Part 1 - Poetry Meter

This explains what poetry meter is... and why you should care.

Poetry meter - so what?

Meter is a way of measuring a line of poetry based on the rhythm of the words. But why should you care?

- As a reader, knowing about meter helps you understand how a poem is put together. You can see what rules the poet was following and how he or she used or went outside those rules. This lets you guess what was going through the poet's mind.
- If you want to write poetry, knowing about meter will make you a better poet. First, it helps you understand what poets have done in the past, so that you can learn from them. It allows you to use traditional forms such as sonnets. Even if you prefer to write in free verse, you should learn about traditional forms. Being aware of traditions gives you more flexibility to use aspects of them when you want to, or to "break the rules" in a more interesting way.

Poetry meter - stressed syllables and the iambic foot

Meter measures lines of poetry based on stressed and unstressed syllables. I'll explain. When we speak, we put the stress on a certain part of each word. For example, take the words "apple" and "fantastic."

- When we say the word "apple," we stress the first syllable, the "ap" part. We say "AP-baH" not "ap-PLE."
- When we say the word "fantastic," we stress the second syllable. We say, "fan-TAS-tic," not "FAN-tas-tic" or "fan-tas-TIC."

In poetry, a unit of stressed and unstressed syllables is called a foot. For example, look at this line from Shakespeare: "No longer mourn for me when I am dead." The rhythm is, "bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH. We read it like this: "no LON-ger MOURN for ME when I am DEAD." The type of foot Shakespeare used here is called an iamb. An iamb or an iambic foot has the rhythm bah-BAH. An unstressed syllable, then a stressed one. The iamb is the most common kind of foot in English poetry.

Here are three examples of words that have an iambic rhythm (bah-BAH).

- above (we say, "a-BOVE")
- support (we say, "sup-PORT")
- hurray (we say, "hur-RAY").

Here's a sentence written in iambic meter: "His noisy snoring woke the neighbors’ dog." Bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH bah-BAH.
Poetry meter - other types of foot:

- The **trochee** or **trochaic** foot. This is the opposite of an iamb -- the rhythm is BAH-bah, like the words "apple," and "father."
- The **anapest** or **anapestic** foot. This sounds like bah-bah-BAH, like the words "underneath" and "seventeen."
- The **dactyl** or **dactylic** foot. This is the opposite of an anapest -- the rhythm is BAH-bah-bah," like the the words "elephant" and "stepmother."

Poetry meter - counting the feet

When we think about the meter of poem, in addition to looking at the *kind* of foot, we count the *number* of feet in each line.

- If there's one foot per line, it's **monometer**. Poetry written in monometer is very rare.
- If there are are two feet per line, it's called **dimeter**. Here's a sentence in trochaic dimeter: "Eat your dinner." BAH-bah (1) BAH-bah (2).
- Three feet per line = **trimeter**. Here's a sentence in iambic trimeter: "I eat the bread and cheese." Bah-BAH (1) bah-BAH (2) bah-BAH (3).
- Four feet per line = **tetrameter**. Here's a sentence in trochaic tetrameter: "Father ordered extra pizza." BAH-bah (1) BAh-bah (2) BAH-bah (3) BAH-bah (4).
- Five feet per line = **pentameter**. Here's a sentence in iambic pentameter: "I'll toast the bread and melt a piece of cheese." Bah-BAH (1) bah-BAH (2) bah-BAH (3) bah-BAH (4) bah-BAH (5).
- Six feet per line = **hexameter** or **Alexandrine**. A sentence in iambic hexameter: "I'll toast the bread and melt a piece of cheese, okay?" Bah-BAH (1) bah-BAH (2) bah-BAH (3) bah-BAH (4) bah-BAH (5) bah-BAH (6).
- Seven feet per line = **heptameter**. You get the idea...

Poetry meter - meter and rhythm

When you read metered poetry, such as a sonnet in iambic pentameter, you may notice that the meter is sometimes sounds uneven or is hard to hear. Meter is just a form of measurement. The real rhythm of a poem is more complicated than that:

- None of us talk like robots. We give certain words and sounds more emphasis than others in a sentence, depending on a number of factors including the meaning of the words and our own personal speaking style. So not all of the stressed syllables have the same amount of stress, etc.
- We pause at the ends of ideas or the ends of sentences, even if these occur partway through a poetic line. So this creates a rhythmically variation. When the sentence ends or has a natural pause in the middle of a line of poetry, that's called a **caesura**.
- Poets vary meter or make exceptions in order to create desired rhythmic effects.

