

We will be concerned here only with accentual verse and the metrical scansion of stress and non-stress within the individual feet of a poem.

The following are the meters most often found in English and American poetry, with examples for each:

Iambic From the Greek, "funny girl with skirts up."

. / . /

I died for Beauty—but was scarce
Adjusted in the Tomb
When One who died for Truth, was lain
In an adjoining Room—

He questioned softly "Why I failed?"
"For Beauty", I replied—
"And I—for Truth—Themselves are One—
We Brethren, are", He said—

And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night—
We talked between the Rooms—
Until the Moss had reached our lips—
And covered up—our names—
(Emily Dickinson, "I died for Beauty")

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.
(Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods
on a Snowy Evening")

Trochaic From the Greek, "running."

/ . / .

I'll drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid;
He shall live a man forbid;

Weary se'nnights nine times nine
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:
Though his bark cannot be lost,
Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd.—
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, I.iii)

Never, never, never, never, never!
(William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, V.iii)

Anapestic From the Greek, "beaten back"; upbeat, thrust; natural gait of a horse walking.

. . / . . /

Come and sit by my side if you love me,
Do not hasten to bid me adieu,
But remember the Red River Valley
And the cowboy who loved you so true.
(“Red River Valley”)

Dactyllic From the Greek, "finger with one long and two short joints."

/ . . / . .

Half a league, half a league, half a league onwards . . .
(Alfred, Lord Tennyson,
"The Charge of the Light Brigade")

Spondaic From the Greek, "spilling out of wine from a jug."

/ / / /

Out, out brief candle . . .
(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii)

Rocks, Caves, Lakes, Fens, Bogs, Dens, and Shades of Death.
(John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book Two)

I saw the best minds of my generation . . .
(Allen Ginsberg, "Howl")

Other meters are variations of the five described above; they include

pyrrhic (one or more unaccented syllables)	. . .
amphibrachic (one short, one long, one short)	. / .
baeochic (one short and two long)	. / /
choriambic (one long, two short, one long)	/ . . /

No matter how adept one becomes at metrical scansion, one should remember that poets have always insisted that the intuitive music of poetry must come first. Thus Shelley wrote in "A Defense of Poetry" (1812),

An observation of the regular modes of the recurrence of harmony in the language of poetical minds, together with its relation to music, produced meter, or a certain system of traditional forms of harmony and language.

Emerson in his essay "The Poet" reminds us that more than mere metrics is required to produce a strongly metered poem:

For it is not meters, but a meter-making argument, that makes a poem—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing.

Coleridge agrees in his *Biographia Literaria*:

Our genuine admiration of a great poet is for a continuous undercurrent of feeling; it is everywhere present, but seldom anywhere a separate excitement.

T. S. Eliot in his "Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry" affirms the inevitability of rhythm and meter in all heightened human utterance:

The human soul, in intense emotion, strives to express itself in verse. It is not for me, but for the neurologists, to discover why this is so, and why and how feeling and rhythms are related. The tendency, at any rate, of prose drama is to emphasize the ephemeral and superficial; if we want to get at the permanent and universal, we tend to express ourselves in verse.

Ezra Pound in his "Treatise on Meter" relates the origins of meter to the practice of song and singing: "Symmetry of strophic forms naturally HAPPENED in lyric poetry when a man was singing a long poem to a short melody which he had to use over and over." In his own *Cantos*, Pound is proudest of having gotten rid of rote metrics:

(To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)

(Ezra Pound, "Canto LXXXI")