

Rhythm in Poetry

Rhythm refers to the pattern of sounds made by varying the stressed and unstressed syllables in a poem.

There are five basic rhythms in English poetry:

1. Iambic (made up of units of : one stressed syllable and one unstressed syllable, or “x /”)
2. Trochaic (made up of units of: one unstressed stressed and one stressed syllable, or “/ x”)
3. Spondaic (made up of units of: two unstressed syllables, or “/ /”)
4. Anapestic (made up of units of: two stressed syllables and one unstressed, or “x x /”)
5. Dactylic (made up of units of: one unstressed syllable and two stressed syllables, or “/ / x”)

Each of these units is called a “foot.” For example, one iamb or iambic foot is “x/.” If a line has 10 syllables and they are all arranged in iambic units, then the line has 5 feet. This specific rhythm is called “iambic pentameter,” and was popularized by Shakespeare.

Important Terms:

- “Rhythm” is a sound pattern (a beat) using one or more kinds of meter.
- “Meter” refers to the number of “feet” of a specific kind in a line of poetry.
- A “Foot” is the measurement for one unit of poetry (usually two- three syllables).

Why Would You Chose to Use Rhythm in Your Poem ?

You are already using a rhythm in your writing, whether you know it or not. All sounds break down into some sort of pattern. Even daily conversation contains rhythm. The question is whether you will work to make your rhythms sounds better and flow more smoothly or not.

Three Ways to Play with Rhythm

1. Use Caesurae: a caesura is a visible break or pause in a line of poetry (shown either by punctuation or empty space) that signifies a pause while reading the line. These breaks change the rhythm of the lines. Although they do not change the kinds of feet used, they change the final pattern of the line. Caesuras were popular in old and middle English writing, when poetry was spoken aloud. For example:

“Sigemund's glory grew and grew
because of his courage when he killed the dragon,
the guardian of the hoard. Under grey stone...”
(From Seamus Heaney's translation of *Beowulf*, lines 884-886)

2. Use Enjambment: enjambment occurs in poetry when a phrase in one line continues into the next. This means that there is no punctuation cutting up the idea of the phrase, and no signal for the reader to pause. The phrase is read as if it were one long line of poetry, but it is written as two (or more) lines. Although this does not change the meter (number of feet per line), it does change the way a poem sounds when it is read. Thus, it changes the oral rhythm of the poem. Here is an example:

“When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;”
(From T. S. Eliot's “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” lines 2-3)

***For more information please see the enjambment handout posted on the WiER resources page.

3. Use a Change in Rhythm for Emphasis: The reader will notice a significant change in rhythm (such as a shift from iambic pentameter to trochaic hexameter) in a poem. This means that the lines where the change occurs will stand out, or be emphasized. Many poets (such as Shakespeare) use changes in rhythm to point out something to the reader. For example:

Sonnet CXXX

William Shakespeare

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

Notice the change in rhythm used in the last couplet (the last two lines). While most of the poem is written in iambic pentameter, the second last line of it has only 8 syllables. The last line returns to 10 syllables. Thus, the final couplet, full of rhythmic changes, stands out as the most important part of the sonnet. The change in rhythm matches the change in the speakers' tone, as he explains that he really does love his mistress, even though he has not been describing her very kindly.

(Note: This important shift in tone in a sonnet is referred to as a “volte”)

All three of these poetic techniques can be used to play with rhythm and add to the beauty of your poetry.

Exercises A (class activity): Finding Rhythm in Speech

Go around the classroom and talk to five different friends for a minute or two each. Listen to your friends' speech, notice the rhythm they use. Take notes on each one. At the end, answer these questions:

- What kinds of rhythm do you hear?
- Is one more common than the other? Which one?
- Did it become easier to catch your friends' rhythms towards the end of this exercise?

Exercise B (individual activity): Finding and Creating Rhythm in Your Poetry

Pick one of your own poems that you are open to changing, and follow these steps:

1. Read it over to yourself and mark all of the stressed and unstressed syllables.
2. Answer these questions: What kind of rhythms does your poem contain? Is there one rhythm that your poem uses the most, or that seems to fit your poem best?
3. Now, pick your favourite rhythm and rewrite your poem to use mostly that rhythm. You may, however, change the rhythm for emphasis. Feel free to use caesurae or enjambment.