

## Understanding Meter

In English poetry, the metrical foot is the primary criterion by which poets establish the rhythms of their works. Whether they think actively about the meter or whether they simply write “by ear,” poets generally rely heavily on meter.

Metrical feet are defined by the number of syllables in each word and the natural stresses on those syllables. For example, the word *telescope* is composed of three syllables—*tel ə skōp*. By itself, *telescope* provides a good example of a metrical foot with three syllables. When the word is spoken, the stress falls on the first syllable—**TEL** ə skōp. Poets sometimes vary the stresses on purpose for artistic effect, but in general terms, the stresses on a word’s syllables follow natural speech patterns. You wouldn’t ordinarily pronounce the word *telescope* as *tel Ə skōp* or *tel ə SKŌP*. Therefore, *telescope* is composed of a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables (it’s a dactylic metrical foot).

Metrical feet are given names depending on the number and sequence of stresses. As some of the following examples demonstrate, a metrical foot can incorporate parts of more than one word. In short, when scanning a poem for meter, you should count the *syllables* in each line of poetry, not the words.

Type of Metrical Foot	Description	Examples
iamb (iambic foot)	One unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable.	align / involve
trochee (trochaic foot)	One stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable.	pretty / modern
anapest (anapestic foot)	Two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable.	in the heat / on the phone
dactyl (dactylic foot)	One stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.	telescope / purple patch
spondee (spondaic foot)	Two stressed syllables.	No! Don’t! / Oh, yes!
pyrrhic (pyrrhic foot)	Two unstressed syllables.	onto / of the
amphibrach (amphibrachic foot)	One unstressed syllable, one stressed syllable, and then another unstressed syllable.	whatever / garage sale
amphimacer (amphimaciac foot)	One stressed syllable, one unstressed syllable, and then another stressed syllable.	twenty-nine / so do you

Depending on the number of feet per line of poetry, the rhythm of a poem is described as meter.

Type of Meter	Description	Examples
monometer	One metrical foot per line.	Thus I Passe by, And die: As one, Unknown, And gone. — Robert Herrick, “Upon His Departure Hence”
dimeter	Two metrical feet per line.	Workers earn it. Spendthrifts burn it. — Richard Armour, “Money”
trimeter	Three metrical feet per line.	As I came to the edge of the woods. — Robert Frost, “Come In”
tetrameter	Four metrical feet per line.	The grave’s a fine and quiet place, But none I think do there embrace. — Andrew Marvell, “To His Coy Mistress”
pentameter	Five metrical feet per line.	True wit is Nature to advantage dress’d, What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d. — Alexander Pope, <i>Essay on Criticism</i>
hexameter (an “Alexandrine”)	Six metrical feet per line.	This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the hemlocks. — Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, <i>Evangeline</i>
heptameter (a “fourteener” if iambic)	Seven metrical feet per line.	‘Tis but as ivy-leaves around the ruin’d turret wreath, All green and wildly fresh without, but worn and gray beneath. — Lord Byron, “Youth and Age”
octameter	Eight metrical feet per line.	Deep into the darkness peering, long I stood there wond’ring, fearing. — Edgar Allan Poe, “The Raven”

Meter generally is described in terms of the kind and number of feet in each line. Hence, a line of poetry composed of four iambic feet would be an example of iambic tetrameter; a line of poetry composed of three dactylic feet would be dactylic trimeter.