

Foundation of the Sonnet: Iambic Pentameter

A **sonnet** is a classic form of short poem. What makes a sonnet? Most English sonnets have these characteristics:

- Sonnets have 14 lines. The last word of each line rhymes with the last word of one other line.
- Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables. In special cases, a line may have eleven, but that comes later
- The ten syllables of each line have a special stress rhythm: **ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM**.

Stress Patterns in English Words

Most English words have alternating soft-hard stress patterns. Take the word “invent.” “Invent” is a two syllable word with a soft stress and a hard stress. How can you tell? Try it both ways:

“**in**vent” “in**vent**” *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

Try reading it with an exaggerated sense of stress:

“**IN**-vent” “in-**VENT**” *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

Try reading it with your mouth closed, using “mmm” sounds.

“**MMM**-mm” “mm-**MMM**” *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

“Invent” is a word with a soft first syllable and a **hard** second syllable.

Most dictionaries provide stress instruction alongside their definitions.

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words.

- | | | | |
|-----------|------------------------|-------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. garlic | “GAR-lic” or “gar-LIC” | 5. vaccine | “VAC-cine” or “vac-CINE” |
| 2. forgot | “FOR-got” or “for-GOT” | 6. replaces | “RE-place-ES” or “re-PLACE-es” |
| 3. open | “O-pen” or “o-PEN” | 7. algebra | “AL-ge-BRA” or “al-GE-bra” |
| 4. absent | “AB-sent” or “ab-SENT” | 8. banana | “BA-na-NA” or “ba-NA-na” |

Some words can change meaning based on stress. The word “console” can be “CON-sole” or “con-SOLE,” for example. The spelling is the same, but the stress changes, and so does the meaning.

Circle the proper stress pattern for the word “console” in each sentence.

- I hugged Rita to _____ her after the race. (“CON-sole” / “con-SOLE”)
- Arnav got a Sony _____ for his birthday. (“CON-sole” / “con-SOLE”)
- Did Minecraft start as a _____ game? (“CON-sole” / “con-SOLE”)

Draw empty circles underneath soft stresses and solid circles underneath hard stresses. For example:

apple Toyota explode happy orangutan (There is no g at the end of orangutan.)
 ● ○ ○ ●○ ○ ● ● ○ ○ ●○ ●

- | | | |
|--------------|----------------|---------------|
| 12. describe | 16. dangerous* | 20. infection |
| 13. enhance | 17. double | 21. alarm |
| 14. shaving | 18. yo-yo | 22. kitten |
| 15. minister | 19. Atlanta | 23. pretend |

*Note: Dangerous is a **dactyl**: “DAN-ger-ous.” (“**It** can be **dangerous**, **running** with **knives**” is a dactylic phrase.) But in a sonnet, this word would usually sound okay as “DAN-ger-OUS.” (“The **deadly don’t** seem **dangerous** at **all**.”) It’s important to sound these words out honestly when you write! Just because **you** can talk yourself into it doesn’t mean the reader/audience will oblige!

Stress Patterns Across Multiple Words

Sometimes, the stress pattern is so strong that it extends across pairs of words. We say “**hot** dog,” for example. Here are some other phrases and their normal stress patterns:

blue jeans **French** fries French **toast** threw **up** good **luck** time **out** first **aid**

Stresses can change, if the meaning of the pair of words is different for a particular conversation. For example, if someone said: “Can we get French **toast** at this restaurant?” You might respond: “No, they don’t have **French** toast, just **plain** toast.” Stress changes meanings in sentences, too. Consider the difference between these two questions:

Is **Joe coming HERE** tomorrow? and Is **Joe coming here toMORRow**?
 Is Joe coming here or someplace else tomorrow? Is Joe coming here tomorrow, or some other time?

