

Learning to Scan

LING0001 Fall 2023

Iambic Pentameter:

iamb = (˘ ¯) in quantitative systems like Greek and Latin

i.e. *short + long*

where long may be “resolved” into two shorts

iamb = (w s) in accentual-syllabic systems like English

i.e. *weak + strong*

where ideally *weak* = “unstressed”

and *strong* = “stressed”

pentameter = five “measures” = “feet”

W S W S W S W S W S

“Pentameter” = 5 binary “feet”
= 10 positions

So how many syllables?

And which syllables can line up where?

W S W S W S W S W S

That pattern defines the "meter"
which is like a musical beat -

And "scansion" is like the process
of fitting words to music.

In some cases, there are 10 syllables
aligned with the 10 positions
such that stressed syllables line up with s(trong) positions
and unstressed syllables line up with w(eak) positions

The first two lines of Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*:

W S W S W S W S W S
 * * * * *

• • • • • • • • • •

Tis hard to say, if greater want of skill

W S W S W S W S W S
 * * * *

• • • • • • • • •

Appear in writing or in judging ill

But there are often more than 10 syllables.

And stress doesn't always align with s(trong).

Let's take a look...

Hamlet's soliloquy:

To be, or not to be--that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them. To die, to sleep--
No more--and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep--
To sleep--perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.

W S W S W S W S W S

* * * * *

. +

To be, or not to be--that is the question:

W S W S W S W S W S

* * * * *

. +

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

- “feminine” line ending = extra-metrical weak syllable
- “inversion” = stressed syllable in w(eak) position after a break (especially at the start of the line)

The basic stress-alignment rule:

No local stress maximum in a w(eak) position.

From Shakespeare, Richard III:

Now is the winter of our discontent

W S W S W S W S W S

· · · · · · · · · ·

Made glorious summer by this sun of York;

“elision” = vowel not counted as separate syllable
(because maybe not pronounced)

From Shakespeare's Richard II:

Harry of Hereford, Lancaster and Derby
Am I; who ready here do stand in arms,
To prove, by God's grace and my body's valour,
In lists, on Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk,
That he is a traitor, foul and dangerous,

W S W S W S W S W S
.
To God of heaven, King Richard and to me;

“elision” can also be unstressed syllabic nasal as in “heav’n”

Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sonnet IV:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
So make the most of this, your little day,
Your little month, your little half a year
Ere I forget, or die, or move away,
And we are done forever; by and by
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie
I will protest you with my favorite vow.
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,
And vows were not so brittle as they are,
But so it is, and nature has contrived
To struggle on without a break thus far,—
Whether or not we find what we are seeking
Is idle, biologically speaking.

W S W S W S W S W S

. +

Whether or not we find what we are seeking

W S W SW S W S W S

. +

Is idle, biologically speaking

Which of these are (or could be) iambic pentameter?

1. Vigil strange I kept on the field one night

2. And did those feet in ancient time

Walk upon England's mountains green

3. Amazing Grace, How sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

4. Those hours, that with gentle work did frame

The lovely gaze where every eye doth dwell

5. The winter! the brightness that blinds you,

The white land locked tight as a drum,

The cold fear that follows and finds you,

The silence that bludgeons you dumb.

6. Because I could not stop for Death –
He kindly stopped for me –
The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.
7. The outlook wasn't brilliant for the Mudville Nine that day;
The score stood four to two, with but one inning more to play,
And then when Cooney died at first, and Barrows did the same,
A sickly silence fell upon the patrons of the game.
8. When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep

Hey Diddle Diddle,
The cat and the fiddle,
The cow jumped over the moon.
The little dog laughed,
To see such sport,
And the dish ran away with the spoon.

Hickory, dickory, dock.
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
The mouse ran down,
Hickory, dickory, dock.

W.H. Auden: "[Under Which Lyre](#)" ([discussion](#))

Ares at last has quit the field,
The bloodstains on the bushes yield
 To seeping showers,
And in their convalescent state
The fractured towns associate
 With summer flowers.

Encamped upon the college plain
Raw veterans already train
 As freshman forces;
Instructors with sarcastic tongue
Shepherd the battle-weary young
 Through basic courses.

Among bewildering appliances
For mastering the arts and sciences
 They stroll or run,
And nerves that steeled themselves to slaughter
Are shot to pieces by the shorter
 Poems of Donne.

William Butler Yeats: "[The Second Coming](#)"

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?