**An Introduction to Stress and Meter**

Consider the sound of the underlined word in each passage. Speak the underlined word aloud:

* Darth Vader decided to crush the rebel soldier.
* Luke Skywalker will rebel against his father's wishes.

Hear the difference between the way rebel sounds in the first and second sentences? It is spelled the same. So what made the difference in sound?

That difference is a change in **stress**. As we speak English, we stress some syllables and leave other syllables "unstressed." Technically, from a linguistic standpoint, every syllable has at least some stress to it, or we wouldn't be able to hear it. It would be more accurate to say "long" and "short" stress, but even that is not completely accurate either, since some words may have degrees of intermediary (in-the-middle) stress. Regardless of this fact, it is common practice to refer to syllables with greater stress as "long," "strong," "heavy" or "stressed," and to refer to syllables with lesser stress as "short" or "light" or "unstressed."

In the first example, the pattern in the word rebel is "stressed," then "unstressed."

* **DARTH** **VA**der de**CID**ed to **CRUSH** the **REB**el **SOLD**ier.

In the second example, the pattern in the word rebel is "unstressed, stressed."

* **LUKE** **SKYWALK**er **WILL** re**BEL** a**GAINS**T his **FATH**er's **WISH**es.

To indicate the changes in **meter**, scholars put a diagonal line ( / ) or a macron ( - ) over stressed syllables. A small curving loop ( u ) or a small x ( x ) goes over the unstressed syllables.

/ / u u / u u / u / u / u

* Darth Vader decided to crush the rebel soldier.

/ / / u / u / u / u / u / u

* Luke Skywalker will rebel against his father's wishes.

Rhyme is only part of poetry. The main component of poetry is its meter (the regular pattern of strong and weak stress). When a poem has a recognizable but varying pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, the poetry is written in verse. The sentences above don't have an established repetitive pattern. They are just spoken words. There are many possible patterns of verse, and the basic pattern of each unit is called a foot. Before we move onto feet, let's see if we can identify stressed and unstressed syllables.

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**Types of Metrical Feet**

In M. H. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms*, Abrams gives examples of the four most common feet.

**1. Iambic (the noun is *iamb* or *iambus*):** a lightly stressed syllable followed by a heavily stressed syllable: u /

u / u / u / u / u /

**The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,**

u / u / u / u / u /

**The lowing herds wind slowly o'er the lea.**

--Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

**2. Anapestic (the noun is *anapest*):** two light syllables followed by a stressed syllable: u u /

u u / u u / u u / u u /

**The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold**

u u / u u / u u / u u /

**And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.**

--Lord Byron, "The Destruction of Sennacherib"

**3. Trochaic (the noun is *trochee*):** a stressed followed by a light syllable: / u

/ u / u / u / u / u

**"There they are, my fifty men and women."**

--Robert Browning, "One Word More"

**4. Dactylic (the noun is *dactyl*):** a stressed syllable followed by two light syllables: / u u

/ u u / u u

**"Éve, with her basket, was**

/ u u / u u

**Deep in the bells and grass."**

--Ralph Hodgson, "Eve"

Verbs and nouns are often stressed; prepositions and articles are often unstressed. Exceptions frequently occur, however. Sometimes, a word that would be stressed or unstressed in normal, everyday speech becomes the opposite in poetry in order to match the surrounding pattern of words. For example, in the dactylic example, the verb *was* and the noun *grass* are unstressed. Sometimes, for instance, in the iambic example, the verb *wind* might be unstressed even though verbs are usually stressed. Likewise cheats by pronouncing *-ed* as a separate syllable: *banishéd*.

Iambs and anapests, since the strong stress is at the end, are called "rising meter"; trochees and dactyls, with the strong stress at the beginning, are called "falling meter." Additionally, if a line ends in a standard iamb, with a final stressed syllable, it is said to have a **masculine ending**. If an extra lightly stressed syllable is added to a line, it is said to be **feminine**. To hear the difference, read the following examples out loud and listen to the final stress:

**Masculine Ending**:

u /

**'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house,**

u /

**Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.**

**Feminine Ending**:

u / u

**'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the housing,**

u / u

**Not a creature was stirring, not even a mousing.**

We name metric lines according to the number of "feet" in them. If a line has four feet, it is **tetrameter**. If a line has five feet, it is **pentameter**. If it has six feet, it is **hexameter**, and so on.

Different languages tend to require different meter. English verse tends to be **pentameter**, French verse **tetrameter**, and Greek verse **hexameter**. When scanning a line, we might, for instance, describe the line as "iambic pentameter" (having five feet, with each foot tending to be a light syllable followed by heavy syllable). Or it might be "trochaic hexameter" (having six feet, with each foot tending to be a heavy syllable followed by a light syllable).

Iambic pentameter that doesn't rhyme is called "**blank verse**." The Earl of Surrey, a Renaissance writer who lived just before Shakespeare, introduced blank verse into English. It has been popular ever since because it maintains strong meter, but the lack of rhyme makes it more flexible than rhymed verse, and it also doesn't seem so artificial when used in plays like those of Shakespeare.

