



Poetry Rocks!

Take your dreams seriously...play with them. ®

Tool 15

The Rapper

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

SOUND

Rhythm

Meter

PURPOSE

To work and play with Sound in your poems by focusing on Rhythm, and Meter, experimenting with *syllabics*, a *metric pattern*, and/or *accentual meter*.

BACKGROUND

There are formal and informal ways to incorporate rhythm into your poetry, and for that matter, your prose. But ultimately, they all involve the number and arrangement of the syllables in the lines of a poem. When it comes to rhythm, what counts is, not the words, but the syllables that make up these words. There are words made up of a single syllable, of course, like the word *word* itself, and there are multisyllabic words, from the two-syllable variety, like wa·ter, all the way up to the fourteen-syllable doozy, su·per·cal·i·frag·i·lis·tic·ex·pi·al·i·do·cious.

We're going to discuss three basic methods of adding the music of Rhythm and Meter to poems: syllabics, metric forms, and accentual meter.

Syllabics: Ignoring Stressed and Unstressed Syllables or Beats Altogether and Arranging Your Poem According to the Number of Syllables in Each Line

Poems written in syllabic verse have the same number of syllables in each line. Unlike metric verse and accentuated meter, where the stresses fall—or don't—is immaterial. Syllabic verse is common in languages that are *syllable-timed*, like Japanese—think of haiku with its 5-7-5-syllable lines—as opposed to *stress-timed* languages like English. You won't hear the rhythm of syllabics the way you will in pure or accentual meter, but this is a fine way to work with the rhythm of your poems and find interesting line breaks.

It's easy to write in syllabics. You literally tap out the syllables in each line. It's okay to have a few of the lines vary by one or two syllables, by the way. As Ralph Waldo Emerson says in his slant-rhymed quote, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines."

Metric Form: Arranging Your Poem in Lines with a Repeating Pattern of Stressed and Unstressed Syllables

The most formal form of rhythm is meter. Meter does the same work in poems as drums and other rhythm instruments do in songs, through the frequency and pattern of beats made by stressed and unstressed syllables. These syllables are arranged into repeated patterns within a line. Each repeating unit of meter is called a foot.

There are a number of [metric forms and patterns](#). We're going to focus on one of the most common, *iambic pentameter*. In case you don't remember this term, the word *pentameter* signifies a line of poetry with five metrical *feet*, in other words, a particular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables repeated five times. And an *iamb* is a metrical unit that consists of an unstressed syllable (˘) followed by a stressed one (/), as in the word *farewell*. Put them together, and voila, you have a line made up of five iambs in a row, for a total of ten rhythmic syllables. A classic line of iambic pentameter is Romeo's famous line:

˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
But SOFT! What LIGHT through YONder WINdow BREAKS?									

Accentual Meter: Arranging Your Poem by Counting the Stresses or Beats in Each Line, Rather Than the Syllables

Poet Dana Goia, author of a very influential book called *Can Poetry Matter?*, says, “Accentual meter is the simplest, oldest, and most natural poetic measure in English.” He gives as an example a poem we’ve all heard numerous times. And as Goia says, “Although every line in this famous folk charm has a different syllable count, the meter is constant—four strong beats per line.” In other words, this poem is arranged in accentual meter. You can read a bit more about accentual meter and look at some examples [here](#).

/	/	/	/						
Star	light		Star	bright	(4 syllables)				
/	/	/	/						
First	star		I	see	tonight	(6 syllables)			
/	/	/	/						
I	wish	I	may		I	wish	I	might	(8 syllables)
/	/	/	/						
Have	the	wish		I	wish	tonight	(7 syllables)		

WHAT TO DO

Take a poem you’ve already written and arrange it into one of these rhythmic patterns:

- Syllabics. If thinking about stressed and unstressed syllables stresses you out, this is the rhythm for you! I love playing with syllabics. Often, this process helps me discover my best line breaks.
- A Formal Metric Pattern. If you go this route, I suggest iambic pentameter. Here’s another example for you, poet Elizabeth Bishop’s favorite line of iambic pentameter:

˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
“I	HATE	to	SEE	that	EVENin’	SUN	go	DOWN.”	

If you’d like to play with another metric pattern, or learn more about them, Goucher College offers a nice online overview of [metric feet](#), [scansion](#), and [stanza forms](#).

- Accentual Meter. Count your beats like a rapper! Do this by ear.

EXAMPLE

This poem about my dad is written in syllabics. I used ten syllables per line. Most lines, that is. That great bard, Shakespeare himself, varied his syllables at times; so can we. I chose couplets (two-line stanzas) since the poem is about a married couple.

Forty-eight Years after Their Wedding,

I'm here in my parents' kitchen, clanking
clean silverware back into the drawer.

How many times have I done this before
and since I moved away, before and since

my mother lost language and so much more?
The *Extra Care* Unit is coming soon,

the hand feeding. My father doesn't say
much; he'll do what a good man does. Fork to

fork, spoon to spoon—the syncopation of
silver is soothing. Each to its own place.

My father breaks the rhythm to tell me
this mismatched table knife he's holding up

should never be put in the dishwasher
like I did last night. As he swishes it

through soapsuds, he shows the wooden handle,
the rivets he's repaired time and again.

Its mate, he says, is right now awaiting
attention on his workbench. When my look

is an unasked question, wondering if
this is yet one more manifestation

of growing up during the Depression,
he tells me these two knives are what's left of

the place settings for two he and Mother
purchased at Woolworth's five and dime after

opening their wedding gifts, just back
from their honeymoon in the Poconos.

*We made a list of the things we needed
to set up housekeeping, he says. Our first*

*apartment in Cleveland. A second-floor
walk-up for twenty-five dollars a month.*

A flourish of the dishtowel, and he's
finished, handing me this homely music

complete with crescendo and caesura.
How gently can I lay tenderness down,

close the drawer? The silence settles, marks
our place in the story, which isn't over.

REFLECTION

What did you notice about the way your poem morphed as you played with its rhythm? Does meter come naturally for you? Or have you developed a new respect for those poets who make writing in metric patterns look effortless? How might you continue to practice working with meter and rhythm?

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Take note of how poets you admire use meter and rhythm in their poems.

Try using meter and rhythm in your own poems through syllabics, metric forms, and/or accentual meter. You'll get more resources at the end of the course. For now, I recommend *Rhyme's Reason* by John Hollander.

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