

# IDENTIFYING POETIC FEET AND METER

When analyzing a poem, you may be asked to determine the **Poetic Feet and Meter**, or the rhythmic structure of the poem. The term **feet** refers to the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry, and the term **meter** refers to the configuration of poetic feet within a line. With a little practice, you can learn to identify the feet and meter in any poem!

The most common type of feet and meter in English poetry is called iambic pentameter. This structure was frequently used by poets like John Donne and William Shakespeare!

## POETIC FEET

A single **poetic foot** contains a certain number of stressed and unstressed syllables. Common forms of poetic feet include:

- **Iambic:** unstressed/STRESSED, pronounced *duh-DUH*
  - Belong → *be-LONG*
  - Destroy → *de-STROY*
  - Portray → *por-TRAY*
- **Trochaic:** STRESSED/unstressed, pronounced *DUH-duh*
  - Garden → *GAR-den*
  - Market → *MAR-ket*
  - Toothbrush → *TOOTH-brush*
- **Anapestic:** unstressed/unstressed/STRESSED, pronounced *duh-duh-DUH*
  - Disregard → *dis-re-GARD*
  - Overcome → *ov-er-COME*
  - Understand → *un-der-STAND*
- **Dactylic:** STRESSED/unstressed/unstressed, pronounced *DUH-duh-duh*
  - Buttermilk → *BUT-ter-milk*
  - Elephant → *EL-le-phant*
  - Handkerchief → *HAND-ker-chief*

## POETIC METER

**Meter** refers to the number of times that a poetic foot appears in a line of poetry. Common forms of meter include:

- **Monometer** contains one poetic foot. Due to its short length, you will rarely encounter this kind of meter.
- **Dimeter** contains two poetic feet. Here is an example of **iambic dimeter** from the first line of “We Are Seven” by William Wordsworth:  
A simple child<sup>1</sup>  
*a SIM-| ple CHILD*
- **Trimeter** contains three poetic feet. Here is an example of **trochaic trimeter** from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark”:  
Higher still and higher,  
*HIGH-er | STILL and | HIGH-er*  
From the earth thou springest  
*FROM the | EARTH thou | SPRING-est*
- **Tetrameter** contains four poetic feet. Here is an example of **anapestic tetrameter** from Lord Byron’s “The Destruction of Sennacherib”:  
The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold,  
*the as-SYR-| ian came DOWN | like a WOLF | on the FOLD*  
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold  
*and his CO-| horts were GLEAM-| ing in PUR-| ple and GOLD*
- **Pentameter** contains five poetic feet. Here is an example of **iambic pentameter** from “The Waking” by Theodore Roethke:  
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.  
*I WAKE | to SLEEP | and TAKE | my WAK-| ing SLOW*  
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.  
*I FEEL | my FATE | in WHAT | I CAN-| not FEAR*  
I learn by going where I have to go.  
*I LEARN | by GO-| ing WHERE | I HAVE | to GO*
- **Hexameter** contains six poetic feet. Here is an example of **dactylic hexameter** from the first line of “Evangeline” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:  
This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks,  
*THIS is the | FOR-est pri-| ME-val the | MUR-mur-ing | PINES and the | HEM-locks*

- **Heptameter** contains seven poetic feet. Here is an example of **iambic heptameter** from Galadriel’s Song of Eldamar from J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Fellowship of the Ring*:  
 I sang of leaves, of leaves of gold, and leaves of gold there grew:  
*I SANG | of LEAVES | of LEAVES | of GOLD | and LEAVES | of GOLD | there GREW*  
 Of wind I sang, a wind there came, and in the branches blew.  
*Of WIND | I SANG | a WIND | there CAME | and IN | the BRANCH-| es BLEW*
- **Octameter** contains eight poetic feet. Here is an example of **trochaic octameter** from the first line of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven”:  
 “Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,”  
*ONCE up-| ON a | MID-night | DREA-ry | WHILE I | PON-dered | WEAK and | WEA-ry*

<sup>1</sup>This poem and all other poems retrieved from the Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems>

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