All of these elements combine to give each poem a unique music.
Part 2 - Poem Structure - Lines and Stanzas

This is an introduction to poem structure and poetry techniques. What's the best way to divide your poetry into lines? (Hint: "at random" is not the right answer!) Learn more below.

Poem structure - the line is a building block

The basic building-block of prose (writing that isn't poetry) is the sentence. But poetry has something else -- the poetic line. Poets decide how long each line is going to be and where it will break off. That's why poetry often has a shape like this:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

That's the beginning of a poem by Robert Herrick. No matter where it is printed, the first line always ends with the word "may" and the second line with the word "a-flying" because the poet has written it this way.

If you print a piece of prose such as a short story, the length of the lines will depend on the font size, the paper size, margins, etc. But in poetry, the line is part of the work of art you have created. The length of the lines and the line breaks are important choices that will affect many aspects of the reader's experience:

- The sound of the poem - When people read your poem out loud, or in their heads, they will pause slightly at the end of each line.
- The speed of reading - Shortening or lengthening the lines can speed up or slow down the way people read.
- How the poem looks on the page - Does the poem look light, delicate, with a lot of white space around the lines? Or are the lines packed solidly together?
- Emphasis - Words at the end of a line seem more important than words in the middle.

Poem structure - types of lines

If you are writing a poem in a standard form such as a sonnet, your choices about line length are somewhat restricted by the rules of the form. But you still have to decide how to fit the ideas and sentences of your poem over the lines. When you fit natural stopping points in a sentence to the end of
your line, the reader takes a little pause. When a sentence or phrase continues from one line to the next, the reader feels pulled along. If your line break interrupts a sentence or idea in a surprising place, the effect can be startling, suspenseful, or can highlight a certain phrase or double-meaning.

Lines that finish at ends of sentences or at natural stopping points (for example, at a comma) are called end-stopped lines. Here's an example:

*Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,*  
*Old Time is still a-flying:*

Lines that in the middle of the natural flow of a sentence are called run-on or enjambed lines. Here's an example:

*But being spent, the worse, and worst*  
*Times still succeed the former.*

Here, Herrick interrupts the phrase "worst times" with a line break between "worst" and "times," focusing extra attention on the word "worst."

If you are writing in free verse, you have even more decisions to make than a poet writing in a traditional form. You can decide to use short lines or long lines, or to vary the length. You can decide to stack your lines evenly along the left margin, or to use a looser or more graphical form. Some poets even write poems that are in the shape of the thing they are writing about, for example, a circular poem about the moon. You have many options, but these choices should never be made randomly.

**Poem structure - stanzas**

In prose, ideas are usually grouped together in paragraphs. In poems, lines are often grouped together into what are called stanzas. Like paragraphs, stanzas are often used to organize ideas.

For example, here are the two final stanzas of the Robert Herrick's poem. In the first of these stanzas, he is explaining that being young is great, but life just gets worse and worse as you get older. In the second one, he is saying: "So get married before you're too old and have lost your chance."
That age is best which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,
And while ye may, go marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may for ever tarry.


**Poem structure - decisions about form**

So many decisions to make -- line length, line breaks, arrangement, speed, rhythm. How should you choose? The right form for your poem depends on, and works with, the poem's content, or what it's about. If the poem is about flying, you probably don't want lines that feel slow and heavy. If you're writing a sad poem, short bouncy lines might not be the way to go.

You may feel overwhelmed by so many issues to think about. How can your inspiration flow freely if you have to keep track of all of these aspects of a poem? The answer is to do the work in two stages.

1. First, let your ideas flow.
2. Then, go back to the poem later and work on improving the poem structure and form.

In the second stage, it's a good idea to experiment a lot. Try breaking the lines and different ways and compare the effects. Try changing the order of things. Try reorganizing things to move different words to the end of the lines so that the reader's attention goes to them. You've got nothing to lose -- you can always go back to an earlier version.

As you go through this process, ask yourself:

- What is my poem about?
• What feeling or mood do I want the reader to have?
• Do I want the poem to move quickly or slowly? Are there places I want it to speed up or slow down?
• What words or phrases do I want to highlight?

There are a lot of things to consider. But the more poetry you write -- and read, the more natural and instinctive some of these decisions about poem structure will become to you.

Part 3 - Rhyme Schemes

*This is an introduction to rhyme schemes. Do you know the pattern of a limerick, a sonnet? How to write a poem with special sound effects? More below!*

**Rhyme schemes and sound effects**

Rhyme is an important tool in the poet's toolbox. Traditional poetry forms such as sonnets often use rhyme in specific patterns. But even if you are writing free verse, you can use rhyme to when it helps you create desired effects.

