

Classical Metres (Graeco-Latin)

The classical metres were inherited from Classical Learning and bear Greek names reflecting that origin. They were easily adapted to English poetry but the question was always open whether they were really part of the performance of English poets — that is to say, a natural part of the poetic language. In fact, English poetry derives its major impulse from the Stress System which assigns an equal number of stresses to each line (or parallel lines) in a stanza (or stanzas). In addition, much of English poetry obeys the law of Syllable-Count. Thus that the ‘iambic pentameter’ which is very largely used by Shakespeare in all his plays, is a ten-syllable line with variable stresses, no verse-rhymes and run-on sentences. Usually the metre is iambic: ‘See yonder light that through the window creeps ...’ This is arguably no more than measured prose—but it does share with all English poetry the use of stress as the main form of speaker-realisation, whether in reading, recital or on the stage. In the famous line, ‘To be or not to be ...’, Shakespeare achieves a powerful effect of emphasis by swapping the normal iambic ‘foot’ for a trochaic one, but obviously any speaker will distribute the stress correctly on the basis of the meaning and without reference to the classical metres.

Examples of Iambs, Trochees, Spondees, Dactyls, and Anapests

Once we know what stress is, we can note that many words and phrases in English naturally fall into iambs, trochees, spondees, dactyls, or anapests. Such words make it easy to spot the metrical pattern in a poem. Here are some examples:

Iamb or Iambus (iambic): = u /

u /

behold, amuse, arise, awake, return, Noel, depict, destroy, inject, inscribe, insist, employ, "to be," inspire, unwashed, "Of Mice and Men," "the South will rise again."

Trochee (trochaic): = / u

/ u

happy, hammer, Pittsburgh, nugget, double, incest, injure, roses, hippie, bubba, beat it, clever, dental, dinner, shatter, pitcher, Cleveland, chosen, planet, chorus, widow, bladder, cuddle, slacker, doctor, Memphis, "Doctor Wheeler," "Douglas County," market, picket

Spondee (spondaic): = //

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football, Mayday, D-Day, heartbreak, Key West, shortcake, plop-plop, fizz-fizz, drop-dead, dead man, dumbbell, childhood, goof-off, race-track, bathrobe, black hole, breakdown, love-song

Dactyl (dactylic): = / u u

/ u u

carefully, changeable, merrily, mannequin, tenderly, prominent, buffalo, Bellingham, bitterly, notable, horrible, glycerin, parable, scorpion, Indianapolis, Jefferson, Strawberry (as the word is pronounced in East Tennessee—elsewhere it's two longs and a short)

Anapest (anapestic): = u u /

u u /

understand, interrupt, comprehend, anapest, New Rochelle, contradict, "get a life," Coeur d'Alene, "In the blink of an eye"

Note that some words change their meter depending upon how they are used. For instance, the word *rebel* is pronounced one way when it is a noun, and another way as a verb. The same is true for *detail*. Likewise contrast words with similar pronunciation except for their patterns of stress: *rockets* with *Rockettes*, *glycerin* with *Listerine*, *travel* with *travail*, and so on.