

Meters in English Poetry

A meter in writing is a rhythm of accented and unaccented syllables organized into feet, aka patterns.

The most common meters are:

Iambic

A foot which starts with an unaccented and ends with an accented (stressed) syllable. It is the most common meter in the English language and naturally falls into everyday conversation. An example is "To *be* or *not* to *be*" (the accented syllables are italicized) from Shakespeare's Hamlet.

Trochaic

The opposite of an iambic meter. It begins with an accented then followed by an unaccented syllable. An example is the line "*Double, double, toil and trouble.*" from Shakespeare's Macbeth.

Anapestic

A foot which has two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable. Example: "I *arise* and *unbuild* it *again*" from Shelley's Cloud.

Dactylic

A foot including an accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables. Example: *openly*.

Spondee

A foot consisting of two accented syllables. Example: *heartbreak*.

Pyrrhic

A foot including two unaccented syllables, generally used to vary rhythm.

As well, meters are named for the number of feet;

monometer: one foot,

dimeter: two feet,

trimeter: three feet,

tetrameter: four feet,

pentameter: five feet,

hexameter: six feet,

heptameter: seven feet.

From "An Essay on Criticism"

by Alexander Pope

True Ease in Writing comes from Art, not Chance,
As those move easiest who have learn'd to dance,
'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;

(1711)

When I Have Fears

by John Keats

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love;--then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

(1818)

The Charge of the Light Brigade

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
"Forward, the Light Brigade!
"Charge for the guns!" he said:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

2.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"
Was there a man dismay'd?
Not tho' the soldier knew
Someone had blunder'd:
Their's not to make reply,
Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die:
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

3.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon in front of them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
Boldly they rode and well,
Into the jaws of Death,
Into the mouth of Hell
Rode the six hundred.

4.

Flash'd all their sabres bare,
Flash'd as they turn'd in air,
Sabring the gunners there,
Charging an army, while
All the world wonder'd:
Plunged in the battery-smoke
Right thro' the line they broke;

Cossack and Russian
Reel'd from the sabre stroke
Shatter'd and sunder'd.
Then they rode back, but not
Not the six hundred.

5.

Cannon to right of them,
Cannon to left of them,
Cannon behind them
Volley'd and thunder'd;
Storm'd at with shot and shell,
While horse and hero fell,
They that had fought so well
Came thro' the jaws of Death
Back from the mouth of Hell,
All that was left of them, Left of six hundred.

6.

When can their glory fade?
O the wild charge they made!
All the world wondered.
Honor the charge they made,
Honor the Light Brigade,
Noble six hundred.

Copied from Poems of Alfred Tennyson,
J. E. Tilton and Company, Boston, 1870

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth; 5

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same, 10

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back. 15

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference

A villanelle is a nineteen-line poem comprising five triplets and a quatrain. It will usually be rhymed aba aba aba aba aba abaa. It makes use of alternate repetition: for example, the first line of the first stanza will be repeated as the third line in the second stanza, and the third line of the first stanza will be repeated as the third line of the third stanza.

Do not go gentle into that good night

Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of
day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is
right,
Because their words had forked no lightning
they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how
bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a
green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in
flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its
way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with
blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be
gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

The Waking

by Theodore Roethke

I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I feel my fate in what I cannot fear.
I learn by going where I have to go.

We think by feeling. What is there to know?
I hear my being dance from ear to ear.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Of those so close beside me, which are you?
God bless the Ground! I shall walk softly
there,
And learn by going where I have to go.

Light takes the Tree; but who can tell us
how?
The lowly worm climbs up a winding stair;
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.

Great Nature has another thing to do
To you and me, so take the lively air,
And, lovely, learn by going where to go.

This shaking keeps me steady. I should
know.
What falls away is always. And is near.
I wake to sleep, and take my waking slow.
I learn by going where I have to go.

From *The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke* by Theodore Roethke, published by Doubleday & Company, Inc. (Originally published in *The Waking*, 1953.)

Trochaic Rhythm

Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* is written almost entirely in trochees, barring the occasional substitution (iamb, spondee, pyrrhic, etc.).

Should you ask me, whence these stories?
Whence these legends and traditions,
With the odours of the forest,
With the dew and damp of meadows,

In the second line, "and tra-" is a pyrrhic substitution, as are "With the" in the third and fourth lines, and "of the" in the third. Even so, the dominant foot throughout the poem is the trochee.

Apart from the famous case of Longfellow's *Hiawatha*, this metre is rare in English verse, except with an extra long syllable added to each line, as in this example from Tennyson:

Go not, happy day,
From the shining fields;
Go not, happy day,
Till the maiden yields.

Some poets choose to alternate lines of full trochees and lines where the final unstressed syllable has been omitted. Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* is a perfect example.

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December;
And each separate dying ember wrought its ghost upon the floor.

Perhaps owing to its simplicity, though, trochaic meter is fairly common in children's rhymes:

Peter, Peter pumpkin-eater
Had a wife and couldn't keep her.

Often a few trochees will be interspersed among iambs in the same lines to develop a more complex or syncopated rhythm. Compare (William Blake):

Tyger, Tyger, burning bright
In the forests of the night

These lines are primarily trochaic, with the last syllable dropped so that the line ends with a stressed syllable to give a strong rhyme or masculine rhyme. By contrast, the intuitive way that the mind groups the syllables in later lines in the same poem makes them feel more like iambic lines with the first syllable dropped:

Did he smile his work to see?

Anapaestic Rhythm

An anapaest or anapest, also called antidactylus, is a metrical foot used in formal poetry. In classical quantitative meters it consists of two short syllables followed by a long one (as in a-na-paest); in accentual stress meters it consists of two unstressed syllables followed by one stressed syllable. It may be seen as a reversed dactyl.

Here is an example from William Cowper's "Verses Supposed to be Written by Alexander Selkirk" (1782), composed in anapaestic trimeter:

I am out of humanity's reach
I must finish my journey alone

Because of its length and the fact that it ends with a stressed syllable and so allows for strong rhymes, anapaest can produce a very rolling, galloping feeling verse, and allows for long lines with a great deal of internal complexity. The following is from Byron's *The Destruction of Sennacherib*:

The Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold
And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold
And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea
When the blue wave rolls nightly on deep Galilee.

An even more complex example comes from Yeats (*The Wanderings of Oisín*). He intersperses anapests and iambs, using six-foot lines (rather than four feet as above). Since the anapaest is already a long foot, this makes for very long lines.

Fled foam underneath us and 'round us, a wandering and milky smoke
As high as the saddle-girth, covering away from our glances the tide
And those that fled and that followed from the foam-pale distance broke.
The immortal desire of immortals we saw in their faces and sighed.

Twas the Night before Christmas

Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there.

The children were nestled all snug in their beds,
While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.
And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,
Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap.