**Rhyme schemes - why rhyme**

There are many reasons why you might choose to use rhyme:

• To give pleasure. Rhyme, done well, is pleasing to the ear. It adds a musical element to the poem, and creates a feeling of “rightness,” of pieces fitting together. It also makes a poem easier to memorize, since the rhyme echoes in the reader's mind afterward, like a melody.
• To deepen meaning. Rhyming two or more words draws attention to them and connects them in the reader's mind.
• To strengthen form. In many traditional forms, a regular pattern of rhymes are at the ends of the lines. This means that even if the poem is being read out loud, listeners can easily hear where the lines end, can hear the shape of the poem.

**Rhyme schemes - internal rhymes and end rhymes**

When the last word in a line of poetry rhymes with the last word in another line, this is called an *end rhyme*. Many traditional poetry forms use end rhymes.

When words in the middle of a line of poetry rhyme with each other, this is called an *internal rhyme*.

Below is part of a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Can you find the internal rhymes and end rhymes?
\textit{The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,}
\textit{The furrow followed free;}
\textit{We were the first that ever burst}
\textit{Into that silent sea.}

In this example, "blew"-"flew," and "first"-"burst" are internal rhymes. "Free" and "sea" are end rhymes.

\textbf{Rhyme schemes - true rhymes and off-rhymes}

"Smart" and "art"; "fellow" and "yellow"; "surgery" and perjury" -- these are all examples of true rhymes, or exact rhymes because the final vowel and consonant sounds (or the final syllables in the longer words) are exact matches to the ear.

"Fate" and "saint"; "work" and "spark"; are examples of off-rhymes, or slant-rhymes. In each case, part of the sound matches exactly, but part of it doesn't. Off-rhymes use assonance and consonance:

- Assonance is a similarity between vowel sounds (the sounds made by your breath, written with the letters a,e,i,o,u,and sometimes y) "Sing,""lean", and "beet" are an example of assonance because they all have a similar "e" sound. Another example is "boat,""bone", and "mole," which all have a similar "o" sound.
- Consonance is a similarity between consonant sounds (consonants are the letters that you pronounce with your lips or tongue, not with your breath: b,c,d,f,g,h,j,k,l,m,n,p,q,r,s,t,v,w,x,z and sometimes y). "Lake,""book", and "back" are an example of consonance because they all have the same "K" sounds, even though the vowel sounds in these words are different. When the same consonants are used at the beginning of the word (for example, the words "sing" and "sell"), that is called alliteration.

You might choose to use off-rhymes instead of true rhymes, or in addition to them, to create a subtler effect.

Using off-rhymes also gives you more choices of words to rhyme. This often makes it possible to create more original or surprising rhymes. How many pop songs can you think of that rhyme "heart" with "apart?"

And when you hear the words "heaven above" in a song, you can bet that the word "love" is lurking nearby. There are only a few words that rhyme with "love," so they are used over and over again. Off-rhymes can help to remove some of that predictability so that you can come up with more interesting rhyme.
Rhyme schemes

The pattern of rhymes in a poem is written with the letters a, b, c, d, etc. The first set of lines that rhyme at the end are marked with a. The second set are marked with b. So, in a poem with the rhyme scheme abab, the first line rhymes with the third line, and the second line rhymes with the fourth line. In a poem with the rhyme scheme abcb, the second line rhymes with the fourth line, but the first and third lines don't rhyme with each other.

Here's an example of an abab rhyme scheme from a poem by Robert Herrick:

GATHER ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

Here's an example of an abcb rhyme scheme.

The itsy bitsy spider (a)
Went up the water spout (b)
Down came the rain (c)
And washed the spider out (b)

This one's aabcccb:

Little Miss Muffet
Sat on a tuffet
Eating her curds and whey.
Along came a spider
And sat down beside her
And frightened Miss Muffett away.
Here's a sonnet by Shakespeare. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; (a)
Coral is far more red than her lips' red; (b)
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun; (a)
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head. (b)
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white. (c)
But no such roses see I in her cheeks; (d)
And in some perfumes is there more delight (c)
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks. (d)
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know (e)
That music hath a far more pleasing sound; (f)
I grant I never saw a goddess go; (e)
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground: (f)
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare (g)
As any she belied with false compare. (g)

Can you figure out the rhyme scheme in this limerick by Edward Lear (1812-1888)? (Answer below):

There was an old man of the coast
Who placidly sat on a post
But when it was cold
He relinquished his hold
And called for some hot buttered toast.

Source: