

Poetry Terms – A Quick Reference Guide

What Is Poetry?

It is words arranged in a rhythmic pattern with regular accents (like beats in music), words which are carefully selected for sound, accent and meaning to express imaginatively ideas and emotions. Each poem has rhythm, melody, imagery, and form.

What Can Poetry Do Better Than Prose?

Poetry attempts to recreate pleasure and experience to deepen the meaning of life—acutely focusing to increase awareness and intensity of a subject. Not only the visual dimensions, but the emotional dimensions of our world, as well. It is a synthesis of experience: scientific and the literary—participatory and observational. Poetry is a multidimensional language: meter, sound, meaning, intelligence, senses, emotions, and imaginations. Poetry also has the ability to sneak beneath the radar of the political world, and effect change.

What Is Rhythm?

Rhythm is produced by a recurring pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables and pauses. Each poem has a **metric pattern** (except in “free verse” which has no metrical pattern since it is based on the natural cadences of speech). That is, the accents of the syllables in the words fall at regular intervals, like the beat of music. This pattern is described by indicating the kind and number of **feet** in a regular verse line. A foot is defined as one stressed syllable and a number of unstressed syllables (from zero to as many as four).

The Four Most Common Feet

Accented = (/) “DUMM”

Unaccented = (~) “de”

No. of Syllables Technical Name

2	iamb, iambic	~/	de DUMM	~/~/	a WAY, i WILL
2	trochee, trochaic	/~	DUMM de	/~/~	COM ing, DO it
3	anapest, anapestic	~~/	de de DUMM	~~/~~/	can non ADE, let us IN
3	dactyl, dactylic	/~~	DUMM de de	/~~/~~	VIC to ries, TWO of them
2	spondee, spondaic	//	DUMM DUMM	////	BASE BALL, PEO PLE
2	pyrrhus, pyrraic	~~	de de	~~~~	

The beat of poetry feet is called **meter**.

Marking lines as the following are marked to show **feet** or **meter** is called **scansion**:

~/ ~/ ~/ ~/

The stag | at eve | had drunk | his fill

This line above is **iambic tetrameter**. (4 iamb feet per line)

If meter should vary within a line, it is called **inversion**.

The number of feet in a line is expressed as follows:

1 foot monometer	6 feet hexameter
2 feet dimeter	7 feet heptameter
3 feet trimeter	8 feet octameter
4 feet tetrameter	9 feet nonameter
5 feet pentameter	

What Is Melody?

Like music, each poem has **melody** (i.e., sound devices). A poet chooses words for their sound, as well as for their meaning. **Rhythm**, of course, is a kind of sound device based upon pattern. **Euphony** (literally “good sound”) and **cacophony** (literally “bad sound”) contribute to producing **melody**, or a musical quality in verse.

POETIC PAUSES

Pauses do not usually figure significantly in scansion, but they do affect the rhythm of a line, just as they affect the rhythm of music. There are three types of pauses:

End-stopped which is a pause at the end of a line.

Caesura which is a pause that occurs within a line.

Enjambement which is a line that “runs over” to the next line without a pause.

What is Rhyme?

One of the principle tools of melody is **rhyme** — that is where two words have the same sound on their last accented vowel preceded by different consonants, such as:

Single (Masculine) Rhyme dame, same; love, dove

Double (Feminine) Rhyme napping, tapping; weather, heather

Triple Rhyme mournfully, scornfully; victorious, glorious

Other rhyming terms include:

Sight Rhyme in which two words look alike but don’t sound alike, such as “LOVE” and “JOVE”

Slant Rhyme in which two words are nearly rhymed but have a slight variation, such as “LAKE” and “FATE.” **NOTE:** Sometimes what is now a sight rhyme was once a true rhyme, but pronunciation changes have occurred, such as “AGAIN” and “RAIN.”

Identical Rhyme in which two words are spelled differently but have the same pronunciation (also called **homonyms**), such as “TWO” and “TOO” or “RITE” and “RIGHT.”

End Rhyme in which the rhyming words occur at the ends of lines of poetry.

Internal Rhyme in which the rhyme occurs inside a line, such as – “Let’s BEAT the HEAT.”

Other Sound Devices

Besides rhyme, poets also use other sound effects:

Alliteration: the repetition of similar speech sounds in closely associated words or syllables, often at the beginning of words: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.

Anaphora: repeating a sequence of words at the beginnings of neighboring clauses, thereby lending them emphasis, such as: “Mad world! Mad kings! Mad composition!”

Assonance: is the repetition of identical vowel sounds in syllables that have different consonant sounds, such as “LAKE” and “FAKE” or “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan” (which repeats only vowel sounds).

Consonance: the repetition at close intervals of the final consonant sounds of accented syllables or important words, such as book-plaque-thicker.

Onomatopoeia: the use of words which sound like their meanings, such as “HISS,” “MURMUR,”

“BUZZ,” and so on. A really skillful poet may merely use S-sounds in a poem about a snake, rather than the word “HISS.”