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words:

24. “**BREATH** mint” or “breath **MINT**” 26. “**ICE** cream” or “ice **CREAM**”
 25. “**BAD** breath” or “bad **BREATH**” 27. “**ICED** tea” or “iced **TEA**”

Write down what each of the following sentences means, following the examples given:

Roberta wants to borrow your guitar. Roberta would like you to lend her your guitar.

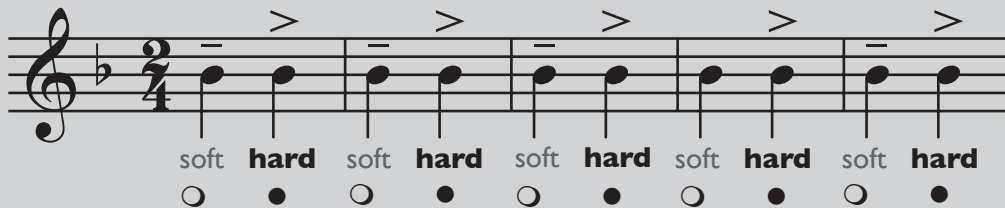
28. Roberta **wants to BORrow your guitar.** _____
 29. Roberta **wants to borrow YOUR guitar.** _____

Maria had an extra bag of chips. Maria had a bag of chips she did not need.

30. Maria **HAD an extra bag of chips.** _____
 31. Maria **had an extra bag of CHIPS.** _____

Building Syllables and Stresses Into Lines

Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables, like so:



If you read music at all, you might realize that there are five measures. Each measure has two beats, with one quarter note on each beat. Sonnets work the same way. Each line of a sonnet has five **iamb**s (“EYE-ams”). A line in a sonnet ought to come out to five iambs, or ten syllables. A line of five iambs is called **iambic pentameter**. A line would get these stress circles: ○● ○● ○● ○● ○●.

Exercises

Put stress circles under each of these lines of iambic pentameter. Draw ○ for soft stress, ● for hard stress.

32. Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!
 33. The evil that men do lives after them.
 34. I can’t eat ice cream, or I’ll get bad breath.

Exercises

Look at these everyday sentences. Draw circles under them. Decide if each is iambic pentameter or junk. (When it comes to sonnets, a sentence is either one or the other.)

- | | | |
|---|-------------------|------|
| 35. Nintendo used to make casino chips. | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 36. Is anyone left-handed besides Sam? | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 37. The salamander slept beneath the log | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 38. I don't think I could eat another bite. | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 39. You said that we could buy tickets later. | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 40. Man, some people have no sense of humor! | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 41. Did I delete your comment? My mistake. | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 42. He took the subway into town Sunday. | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 43. We caught my puppy chewing up the couch! | iambic pentameter | junk |
| 44. My goldfish died, but I'm over it now. | iambic pentameter | junk |

Making Iambic Pentameter from Lines of Text:

The tricky part about writing sonnets is that you can't just ignore iambic pentameter when you feel like it. If there's a sentence or a thought to express in a line, then you must figure out how to convey that thought in the proper form. Take the sentence "Who orders onion rings on a first date?" This sentence is not iambic pentameter:

Who orders onion rings on a first date? *How could you re-write it in iambic pentameter?*

● ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ○ ● ●

Start by looking for words that you **must** bring over to the new sentence. There is no good synonym for "onion rings," so you'll need those three syllables exactly as they are. Fortunately, "**onion rings**" has the right stress pattern. The pair "first date" could be "**first date**" or "**first date**" depending on the meaning. Here are two versions of this thought in iambic pentameter:

On **first** dates, **no** one **orders** **onion rings**. or On **first** dates **he** eats **onion rings**? That **fool**!

The two sentences above are not perfect replicas of the original thought. They have most of the same meaning and tone, but they are different. One of them is now two sentences, or a sentence and an exclamation. Notice that "eats" has become a synonym for "orders" in one of the sentences. Also, question marks or exclamation points **usually** put a hard stress on the last word (or syllable) of a sentence.

