

Linguistics 103. Language Structure and Verbal Art.
What is Iambic Meter?

Consider the following passage from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* IV.15.

CLEOPATRA

No more, but e'en a woman, and commanded
By such poor passion as the maid that milks
And does the meanest chares. It were for me
To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods;
To tell them that this world did equal theirs
Till they had stol'n our jewel. All's but naught;
Patience is scottish, and impatience does
Become a dog that's mad: then is it sin
To rush into the secret house of death,
Ere death dare come to us? How do you, women?
What, what! good cheer! Why, how now, Charmian!
My noble girls! Ah, women, women, look,
Our lamp is spent, it's out! Good sirs, take heart:
We'll bury him; and then, what's brave, what's noble,
Let's do it after the high Roman fashion,
And make death proud to take us. Come, away:
This case of that huge spirit now is cold:
Ah, women, women! come; we have no friend
But resolution, and the briefest end.

This passage are written in *iambic pentameter*. For a first approximation we can assume that an iambic pentameter line consists of at least ten positions, and each position contains a single syllable. The positions may be W (weak) or S (strong).

Take the following then, as a template for the iambic line:

W S W S W S W S W S (W)

The W in parentheses at the end indicates that there may be an optional W position at the end of the line.

On the basis of the data from the above passage, evaluate the following hypotheses and be prepared to argue for one of them.

HYPOTHESES

For Shakespeare, a line of iambic verse is metrically well-formed if and only if:

Hypothesis 1. Every W position contains an unstressed syllable and every S position contains a stressed syllable.

Hypothesis 2. Every W position contains an unstressed syllable.

Hypothesis 3. Every S position contains a stressed syllable.

Hypothesis 4. Every stressed syllable occupies an S position

Hypothesis 5. Every stressless syllable occupies a W position.

Hypothesis 6. None of the above.
(If you choose this option be prepared to explain why.)