What Is Imagery

Each poem also uses **imagery** which is produced by **figures of speech**. These take many forms, but all are rhetorical methods which affect the literal meaning of words. Let’s start by looking at single words which appear synonymous:

- dumb, stupid, slow, uneducated, ignorant, obtuse, dense
- smart, clever, shrewd, brilliant, intelligent, with-it, cagey
- skinny, slender, thin, emaciated, scrawny, lithe, lean, underweight
- fat, chubby, plump, corpulent, pudgy, junoesque, zaftig, overweight
- home, house, shack, bungalow, mansion, crib, pad, hearth, quarters

Even though the **denotation** (literal meaning) of the words appears synonymous, the **connotation** (figurative meaning) is different. Figures of speech work the same way.

Denotation: the basic dictionary definition of a word; words often have a number of definitions
Connotation: what a word suggests beyond its basic definition; a word’s overtones of meaning.

Imagery is the representation through language of sense experience. There are six types of imagery:

Visual: sight
Tactile: touch
Olfactory: smell
Auditory: sound
Gustatory: taste
Organic: internal feel (e.g., thirst, fatigue, nausea)

Imagery is the use of figures of speech which are **concrete** — it always refers to a sensory experience. The sun perceived by the senses is **concrete**; the enlightenment associated with it is **abstract** (perceived by the intellect, not the senses). Thus, we have the **image** of a peacock which serves as the **vehicle** of the comparison. Its **theme** or meaning may be something abstract like vanity or beauty, but the **image** must be concrete.

What Is Figurative Language?

Figure of speech include all ways of saying something other than the ordinary way; a way of saying one thing and meaning something that is much richer than the literal meaning. Generally speaking, there are **three kinds of figures of speech**: comparisons, substitutions, and ambiguities.

Type 1: Comparisons

Analogy: A comparison of two things, alike in certain aspects – a simile is an expressed analogy; a metaphor is an implied one.

Metaphor: Two unlike things compared directly, implying several similar qualities, such as “The river is a snake which coils on itself.”

Simile: Two unlike things compared using “like” or “as,” implying only one similar quality, such as “The man paced like a hungry lion.”

Personification: Giving human qualities to inanimate objects or non-human creatures, such as “The trees danced in the breeze.”

Apostrophe: Addressing someone absent or dead or something nonhuman as if it were alive and present and could reply, such as “O world! Tell me thy pain!” Thus, it is a kind of personification.

Allusion: Referring metaphorically to persons, places or things from history or previous literature, with which the reader is expected to have enough familiarity to make extended associations, such as “The new kid is as mean as Grendel and twice as ugly” (reference to *Beowulf*) or “He must think he’s some kind of Superman.”

Allegory: A form of extended metaphor in which objects, persons, and actions in a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative itself, such as *Everyman*. Special kinds of allegories include the fable and the parable.

Conceit: An extended or elaborate metaphor which forms the framework of an entire poem with all comparisons being interrelated in some way, such as “What Is Our Life?” by Sir Walter Raleigh.

Symbolism: The use of one object to represent or suggest another object or an idea. Thus, a *rose* might be used to symbolize the loved one or love in general, depending on the context.

Type 2: Substitutions

Metonymy: Substitution of one word for another closely related word, such as “The pot’s boiling” or “The White House announced...”

Synechdoche: Substitution of part for the whole, such as “All hands on deck” or “a nice set of wheels,” where *hands* represents the sailors on a ship and *wheels* represents a car.

Synaesthesia: Substitution of one sensory response for another (or the concurrent stimulation of several senses), such as “a blue note” or “cool green” or “The blind man turned his face to feel the sun.”

Type 3: Ambiguities

Hyperbole/Overstatement: Saying more than is true, a purposeful over-exaggeration in service of the truth, such as “He wore his fingers to the bone.”

Meiosis/Understatement: Saying less than is true, a purposeful under-exaggeration, such as “The reports of my death have been exaggerated.”

Verbal Irony: Saying the opposite to what is true, such as “War is kind.”

Antithesis: Using contrasts for an accumulative effect, such as “Man proposes; God disposes.”

Oxymoron: An antithesis which brings together two sharply contradictory terms, such as “wise fool,” “little big man,” “eloquent silence,” and “loving hate.”

Litotes: A form of understatement in which a thing is affirmed by stating the negative of its opposite, such as “He was not untruthful” which actually means he was truthful.

Paradox: A statement which while seemingly contradictory or absurd may actually be well-founded or true; a logic twist, such as “Everything I say is a lie.”

Pun: A play on words based on the similarity of sound between two words with different meanings, such as “To write with a broken pencil is pointless.”

Neologism: A word concocted for deliberate effect, such as “slithy” from “lithe” and “slimy,” “frumious” from “fuming” and “furious.” Some such words actually become a part of the language, such as “smog” (smoke plus fog) “brunch,” or “motel.” Sometimes called a **coined word** or a **portmanteau word**.

What Is Poetic License?

It means that a poet is allowed to break rules in order to improve his poem in some way. For example, he may break a spelling rule to make his rhyme or his meter more perfect, such as using “oft” instead of “often.” The whole point of “poetic license” is dependent upon the poet’s knowledge of the very rules he is breaking. Irregularities should be deliberately planned by the poet to establish a desired poetic effect; they should not be unintentional errors.

