

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SCANSION ON ONE PAGE, OR IT WOULD BE IF THIS TITLE WEREN'T SO LONG

Shakespearean verse is largely written in “blank verse” which is defined as “unrhymed iambic pentameter.” Although sometimes it’s rhymed, sometimes it’s not iambic, and sometimes it’s not pentameter. Pentameter means five repeated verse “feet.” A “foot” is a sequence of two or three syllables with a particular stress pattern. The most common are “iambs,” trochees.” “dactyls,” “anapests.” and “spondees.”

METER (OR METRE):

Iambic meter bounces thus
Trochees do it backwards
Spondees beat lines down
Anapestical meter just bounces along
Dactyls are finally, backwardly Anapests.

(Anonymous)

LINE LENGTH:

Monometer: lines of one foot each, as in the classic poem *Fleas* (trochaic monometer):

Adam
Had ‘em.

Dimeter: Lines of two feet each.

“Asleep, my love?
What? Dead, my dove?” (Thisbe, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

Trimeter: Lines of three feet each.

“Blow, blow thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man’s ingratitude;” (Amiens, in *As You Like It*)

Tetrameter: Lines of four feet each.

“If we fairies have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended:
That you have but slumbered here,
While these visions did appear.” (Puck, in “*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”)

Pentameter: Lines of five feet each. (Most Elizabethan verse after 1585 or so.)

Hexameter: Lines of six feet each. (French classical drama: Racine, Corneille, Moliere *et al.*)

Heptameter: Lines of seven feet each. (Often used in early Elizabethan verse drama and sometimes parodied by Shakespeare. When used in rhymed couplets, they were called “fourteeners.”)

“The outlook wasn’t brilliant for the Mudville nine that day,”
(*Casey at the Bat*)

“And travelling along this coast, I here am come by chance,
And lay my arms before the legs of this sweet lass of France,”
(Costard in *Love’s Labours Lost*)

OTHER TERMS:

Caesura: A thought transition in the middle of a verse line, usually indicated in punctuation by a period (full stop), a question mark, or a colon, and occasionally by a comma. The caesura occurs most commonly after the second or third foot in the line in iambic pentameter verse. Often the foot that follows the caesura is trochaic:

But O Griefe,
Where hast thou led me? I (perhaps) speake this
Before a willing bondman: then I know
My answer must be made. But I am armed
And dangers are to me indifferent. (Cassius, in *Julius Caesar*)

Feminine Ending: The classic iambic pentameter line has ten syllables:

“Now EN/terTAIN/ conJEC/ture OF/ a TIME”

A “Feminine” line ending consists of an eleventh syllable of lesser stress added to the end of the line:

“And IN/ my COM/paNY/ my BRO/ther GLOUCES/ter”

Incomplete lines: Verse lines that consist of less than five feet. These are usually understood to indicate a break in thought, shown by a pause in performance:

He is a man, setting his fate aside,
Of comely virtues:
Nor did he soil the fact with cowardice--
An honour in him which buys out his fault--
But with a noble fury and fair spirit,
Seeing his reputation touch'd to death,
He did oppose his foe:
And with such sober and unnoted passion
He did behave his anger, ere 'twas spent,
As if he had but proved an argument. (Alcibiades, in *Timon of Athens*)

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad:
It wearies me; you say it wearies you;
But how I caught it, found it, or came by it,
What stuff 'tis made of, whereof it is born,
I am to learn;
And such a want-wit sadness makes of me,
That I have much ado to know myself. (Antonio, in *Merchant of Venice*)

Shared lines: Verse lines that span the speeches of two (or more) characters. This is often seen as an indication of a seamless cue pickup:

KING LEAR
 ...Why, then she lives.
KENT
 Is this the promised end
EDGAR
 Or image of that horror?

ALBANY
 Fall, and cease!

Antithesis: The balanced juxtaposition of opposing or contrasting ideas:

“Not Hermia, but Helena I love.” (*Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

Stychomythia: The rapid interchange of single lines between two speakers, usually picking up a word from the preceding line and turning its meaning another way. A common form of verbal conflict in classical and Shakespearean drama. Often this is accompanied by a change in the meter.

LADY ANNE: I would I knew thy heart.

GLOUCESTER: 'Tis figured in my tongue.

LADY ANNE: I fear me both are false.

GLOUCESTER: Then never man was true.

LADY ANNE: Well, well, put up your sword.

GLOUCESTER: Say, then, my peace is made.

LADY ANNE: That shall you know hereafter.

GLOUCESTER: But shall I live in hope?

LADY ANNE: All men, I hope, live so. (*Richard III*)

OTHER THOUGHTS

Metrical “Meaning”: When sense, meter, and linguistic length interact they can create patterns that echo the content of the text.

'Tis not enough no Harshness gives Offence,
The Sound must seem an Eccho to the Sense.
Soft is the Strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth Stream in smoother Numbers flows;
But when loud Surges lash the sounding Shore,
The hoarse, rough Verse shou'd like the Torrent roar.
When Ajax strives, some Rocks' vast Weight to throw,
The Line too labours, and the Words move slow;
Not so, when swift Camilla scours the Plain,
Flies o'er th'unbending Corn, and skims along the Main.

(Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism*)

“Scanning” = “checking” Let’s remember that verse patterns are the result of naturally occurring stress. Verse only exists in that context, so if you speak the text normally, the verse should simply be there. We aren’t scanning in order to enforce a speech pattern. We are checking the structure of the verse to see if we can detect meaningful inconsistencies.

Take it one foot at a time: We perceive prosody in terms of *relative* prominence. We shouldn’t expect every metrically stressed syllable in a line to receive the same stress.

The barge | she sat | in, like | a burn |ish'd throne (Enobarbus, in *Antony & Cleopatra*)

To be | or not | to be | that is |the question (*Hamlet*)

So long as we note the structure of each foot, our scanning is done. We should be careful not to think of scansion as something we *play*. Applying the same weight to the stressed syllable in each foot will quickly turn the text into nonsense and make for a very long evening.