Often, poetic verse varies. For instance, iambic pentameter normally would have ten syllables in each line.

There would be ten syllables contained within five feet. Each foot contains one unstressed syllables and one stressed syllables, for a total of ten (2 x 5) syllables. A boring but "perfect" example of iambic pentameter would look like this:

u / u / u / u / u /

**With hot intent the flames will soon expire.**

Reading continuous, perfect meter can become sing-songy and irritating, like hearing nursery rhymes over and over. But the rules of poetry are more flexible than that. To prevent this monotony, poets allow **metrical** **substitution** of one foot for another. For instance, a **spondee** (LONG LONG), or a trochee (LONG short) may be used in the place of an iamb (short LONG) in one or more feet of iambic pentameter, as long as the total syllable count and feet remain the same.

/ / / / / u u / u /

**Now, cold dead weight settles on ash and bone.**

foot #1: spondee; foot #2: spondee; foot #3: trochee; foot #4: iamb; foot #5: iamb

When you notice this sort of substitution, it hints that there's something special about that line. Perhaps the reader should speak those parts with special intonation, emphasis, speed, or slowness. Maybe that substitution marks an important symbol. For whatever reason, the poet went to the trouble of altering the pattern of iambic pattern. Why? Part of closely reading poetry is noticing changes in feet and meter, and thinking about what that change means. One of the most common places for metrical substitution is the final foot. Poets frequently tinker with that foot in order to create either masculine or feminine verse. At other times, poets may insert spondees in perfectly good iambic pentameter, just to "slow down" the verse. Dactyls can be inserted to create a light, tripping meter in other spots of a poem.

**Elision, Synaeresis, Syncope, and Acephalous Lines**

Suppose you are reading iambic pentameter poetry. To your horror, you find that some lines seem to have *nine* syllables. Others seem to have *eleven* or more! Is that a sign of bad poetry? Not at all! In order to keep the syllable count even, traditional poets are allowed to "cheat" in several ways.

**(1)** The first way is **elision.** When one word ends a vowel, and the following word starts with a vowel, one of the two vowels can elide. Basically, the two vowels blur together to become one syllable. For instance,

John Milton in *Paradise Lost* writes:

/ u / u / u /

**Ón a sudden open fly**

/ u / u / u / u / u /

**With impetuous recoil and jarring sound**

u / u / u / u / u /

**Th'infernal doors, and on their hinges grate**

/ / u

**Harsh thunder.**

To make sure each line has ten syllables, Milton squeezes *the* and *infernal* together. Milton is kind; he indicates that elision with the apostrophe and missing letter, but most poets do not indicate elision so directly.

They simply write out both words and presume perceptive readers will count syllables, notice the elision, and pronounce the words accordingly.

**(2)** The second way of cheating is a type of elision called **synaeresis**. When two vowels occur side-by-side, the poet often has the option of reading them as either one or two syllables. For instance, the word *tedious* can be pronounced two ways and is still recognizable. The most common pronunciation of *tedious*, if we speak carefully, takes three syllables: (TEE-dee-us). But when speaking quickly, we often pronounce the word as two syllables: (TEE-dyus). Dryden uses such synaeresis to count *tedious* as a two-syllable word in his poetry:

/ u u / u / u / u /

**Titles and Names 'twere tedious to Reherse.**

**(3)** The third way of cheating is **syncope**. Syncope occurs when a vowel flanked by two consonants is not pronounced. The vowel drops away as in the line below from the same poem:

u / u / u / / / u /

**Him Staggering so when Hell's dire Agent found.**

Here, *staggering* becomes a disyllable. Instead of the usual trisyllable (STAG-ger-ing) it becomes (STAGring); we could also theoretically read it--rather awkwardly--as a spondee (STAG-RING) if we wanted to.

Note that in poetic traditions such as that of Chaucer, and some Renaissance writers, it is perfectly permissible to have any number of extra unstressed syllables. Only the stressed syllables "count" toward creating a foot. By definition, a foot must contain at least one stressed syllable. One or two extra syllables tacked on here and there were acceptable, as long as they were unstressed--especially before the first foot. (In musical lyrics, these extra-syllables are called "pick-up words.")

**(4)** What about iambic pentameter that seems to have only nine syllables? That is an example of the

**acephalous** line. Acephalous (from the Greek word for "headless") means a metrical line whose first syllable, according to strict meter, is lacking. Remember that bit above? About how a foot, by definition, must have at least one stressed syllable? In an acephalous line, the first foot has only one stressed syllable.

That one stress counts as a foot by itself, and we treat it just like any other foot.

**PRACTICE: SCANSION PASSAGE:**

Try scanning this bit of poetry on your own.

**Thy beauty shall no more be found,**

**Nor, in thy marble Vault, shall sound**

**My echoing song: then Worms shall try**

**That long preserv'd Virginity:**

**And your quaint Honour turn to dust;**

**And into ashes all my Lust.**

**The Grave's a fine and private place,**

**But none I think do there embrace.**