

Poetic Meter Defined

The Basic Metrical Feet of Poetry in English

Iamb - an unstressed or unaccented syllable followed by a stressed or accented one. This meter is called **iambic**.

Trochee - a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed one. This meter is called **trochaic**.

Anapest - two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one. This meter is called **anapestic**.

Dactyl - a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones. This meter is called **dactylic**.

rising or falling - the above feet either begin or end with the stressed syllable, as if they lose or gain momentum or "height". Hence **iambic** and **anapestic** are called **rising meters**, and **trochaic** and **dactylic** are called **falling meters**.

Other Kinds of Feet

Spondee - two stressed syllables. **Spondaic feet** vary or interrupt the prevailing rhythm, emphasizing a syllable that we would expect to be unstressed.

Pyrrhic - two unstressed syllables. **Pyrrhic feet** similarly interrupt the expected rising or falling beats, placing an unstressed syllable where we expect an emphasis.

* **Spondees & Pyrrhic Feet** depend on prevailing meter and usually appear singly or only a few times in a row. It is difficult to imagine (or to write or speak) a line or sentence that either has no unstressed syllables - a constant strong beat (spondaic) - or lacks stressed syllables - a rippling monotone (pyrrhic).

* Because the concepts of **meter** derives from poetic traditions in Greek and Latin that counted **syllables** rather than accents, other possible combinations of **syllables** acquired names. For instance, **amphibrach** (unstressed, stressed, unstressed - noted by Coleridge in his demonstration of **meter**, "Metrical Feet"). But since most meter in poetry in English depends on accents rather than the number of **syllables**, the terms above cover most of the variations that you will encounter.

Counting Feet, or Meter

A line of poetry is subdivided into feet in order to "measure" its meter. The terms are easy enough to understand if you recall geometry or other numeric terminology. Remember that this is a count not of the number of syllables but of stresses; thus, for example, monometer could have two or three syllables per line.

monometer - one foot

dimeter - two feet

trimeter - three feet

tetrameter - four feet

pentameter - five feet

hexameter - six feet

heptameter - seven feet

octameter - eight feet

Scansion

Scansion is the technique of listening to and marking stressed and unstressed syllables, counting the syllables and feet. Often, you will need to scan several lines before you can be sure of the "controlling" **metrical pattern** or "**base meter**" of a poem.