This process of re-wording and revising is where the most time and effort go into writing good sonnets. Few poets can write sonnets on the spot! Most sonnets need to go through several drafts.

Exercises

Pick three of the "junk" sentences from up above. Re-write them as iambic pentameter. Keep as much of the original meaning as you can, although you may have to change verb tenses or switch synonyms.

45. _____

46. _____

47. _____

Putting it All Together:

Iambic Pentameter is not rare. Many newspaper articles, blog posts, and book chapters will have a phrase or sentence in iambic pentameter. You probably say or write something in iambic pentameter every day, without ever realizing it. Iambic pentameter can happen accidentally. So, why study it?

Pentameter is a signal. In William Shakespeare’s plays, some characters speak entirely in iambic pentameter. These characters are often magical, royal, or special. Their rhythmic way of speaking was a way for Shakespeare to let the audience know that this special character deserved extra attention.

Pentameter is a beat. When the DJ plays a song you’ve never heard, it can be hard to dance to the song until you find the beat. You might even ignore the singer or the piano and listen for the drums or the bass until you find a steady, rhythmic pulse. Once you’ve found it, you can dance. When you read poetry written in iambic pentameter, the poet is offering you a beat to help you read.

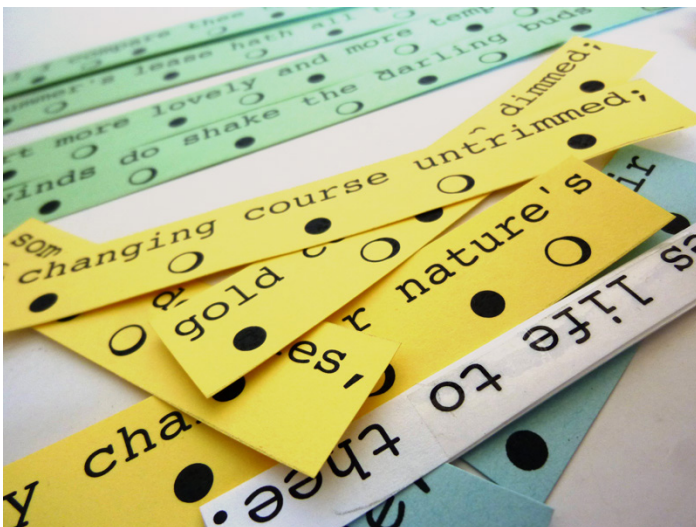
Pentameter is cool. Art doesn’t always need a “why?” Imagine a new music video: First, two teenagers are walking on the sidewalk, talking. One teenager starts rapping. Next, the other teen starts singing. Then, they both dance alongside with pedestrians on the sidewalk. None of this is “realistic,” but have you liked this sort of video? Probably. And you’ve been crystal-clear about the parts when people are singing, when they are rapping, and when they are just talking, right?

In 1590, people watching plays knew who was speaking verse and who was not. Nobody—not kings, not queens, probably not Shakespeare himself—spoke in iambic pentameter while shopping at the market or playing tennis with friends. Just as Drake (probably) doesn’t rap at the doctor’s office. Still, this elevated speech was something theatergoers could enjoy and look forward to.

Exercises

Find three phrases in the above passage that are in iambic pentameter. Phrases may be full or partial sentences.

48. _____
49. _____
50. _____



What’s Next?

For some students, the next step might be to try writing a **quatrain** (that’s four lines of iambic pentameter) or even a whole sonnet. But we have something better: **Sonnet Puzzles!** Our puzzles allow students to mix and match lines and phrases from classic and contemporary sonnets. You’ll gain practice with iambic patterns without the added pressure of writing your own poem (that can come later, and we’d love to see it!)

Your teacher can download a printable set of Sonnet Puzzles for you to cut out and try in class. You’ll need a printer, some colored paper, and tape. Visit www.bicycle-comics.com/pages/poetry.html