

## METER: Basic Definitions

**Accent** (from Latin *ad-cantus*, towards song), sometimes called **stress**). A syllable more strongly “stressed” than those next to it. We may hear stress as any combination of loudness, pitch, and length. This is a central feature of the English language; we know this because we depend on it to understand words.

**Rhythm** (from Greek *rhuthmos*, to flow) The rough patterns of the natural ‘flow’ of language, in which accented syllables and unaccented syllables fall into an ever-changing series of temporarily repeating shapes with every 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> syllable normally being accented in English, but not in any lasting or predictable pattern.

**Meter** (from Greek *metron*, to count, descended from Proto-Indo-European words for “month,” “mother,” and “magic”) A way to strengthen language’s rhythm by shaping it into recognizable patterns of repeating accented and unaccented syllables. The two basic kinds of meter in English, **accentual meter** and **accentual-syllabic meter**, are discussed with examples below.

**Foot** A rhythmical pattern of syllables, usually 2 or 3 syllables long, with a recognized pattern of accented syllables and unaccented syllables.

**Scansion** (from Latin *scandere*, to climb) Marking the meter in a passage of verse using scansion marks. The goal of scansion is to recognize, understand, and appreciate the basic pattern of a poem’s meter along with any artful variations from the basic pattern that the poet has used.

**Form** (from Latin *forma*, mold or shape) A poem’s shape. Every poem is shaped through the predictable repetition of at least one language-element (for more, see [anniefinch.org/Poetics/Essays/What, Exactly, is Poetry?](http://anniefinch.org/Poetics/Essays/What, Exactly, is Poetry?)). We often use the phrase “formal poem” to refer to a poem where the repetitions are noticeable to more than one sense (eye, ear, body), which can include chants, shape poems, etc. as well as metered verse. Sometimes people will use “formal verse” or “formal poem” interchangeably with “metered verse” or “metered poem,” in opposition to “free verse.”

**Verse.** From Latin *versus*, to turn (as a plow at the end of a furrow), it refers to language broken into lines with line-breaks (the opposite, lines that are not broken into lines, is prose). Lines that share a pattern of meter are “metered verse.” Lines that don’t are “free verse.” Poems can be in free verse, or in metered verse, or in prose.

**Prosody** (from Greek *prosodia*, a poem sung to music) 1. A poem’s formal patterning including meter, line-length, and poetic forms. 2. The study and discussion of meter and scansion. 3. The study of rhythms and accent patterns in a language—a branch of linguistics.

**Metrical Contract** (from Latin *contrahere*, pull together, tighten; term from John Hollander) The physical and mental understanding of which meter a particular poem is written in, created and stretched/tested through the poet’s skill in meter, and felt and trusted by listeners/readers.

**Metrical Code** (from Latin *caudex*, tree trunk; term from Annie Finch) The meanings and effects of different meters as experienced (physically, socially, spiritually) by listeners/readers.

**AF’s SCANSION TOOLS:** / (wand)   **u** (cup)   | (edge)   **(u)** (ghost cup)   \ (half-wand)

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