A Brief Introduction To Prosody
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The Basics

The poets we're reading in this class assumed that their readers possessed a good deal of knowledge about **prosody**, or the technical side of poetry, that most speakers of English no longer possess. Because our time is short, I have not assigned any of the many excellent books on prosody for this class; I do, however, recommend John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason* and Paul Fussell's *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form* as good introductory texts if you would like to supplement what we do in class. Hollander's book is shorter and a bit more accessible to the beginner, while Fussell's contains much more detail in general, including many examples taken from the work of poets we're reading in this class.

While prose uses the word, the sentence, and the paragraph as its building blocks English **verse** uses the **foot**, the **line**, and the **stanza**. (Hollander distinguishes the technical notion of "verse" from the narrower category of "poetry," which uses images and metaphor and such.)

Kinds of Metrical Systems

As Hollander puts it, "Verse can be organized according to very many **metrical systems**, depending on the structure of the language in which the verse is written." The systems most used in English are these:

1. **Pure accentual** verse requires a certain number of stresses per line, but the number of syllables can vary. Old English poetry is generally pure accentual verse, as are nursery rhymes and some lyric verse.

2. **Accentual-syllabic** verse requires both a set number of stresses and a set number of syllables. Iambic pentameter, for instance, is accentual-syllabic verse, as it is defined both by the five stresses of "pentameter" and by the syllabic definition of "iambic."

3. **Pure syllabic** verse, which requires only a set number of syllables in each line, is very seldom and only very recently used in English. The haiku is a pure syllabic form.

4. **Free verse** does not require any particular number of stresses or syllables per line. It has other conventions and requirements--"free" is largely a misnomer--but they are not the ones of traditional metrics.
Sound Patterns

The easiest and most important sound pattern to understand is rhyme. Most verse written before the 20th century uses a pattern of end rhymes called a "rhyme scheme," which is described in the next paragraph. (End rhymes are those that come at the, well, end of lines. Internal rhyme, on the other hand, describes rhymes in which at least one of the rhyming words does not end a line.) Slant rhymes are almost-rhymes, often with the same consonants but slightly different vowel sounds. For instance, "mood" and "brood" is a plain old rhyme, while "mood" and "good" is a slant rhyme.

The rhyme scheme of a poem is written in small letters, with "a" signifying the first end rhyme sound, "b" the second, and so on. A space between letters stand for a stanza break. If the notation is typewritten, the scheme is generally italicized. Thus, the rhyme scheme of a Shakespearean sonnet is written abababdcdefefgg, while that of a quatrain-based poem (see below) might be abab cdcd efef . . . The ellipsis (" . . .") signifies a repeating pattern, as it does in mathematical notation.

Alliteration and assonance separate out the components of rhyme to describe less exact sonic links between words. Alliteration is the repetition of a consonant sound, while assonance is the repetition of a vowel sound. Here's some alliteration of "w" sounds from an Early Modern ballad:

There lived a wife at Usher's Well,
And a wealthy wife was she; . . .

The "Rape of the Lock" line, "He watched the ideas rising in her mind" uses assonance to link the "i" sounds of the line.

Metrical Feet

A foot is defined by the number of syllables and stresses it contains. A stressed syllable is generally louder in volume, higher in pitch, and longer in duration than an unstressed syllable.

Two-syllable feet

An iamb contains an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable; "A bug!" is an iamb, as is "But why?". The vast majority of English verse uses the iamb as the base foot. The other two-syllable feet occur frequently in iambic meters as substitutions for iambs.) The adjective form is iambic.

A trochee contains a stressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. "Erik Simpson" is a pair of trochees, for example. The adjective form is trochaic.
A **spondee** contains two stressed syllables, as in "Oh my!" The adjective form is **spondaic**.

A **pyrrhic** contains two unstressed syllables, which makes it difficult to think of examples that stand alone. (A pyrrhic victory is a battle with no real winner; a pyrrhic foot is one with no stress.) The adjective form is also **pyrrhic**.