What Is Form?

And finally, every poem has form. A poet can arrange his poem so that you will read it as he wants you to read it to get its sound, rhythm, and emphasis. The length of lines and the location of pauses affect the speed at which you read his poem. In modern free verse the very typographical arrangement of words in lines produces emphasis, just as regular rhythm and rhyme produce emphasis in regular verse.

There is such a vast difference in the following arrangements of words that the very meaning of the words is changed:

Star, if you are a love compassionate, you will walk
with us this year. We face a glacial distance who are
here huddled at your feet. —Burford

Star,
If you are
A love compassionate,
You will walk with us this year.
We face a glacial distance who are here
Huddl’d
At your feet.
--Burford

The appearance of the poem is often a clue to its form, since form is usually determined by the number of lines, the length of the lines, the rhythmic pattern, and/or the rhyming scheme. The **rhyming scheme** (rhyme pattern) can be determined only by looking at the form of the whole poem. Rhyme schemes are indicated by the use of letters to designate rhyming combinations, such as “a-b-a-b” or “a-a-b-b”

KINDS OF POETRY ACCORDING TO FORM:

- Regular Verse
- Blank Verse
- Free Verse

REGULAR VERSE: Has both rhyme and rhythm

<i>Lines</i>	<i>What It's Called</i>	<i>What It Is</i>
2	rhymed couplet	2 lines with identical rhymes
2	heroic couplet	2 lines with identical rhymes in iambic pentameter (common in Chaucer)
3	tercet, triplet	3 lines – any rhyme scheme, any meter
4	quatrain	4 lines – any rhyme scheme, any meter
4	ballad quatrain	4 lines rhyming a b c b; 1st & 3rd lines iambic tetrameter, 2nd & 4th lines iambic trimeter
5	quintet	5 lines – any rhyme scheme, any meter
5	cinquain	5 lines – no rhyme, no meter BUT consisting respectively of 2, 4, 6, 8 and, 2 syllables a line
		6 sestet 6 lines (often 3 sets of couplets) any rhyme scheme, any meter
7	rime royal	7 lines rhyming a b a b b c c, iambic pentameter
8	octave	8 lines – any rhyme scheme, any meter
8	ottava rima	8 lines rhyming a b a b a b c c iambic pentameter
9	Spenserian stanza	9 lines rhyming a b a b b c b c c lines 1 - 8 iambic pentameter line 9 iambic hexameter
14	sonnet	14 lines iambic pentameter English - 3 quatrains + 1 couplet abab cdcd efef gg Italian - 1 octave + 1 sestet abbaabba cdecde OR cdccde OR cdccdc OR...
19	villanelle	19 lines – 5 tercets + 1 quatrain 2 repeating refrains – 8 of 19 lines are refrain line 1 A' (repeated entirely at 6, 12, & 18) line 3 A" (repeated entirely at 9, 15, & 19) scheme – A'bA" abA' abA" abA' abA" abA'A"
BLANK VERSE		
Any number	No rhyme	Usually iambic pentameter
FREE VERSE		
Any number	No rhyme	No meter

POETRY IS ALSO CLASSIFIED BY CONTENT:

Narrative Poetry A nondramatic poem which tells a story or presents a narrative, whether simple or complex, long or short; e.g., **ballad, epic, metrical romance**

Ballad: a short poem, often written by an anonymous author, comprised of short verses intended to be sung or recited.

Epic: A long narrative poem detailing a hero's deeds. Examples include *The Odyssey, The Aeneid, and Beowulf*

Dramatic Poetry Poetry which employs dramatic form or dramatic techniques as a means of achieving poetic ends; e.g., **verse drama, dramatic monologue, verse dialogue**. You can find excellent examples of these in all of the works of Shakespeare.

Lyric Poetry A brief subjective poem marked by imagination, melody, and emotion, but strict definition is impossible. The following are the most common types:

Elegy: a poem that serves as a mournful lament for the dead. Examples include Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem" and Alfred, Lord Tennyson's "In Memoriam."

Sonnet: a fourteen-line poem, usually written in iambic pentameter, with a varied rhyme scheme. The two main types are the **Petrarchan** (or Italian) and the **Shakespearean** (or English). A Petrarchan sonnet opens with an octave that states the proposition and ends with a sestet that states the solution. A Shakespearean sonnet includes three quatrains and a couplet.

Epitaph: a commemorative inscription on a tomb or mortuary monument written in praise, or reflecting the life, of a deceased person.

Ode: a poem that praises people, the arts of music and poetry, natural scenes, or abstract concepts. Examples include: Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and Percy Shelley's in "Ode to the West Wind."

Pastoral: a poem dealing with the lives of shepherds or rural life in general and typically drawing a contrast between the innocence and serenity of a simple life and the misery and corruption of city and especially court life. Examples include: Christopher Marlowe's "The Passionate Shepherd to His Love," Sir Walter Raleigh's "The Nymph's Reply to the Shepherd," and Thomas Campion's "I Care Not For These Ladies."