstressed (x) syllables. Each unit of these types is called *foot*. Here are the five types of rhythm:

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1. Iamb (x /)

This is the most commonly used rhythm. It consists of two syllables, the first of which is not stressed, while the second syllable is stressed. Such as:

"Shall **I** com**pare** thee to a summer's day?"
(*Sonnet 18, by William Shakespeare*)

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2. Trochee (/ x)

A trochee is a type of poetic foot commonly used in English poetry. It has two syllables, the first of which is strongly stressed, while the second syllable is unstressed, as given below:

"T**ell** me n**o**t, in m**ou**rnful **nu**mbers"
(*Psalm of Life, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*)

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3. Spondee (/ /)

Spondee is a poetic foot that has two syllables, which are consecutively stressed. For example:

"**Whi**te **fou**nts falling in the **Cou**rts **o**f the sun"
(*Lepanto, by G. K. Chesterton*)

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4. Dactyl (/ x x)

Dactyl is made up of three syllables. The first syllable is stressed, and the remaining two syllables are not stressed, such as in the word "**mar**velous." For example:

"This is the forest **pri**meval. The **mur**muring pines and the hemlocks,"
(*Evangeline, by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*)

The words "primeval" and "murmuring" show dactyls in this line.

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5. Anapest (x x /)

Anapests are total opposites of dactyls. They have three syllables; where the first two syllables are not stressed, and the last syllable is stressed. For example:

*" 'Twas the **ni**ght before Christ**mas**, and all **throu**gh the house,"*
('Twas the Night Before Christmas, by Clement Clarke Moore)

Short Examples of Rhythm in Sentences

> Doit as you planned, I'd choose to stay at home.
> Whois the woman on the phone? You'll have to call her again.
> Tellthem why you don't agree, Do remem
> I will find the keys for you, and you must finda place to park the car.
> Whose goods are these, I don't know. If I take, my life is at stake, I know though.
> Givehim a burger with an egg.
> She'd rather go to school.
> Bill acts brilliantly, hence he wants to stay at Holly
> With us they will see they do not need
> Never stop doing best till you reach the top if you want to find hope.
> A mouse is hiding in their house.
> The goat is eating in the boat

This rat is fat.
Nina liked the ball in a mall.
How do you pray looking at the tray?

Examples of Rhythm in Literature

Example #1: *Romeo Juliet* (By William Shakespeare)

"Two **house**holds, both a**like** in **dig**nity,
In **fair** Ve**rona**, where we lay our scene,
From **an**cient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;"

There are ten syllables in iamb pentameter, where the second syllable is accented or stressed. In the above lines the stressed syllables are expressed in bold.

Example #2: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)

"And Life—blood streaming fresh; wide was the wound."

Milton has used spondee in this entire epic poem. The spondaic meter is explicitly visible in the words "wide was." However, the remaining line is iambic pentameter.

Example #3: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

"DOU-ble, / DOU-ble / TOIL and / TROU-ble;
FI-re / BURN, and / CAL-dron / BUB-ble."

These two lines are taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The chorus of the witches' spell shows a perfect example of trochees. Stressed pattern is shown in capitals.

Example #4: *Song* (By Sir John Suckling)

> "**Why** so **pale** and **wan**, fond **Lov**er?
> **Prith**ee **why** so **pale**?
> **Will**, when **look**ing **well** can't **move** her,
> **Look**ing **ill** pre**vail**?
> **Prith**ee **why** so **pale**?"

Sir John has written this poem in trochaic meter. Here, the stressed or accented syllables of trochaic pattern are shown in bold-face type. This poem gives a strong rhythmical effect.

Example #5: *Tyger* (By William Blake)

> "**Ty**ger! **Ty**ger! **bur**ning bright
> In the **for**ests of the night,
> What immortal hand or eye
> Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

Trochees are perfectly used in this poem by William Blake. Here, the first syllables of the words "**ty**ger," "**bur**ning," and "**for**ests" are stressed; however the second syllables are unstressed.

Example #6: *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (By Alfred Lord Tennyson)

> "**Half** a League, **Half** a League"

This single line is an example of dactylic pattern, as one stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed syllables, the stressed syllables noted in bold above.

Example #7: *Will There Really Be a Morning?* (By Emily Dickinson)

"Will there really be a morning?
Is there such a thing as day?
Could I see it from the mountains
If I were as tall as they?
Has it feet like water-lilies?
Has it feathers like a bird?
Is it brought from famous countries."

In this poem, the speaker is feeling dejected, wondering if there could be hope and morning again. The poet has used trochees, giving a strong rhythm to the poem. Notice in this first stanza, the accented syllables are emphasized. See that word "I" is unaccented or unstressed with different feet as underlined.

Example #8: *My Papa's Waltz* (By Theodore Roethke)

"The whiskey on your breath
Could make a small boy dizzy...
We romped until the pans
Slid from the kitchen shelf;
My mother's countenance
Could not unfrown itself."

The rhyme scheme of this poem is ABAB, which means the first and the third lines rhyme, as do the second and the fourth lines. Roethke has used three iambs, or three beats per line, giving the poem regular rhythmic flow.

Example #9: *By the North Sea* (By A. C. Swinburne)

"And his hand is not weary of giving,
And the thirst of her heart is not fed
And the hunger that moans in her passion,
And the rage in her hunger that roars,
As a wolf's that the winter lays lash on...
As the waves of the numberless waters

That the wind cannot number who guides
Are the sons of the shore and the daughters."

This poet has used anapests (two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable) in this example. It adds to the rhythm, yet it carries a subdued effect.

Example #10: *The Courage That My Mother Had* (By Edna St. Vincent Millay)

"Oh, if instead she'd left to me
The thing she took into the grave!
That courage like a rock, which she
Has no more need of, and I have."

These lines follow a pattern of four iambs in each line. This rhythm is catchy because the poet first sets the rhythm, and then breaks it in the last few syllables. It makes the reading smooth and melodious.

Function of Rhythm

Rhythm in writing acts as beat does in music. The use of rhythm in poetry arises from the need to express some words more strongly than others. They might be stressed for a longer period of time. Hence, the repeated use of rhythmical patterns of such accent produces rhythmical effect, which sounds pleasant to the mind as well as to the soul. In speech, rhythm is used unconsciously to create identifiable patterns. Moreover, rhythm captivates the audience and readers alike by giving musical effect to a speech or a literary piece.