

POETRY'S STRUCTURE AND FORM

POETRY'S RHYTHM

Rhythm gives a poem its sound, and there are many different ways that rhythm is used, and lots of elements in poetry that are related to rhythm.

Stress / Accent

A line of poetry is filled with syllables. When a syllable is given emphasis, it is called a stressed syllable. Stress is the emphasis given to the syllable.

- Example: "water" has two syllables: wa – ter

The first syllable ("wa") is the stressed syllable – it is pronounced with more emphasis than the second syllable ("ter"), which is the unstressed syllable.

Foot

A foot is a combination of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line of poetry. There are many different combinations, but some are more popular than others. An unstressed (or light) syllable is marked with a *˘* and a stressed syllable (or heavy) is marked with a *ˉ*

Iamb: A foot with two syllables, one that is not stressed and one that is, in that order.

Trochee: A foot with two syllables, this time with one that is stressed and one that *is not*.

Spondee: A foot with two syllables, both of which are stressed.

Anapest: A foot with three syllables, two stressed syllables followed by one unstressed syllable

Dactyl: A foot with three syllables, one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables

Meter

This is the number of feet that is in a line of poetry. A line of poetry can have any number of feet, and can have more than one type of foot. There are some meters that are used more often than others.

Monometer: a line with 1 foot

Trimeter: A line with 3 feet

Pentameter: A line with 5 feet

Heptameter: A line with 7 feet

Dimeter: A line with 2 feet

Tetrameter: A line with 4 feet

Hexameter: A line with 6 feet

Octameter: a line with 8 feet

If a line of poetry has 5 feet, and those 5 feet are all iambs, you have a line of poetry that is *called iambic pentameter*. This is the most common metric pattern in formal poetry.

- Example: How do / I love / thee? Let / me count / the ways.
"Sonnet 43"
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Scansion

When you scan a poem, you are looking for the metrical patterns in a poem. By scanning a poem, you are looking for the patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, allowing you to figure out the type of feet being used. You will then be able to figure out the meter of the poem, whether it be iambic pentameter, anapestic trimeter or trochaic hexameter.

POETRY'S FORM

There is no one way to write a poem. In fact, there are many ways, and many different forms! Sometimes it is the meter of the poem that gives you the form, sometimes it's the content, and sometimes it is the organization of it.

Stanza

A group of lines in a poem. A stanza is similar to the paragraph.

Quatrain

A stanza of four lines

Couplet

A stanza of two lines

Ballad

A ballad is a poem that usually tells a story that is similar to a folktale. It is often written in quatrains, and usually in lines that are iambic trimeter.

Elegy

A poem that is sad and thoughtful, and often said in lament of a person who has died.

Epic

A long narrative poem

Lyric

A poem that express the personal mood, feeling, or meditation of a single speaker.

Narrative

A poem that tells a story

Sonnet

In general, sonnets have 14 lines. However, there are many different types of sonnets.

Petrarchan sonnet (or Italian sonnet):

Each of its 14 lines will be written in iambic pentameter. There will be an octave (a group of 8 lines) at the beginning, and a sestet (a group of 6 lines) at the end.

Shakespearean sonnet (or English sonnet)

Each of its 14 lines will be written in iambic pentameter. There will be three quatrains, and will end with a couplet. The rhyme scheme will be A-B-A-B, C-D-C-D, E-F-E-F,G,G

STRUCTURAL TECHNIQUES AND DEVICES

The Line

A line of poetry is not like a sentence. Just because the words are one line, it doesn't mean that the complete thought is finished.

When reading poetry, and you reach the end of the line and there is no punctuation after the last word, do not pause – continue reading as you would any sentence.

- Example: You would read the following

“I lie in bed fully awake. The darkness
breathes to the pace of a dog’s snoring.
The film is replayed to sounds
Of an intricate blues guitar.”

“Late Movies with Skylar”
Michael Ondaatje

the same way you would read

“I lie in bed fully awake. The darkness breathes to the pace of a
dog’s snoring. The film is replayed to sounds of an intricate blues
guitar.”

However, this does not mean that what appears on a single line of poetry is not important. When reading poetry, or when writing your own, pay close attention to how the lines are being broken up. A line of poetry does not have to end when the sentence ends, and a period or comma does not have to appear at the end of the line either. Take a look at these examples and notice how the poets are breaking the line.

“Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother’s eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.”

“Refugee Ship”
Lorna Dee Cervantes

“What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families
shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the
avocados, babies in the tomatoes!”

“A Supermarket in California”

Allen Ginsberg

Caesura

Most commonly, a caesura is punctuation somewhere else other than at the end of a line of poetry.

- Example: “There are their fragments, all I remember of them,
wanting more knowledge of them. In the mirror and in my kids
I see them in my flesh. Wherever we are
they parade in my brain...”

“Light”

Michael Ondaatjie

Enjambment

When the idea or phrase in a poem is carried over from one line into the next.

- Example: “Black reapers with the sound of steel on stones
are sharpening scythes. I see them place the hones
in their hip-pockets as a thing that’s done,
and start their silent swinging, one by one.”

“Reapers”

Jean Toomer