**Three-syllable feet**

A **dactyl** has one stressed syllable followed by two unstressed ones. "Magical" is a dactyl. The adjective form is **dactylic**.

An **anapest** has two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed one. (As you may have noted, "anapest" is a dactyl. Oh, well.) "But I *must!*" is an anapest. The adjective form is **anapestic**.

Put it all together, and add the more obscure amphibrac and antispast, and you can do cool things like this:

Metrical Feet  
Lesson For a Boy  

**Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

Trochee trips from long to short;  
From long to long in solemn sort  
Slow Spondee stalks; strong foot! yet ill able  
Ever to come up with Dactyl trisyllable.  
Iambics march from short to long;---  
With a leap and a bound the swift Anapests throng;  
One syllable long, with one short at each side,  
Amphibrachys hastes with a stately stride;---  
First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer  
Strikes his thundering hoofs like a proud high-bred Racer.  
If Derwent be innocent, steady, and wise,  
And delight in the things of earth, water, and skies;  
Tender warmth at his heart, with these metres to show it,  
With sound sense in his brains, may make Derwent a poet,---  
May crown him with fame, and must win him the love  
Of his father on earth and his Father above.  
   My dear, dear child!  
Could you stand upon Skiddaw, you would not from its whole ridge  
See a man who so loves you as your fond S. T. Coleridge.
Lines

When metrical feet start forming gangs and hanging out together in regular patterns, they tend to become **lines**. By counting the feet in a line, you can discover the meter by adding the Greek prefix for the number, like so:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feet</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Monometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Trimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tetrameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pentameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Hexameter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(A line of iambic hexameter is an **alexandrine**--see the last line of "Adam Pos'd.")

The number of syllables per line in accentual-syllabic verse will be the number of feet per line times the number of syllables per foot. In other words, iambic pentameter has ten syllables (five iambs times two syllables/iamb), while anapestic tetrameter has twelve (four anapests times three syllables/anapest).

Lines can be either **end-stopped** or **enjambed**. End-stopped lines put a clear rhythmic break at the end of each line, often reinforced by a comma or period. Wordsworth's "She Dwelt Among the Untrodden Ways" is end-stopped, ending

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She lived unknown, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be;
But she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference to me!
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The fact that the reader is trained by the ballad meter of the poem reinforces the lament of the last two lines: because the meter makes sure the "oh" is end-stopped, the sigh lingers a touch longer than it would in an enjambed poem. Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," on the other hand, is generally enjambed. It begins,

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Five years have passed; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, . . .
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The running enjambment of the **blank verse** in "Tintern Abbey" creates a special emphasis for the few end-stopped lines. ("Blank verse" is unrhymed iambic pentameter.)
Line Groupings and Stanzas

When two rhyming lines get together, they form a **couplet**. If they happen to be lines of iambic pentameter—as couplets very often are—then they form a **heroic couplet**. The early eighteenth century was a big time for heroic couplets; it's no fluke that both Finch and Pope use them in the poems we're reading. Heroic couplets often include carefully placed **caesuras**, or rhythmic breaks, in the middle of the line, creating two balanced sections in each line, as in this couplet from Pope's "The Rape of the Lock":

Favours to none, to all she smiles exends;  
Oft she rejects, but never once offends.

Note that Pope uses a trochaic substitution at the beginning of each line (thus emphasizing the first syllable), which increases the balancing effect by weighting both ends of the line. **Substitution** is the insertion of a different metrical foot for the base foot in order to produce rhythmic variety.

A **tercet** is a group of three lines. The most famous tercet form is the Italian **terza rima**, the form of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which uses the interlocking rhyme scheme *aba bcb cdc* . . .

A **quatrain** is a group of four lines. Ballad stanzas are quatrains, but many other kinds of poems use quatrains, too, with all conceivable variations of rhyme scheme. Shakespearean sonnets consist of three quatrains and a couplet.

Those are the most common grouping, but you should also know the **sestet**, or group of six, and **octave**, or group of eight, because they are the building blocks of the Petrarchan sonnet.