Rhythm, Meter, and Scansion Made Easy

rhythm: the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line.
meter: the number of feet in a line.
scansion: Describing the rhythms of poetry by dividing the lines into feet, marking the locations of stressed and unstressed syllables, and counting the syllables.

Thus, when we describe the rhythm of a poem, we "scan" the poem and mark the stresses (/) and absences of stress (^) and count the number of feet.

In English, the major feet are:

iamb (^/)
^ /^ / ^ /^ / ^/^ /^ /
The falling out of faithful friends, renewing is of love

trochee (/^)
/^ /^ / ^ /^
Double, double toil and trouble

anapest (^^/)
^ ^ /^ ^ / ^ ^/
I am monarch of all I survey

dactyl (/^^)
/ ^ ^ /^^
Take her up tenderly

spondee (//)
pyrrhic (^^)

Iambic and **anapestic** meters are called rising meters because their movement rises from unstressed syllable to stressed; **trochaic** and **dactylic** meters are called falling. In the twentieth century, the bouncing meters--anapestic and dactylic--have been used more often for comic verse than for serious poetry.

Spondee and **pyrrhic** are called feet, even though they contain only one kind of stressed syllable. They are never used as the sole meter of a poem; if they were, it would be like the steady impact of nails being hammered into a board--no pleasure to hear or dance to. But inserted now and then, they can lend emphasis and variety to a meter, as Yeats well knew when he broke up the predominantly iambic rhythm of "Who Goes With Fergus?" with the line,

^ ^ / / ^ ^ / /

And the white breast of the dim sea,

A frequently heard metrical description is iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs. This is a meter especially familiar because it occurs in all blank verse (such as Shakespeare's plays), heroic couplets, and sonnets.

Pentameter is one name for the number of feet in a line. The commonly used names for line lengths are:

monometer	one foot	**pentameter**	five feet
dimeter	two feet	**hexameter**	six feet
trimeter	three feet	**heptameter**	seven feet
tetrameter	four feet	**octameter**	eight feet

The scansion of this quatrain from Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 shows the following accents and divisions into feet (note the following words were split: behold, yellow, upon, against, ruin'd):

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /

That time | of year | thou mayst | in me | be hold |

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /

When yel | low leaves, | or none, | or few, | do hang |

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /

Up on | those boughs | which shake | a gainst | the cold, |

^ / ^ / ^ / ^ / ^ /

Bare ru | in'd choirs | where late | the sweet birds sang |

From this, we see the rhythm of this quatrain is made up of one unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable, called an iambic foot. We also see there are five feet per line, making the meter of the line pentameter. So, the rhythm and meter are iambic pentameter.

Rhythm and Meter

The morns are meeker than they were,
The nuts are getting brown;
The berry's cheek is plumper,
The rose is out of town.
--Emily Dickinson

Bats have webby wings that fold up;
Bats from ceilings hang down rolled up;
Bats when flying undismayed are;
Bats are careful; bats use radar;
--Frank Jacobs, "The Bat"

You know that it would be untrue,
You know that I would be a liar,
If I was to say to you
Girl, we couldn't get much higher.
Come on, baby, light my fire.
Try to set the night on fire.
-Jim Morrison, "Light My Fire"

The Emily Dickenson poem is iambic. The meter in line one is tetrameter, line two is trimeter, line three has seven syllables, and line four is trimeter.

"The Bat" is trochaic tetrameter.

The first two lines of "Light My Fire" are iambic tetrameter; the last four are trochaic.

The Road Not Taken
Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Shakespeare's Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets were published in 1609, but most of them were written much earlier, probably in the 1590's, when Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella* established the vogue of the Elizabethan sonnet cycle. There are 154 sonnets in all, and together they suggest a "story," although the exact details of that "story" are elusive and mysterious. The first 126 sonnets are addressed mainly to a young man of great beauty and promise. The speaker expresses his affection and admiration for the young man, urges him to marry and perpetuate his virtues through children, and warns him about the destructive power of time, age, and moral weakness. Sonnets 78–86 of this group are concerned with a rival poet who has also addressed poems to the young man. Sonnets 127–152 are addressed to a lady with dark hair, eyes, and complexion. Both the speaker and the young man seem to be involved with her romantically.

There has always been much speculation about the biographical meaning of the "story" of Shakespeare's sonnets, but no one has ever produced a convincing theory connecting it with the facts of Shakespeare's life. The situations and relationships suggested in the sonnets are best understood as the fictional means through which Shakespeare explores universal questions about time and death, about beauty and moral integrity, about love, and about poetry itself.

Sonnet 18

Rhyme scheme		
a	Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?	
b	Thou art more lovely and more temperate.	
a	Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,	
b	And summer's lease hath all too short a date.°	
c	Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,	5
d	And often is his gold complexion dimmed.	
c	And every fair from fair sometime declines,	
d	By chance or nature's changing course untrimmed.°	
e	But thy eternal summer shall not fade,	
f	Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,°	10
e	Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade	
f	When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.	
g	So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,	
g	So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.	

4. **date:** duration of a lease. 8. **untrimmed:** shorn of its beauty. 10. **owest:** ownest.

Name ______________________________ Date ______________

Guided Practice: Translation of "Sonnet 18"

Your translation

Line 1 ______________________________

2 ______________________________

3 ______________________________

4 ______________________________

5 ______________________________

6 ______________________________

7 ______________________________

8 ______________________________

9 ______________________________

10 ______________________________

11 ______________________________

12 ______________________________

13 ______________________________

14 ______________________________