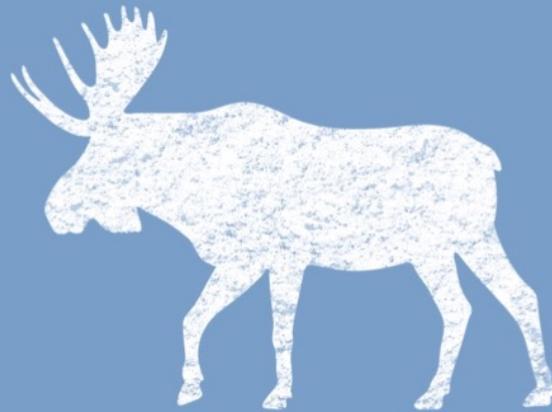


So far we've discovered that poetry can be rhymed or unrhymed. It can stick to a set syllable count (or not, if you want to write free-form). And it can include a repeating refrain. However we are still a long way from developing the full picture. What about poetry whose lines depend not only on a set number of syllables, but on a certain rhythm? Before we look at these, we'd best dig into our tool box for the hammers that will help us tap out a beat....



First there was Syllabic
Versification...

Then there was Rhymed
Syllabic Versification...

And now, just when you
thought it was safe to go back into
the water ... we have Accentual
Syllabic Versification.

Aaaaaaaaaahhh!



It all sounds so flippin' intimidating, doesn't it? Such big words that ultimately refer to simple ideas. We know that syllabic versification is the art of writing a verse (or poem) with a set number of syllables (or sounds) in each line. The only thing that changes when you add the word "accentual" to that phrase is that now your lines have a rhythm or a beat.

This is not a scary concept. I am willing to bet that you have a favourite rock, pop or rap group -- you may walk around wearing their tour T-shirts or stare lovingly at their posters on your bedroom wall, but most of all you listen to them. And what they have to say to you, they say with poetry -- with a rhyme and a beat.

I know this complicates matters for you (and me too) somewhat. So far in this series, we merely had to concern ourselves with counting out the number of syllables per line. Now we have to think about which of those syllables are emphasised and which are not. Like most things in life, though, it is simply a matter of practice. Give yourself some time to practice with these tools, to get used to the feel of them in your hands and you will soon be using them like a true wordsmith.

So what tools am I talking about?

First of all, you need to understand what a foot is -- and no, I don't mean the one attached to your ankle. In poetry a "foot" is the basic unit of measurement, like an inch or a centimetre is on a ruler. There are different ways to arrange accented and unaccented syllables in a poetic foot. These are:

Iamb or Iambic Foot – has one unaccented syllable (U), followed by an accented one (/): U/

Example: "overt".

When you say this word aloud, the main stress falls not on the "o", but on the second syllable, the "vert." This is one iambic foot.

Trochee or Trochaic Foot – has one accented syllable (/), followed by an unaccented one (U): /U

Example: "bundle".

When you say the word "bundle", the main stress falls not on the "dle" sound at the end, but on the first syllable, the "bun". That is one trochaic foot.

Anapest or Anapestic Foot – has two unaccented syllables (UU), followed by an accented one (/): UU/

Example: "nevermore".

The last syllable, “more”, is said with greater emphasis than “ne-ver”.

Another example of an anapestic rhythm is the drum beat you hear all through Queen’s “We Will Rock You.”

Dactyl or Dactylic Foot – has one accented syllable (/), followed by two unaccented ones (UU): /UU

Example: “indigo”.

When you say this word aloud, you accent the first syllable, “in”, and not the second and third syllables: “dig-o”.

Spondee or Spondaic Foot – has two accented syllables: / /

Example: “Go now!”

If you said this to someone, both words would be stressed.

Pyrrhic Foot – has two unaccented syllables: UU

But, you say, it is all very well showing us how this works with single words. What about a whole line of them? Good point. So take this line from Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar”:

“You blocks, you stones, you worse than senseless things!”

U / U / U / U / U /

This is a line written in iambic feet or one unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. Iambs tend to have a duh Da, duh Da, duh Da, duh Da sort of feel to them. In these lines written by Augusta Baker, we see something different:

“The north wind doth blow,
 And we shall have snow.
And what will the robin do then,
 Poor thing?”

What I want to draw your attention to here is the last line of the stanza -- the line “Poor thing”. Each of these two words receives equal emphasis and so provides a good example of a spondaic foot (or a foot with two accented syllables: / /).

When Nina Simone sings this line in “Ain’t Got No, I Got Life” (otherwise known as the song from the Muller yoghurt commercial on TV), she is singing in anapestic feet:

“Got my head, got my hands, got my arms, got my legs...”
 U U / U U / U U / U U /

Conversely when the Beach Boys sing...

“I’m pickin’ up good vi-bra-tions...”
 / U U / U U / U

...they are singing in a dactylic rhythm, for the first two feet anyway. The last poetic foot in this line is trochaic. But hang on, can they do

that? Can they change the pattern in mid-line? Absolutely. Not only is that allowed, but it is positively encouraged and the reason, if you stop and think about it, is obvious. To stick to one meter, one rhythm and one rhythm only, you are in danger of making your poems very boring. Imagine a lengthy poem written in unchanging iambs. It would go --

duh DA, duh DA, duh DA, duh DA,

duh DA, duh DA, duh, DA, duh DA -- over and over and over again.

After a while the poem becomes sing-songy, artificial and monotonous. To avoid this, poets depart from the formula in a variety of ways. This keeps it interesting and adds richness to their poems, or in the case of the Beach Boys, their songs.

However, the accent pattern is only part of the structure of the line. It is also important to know the number of feet in the line.

2 feet = dimeter

3 feet = trimeter

4 feet = tetrameter

5 feet = pentameter

6 feet = hexameter

So iambic pentameter is 5 iambic feet:

U/ U/ U/ U/ U/ or duh DA duh DA duh DA duh DA duh DA

I know this is a lot to take in. When I first sat in school, taking copious notes on meter in my battered red notebook, I could feel a general haze creeping through my brain and my eyes began to glaze over. I found any lengthy discussion of iambic pentameter and trochaic hexameter about as exciting as watching paint dry -- which is why we will dally here no longer. This stuff only gets interesting when you start to apply it to the real thing: to the poems themselves.

And because I have subjected you to this, I now feel I owe you some fun. That is why the next article focuses on the Limerick.