

**Scansion** is a systematic method of reading poetry as if sheet music, i.e., you’re looking at its structure to figure out its rhythm (and dynamics) and how to *sound* it. *Theatrical scansion* is the art of divining meaning based on a mix of scansion and interpretation to figure out the best way to *play* it.

## Traditional Scansion

Before we move onto theatrical scansion, I’m going to give a brief review of *traditional scansion*. Don’t let the vocabulary weigh you down; they’ll become natural to you shortly. Traditional scansion is useful for analyzing both poetry and prose. It puts you right at the foundational level of language—the way *language controls the sounds*. That’s a rather intimate place to be with language; it’s a good place to discover things. It also helps you find the best way to read something out loud.

## Preliminaries

The first thing you do in scansion is to count the number of syllables. (Though, there’s a chance you might change your count after interpretation, or in trying to make a line have the same number of syllables as other lines. More on that in later sections.)

## Counting the Syllables

How do you count the syllables, well, the sentence “Let’s begin with meter,” has six syllables. Syllables are not to be confused with words, since some words have multiple syllables. I guess you can say each that each syllable corresponds with a different movement of your lips. Using our music analogy, think of each syllable as a “note of sound.” Similar to a note of music, which can be held out long in a *legato* or short and bouncy in *staccato*, you can stress (or emphasize) each syllable differently to create variation in tempo.

## Single Word Examples

1. The word “Car” has one syllable. The word “word” also has *one* syllable.
2. The word “ambidextrous” pronounced “am-bee-dex-trous” has *four* syllables.
3. The word “supercalifragilistic” pronounced “su-per-cal-i-fra-gi-lis-tic” has *eight* syllables.
  - Try counting the number of syllables in this one word:  
“supercalifragilisticexpialidocious”

## Line Examples

1. “The center cannot hold,” has *six* syllables. Similarly, Caesar’s famous, “*Veni, vidi, vici*,” is also *six* syllables.
2. “Of many moons, and infinite stars,” has *nine* syllables.
3. “To be, or not to be, that is the question,” actually has *eleven* syllables. Similarly, the next few lines in those famous existential words by Hamlet also have *eleven* syllables, “Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.”

## Feet – The Grouping of Syllables and the Fundamental Unit of Rhythm

A foot is a division of stresses, typically just two or three syllables, although, I believe the hardcore linguists have also coined up terms for four, five, six (and more) syllable feet! (In the music analogy, they’re measure marks—although, poetry is a lot less formal.)

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Words can have syllables stressed or unstressed. We will **bold** the syllable of a word marked to be stressed, and put a separating / between feet. But, in introducing the names of different feet, we will use “da” for unstressed and “**DUM**” for stressed. They’re general, and you can sort of clap them out or beat them out on a snare drum.

*Names for Some Common Feet*

An easy way to remember the common feet is to remember that there are only two common rising feet: the *iambic* and the *anapest*. There are two “monotone” beats, the *pyrrhic* (think pyrrhic victory—nothing to be proud of, so da da) and the *spondee* (which sounds excited and totally **DUM DUM!**).

- *Iambic*: da **DUM**
  - Example: To **be** / or not / to **be**
- *Trochaic*: **DUM** da
  - Example: **Lambda**
- *Pyrrhic*: da da
  - Example: La la
- *Spondee*: **DUM DUM**
- *Anapest*: da da **DUM**
- *Dactyl*: **DUM** da da

*Names for All Variations of 3-Syllable Feet*

We’ve mentioned the anapest and dactyl above. But, there are other ways to combine stresses in three-syllable feet. Here is the full list of all 8 variations:

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- *Tribach*: da da da
- *Anapest*: da da **DUM**
- *Amphibrach*: da **DUM** da
- *Bacchius*: da **DUM DUM**
- *Dactyl*: **DUM** da da
- *Amphimacer Cretic*: **DUM** da **DUM**
- *Antibacchius*: **DUM DUM** da
- *Molossus*: **DUM DUM DUM**

*Reading*

The music analogy of feet is rhythm and/or dynamics. You can read a line of poetry in a monotone, but still maintain stresses. You can also choose to emphasize your stresses with dynamics.

### Meter – A Measure of Feet Per Line

Now, let’s go onto **meter**, which is basically just *counting the feet per line* and *divining the mode number of meter type in a stanza*. (Note, for some words, there may be some interpretive ambiguity in determining its syllable count, which might change the meter.)

#### *Names for feet per line*

The formal names for meters consist of numerical prefixes that count the number of feet per line. Here are some common ones:

Monometer: One foot per line.

##### *Example:*

Caesar’s famous “I came / I saw / I conquered” is actually an (iambic) monometer if you versify it:

*Vini,*  
*Vidi,*  
*Vici*

Dimeter: Two feet per line.

Note: *Not* to be confused with diameter and circles.

##### *Example*

This is a subjective example, as it can be analyzed in other meters. I’ve chosen to analyze it in terms of dimeter, since it brings out a sort of merry-go-round “ring-around” stress. Hear it as you try reading it (try saying the bold syllables loud):

Ring **around** / the **rosy**  
**Pockets full** / of **posies**  
Ashes, **ashes** / we **all fall down**.

Trimeter: Three feet per line

Tetrameter: Four feet per line

Pentameter: Five feet per line

*Iambic pentameter a.k.a. blank verse*

Hexameter: Six feet per line

*a.k.a. the Alexandrine meter*

*Dactyl hexameter is often used in Latin poetry*

#### *Uniformity in meter?*

You’ve probably heard of iambic pentameter, especially with regards to Shakespeare. A typical stanza of verse has variations in meter, so a passage of verse in Shakespeare might not be uniformly in pentameter,

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but as long as most lines are in pentameter, we label the entire thing as pentameter. (These variations are often used as a “spoken beat,” that is, an emphasized “change in flow.” We’ll discuss this in the next section.)

## Theatrical Scansion

**Theatrical scansion** uses the basics you’ve learned from traditional scansion, but is more liberal in that you’re allowed to interpret and “re-stress” words based on your interpreted reading.

## Interpretation

Let’s begin with the most dramatic example. Let’s go with King Lear’s “Never, never, never, never, never”. Voicing the line in iambs would sound more correct to English-speaking people, but what if you have a French Lear, who says it like ma**DAM**?

*Iambic pentameter:* **NE**ver, **NE**ver, **NE**ver, **NE**ver, **NE**ver.

*Trochaic pentameter:* ne**VER**, ne**VER**, ne**VER**, ne**VER**, ne**VER**.

*Mix:* **NE**ver, ne**VER**, **NE**ver, ne**VER**, **NE**ver.

As you can see, you’ve added depth (albeit nothing grand!) to the character just by changing the emphasis. (A French Lear would certainly be different than an English Lear! A mix of the two, might create a sort of crazy split personality in Lear.)

Typically, though, interpretation is *much* more subtle. For example, you can read this line from *Twelfth Night*: Act 1, Scene 5 as a mix of different feet or just a series of spondees.

Mix: “I **see** / what **you** / are: **you** / are **too proud**.”

Spondees: “**I see** / **what you** / **are: you** / **are too proud**.”

Try it out; they sound rather different. The first sounds very rhythmic and regular, with a bacchius emphasis on “too proud.” The spondee sounds stilted and broken, very staccato. Now, try applying emotion to each. Just as how in the previous Lear example, the French trochaic variation can only sound comic in English, the spondee version would sound more exasperated or even constipated. In context, this is what Viola says to Olivia after she had (rather arrogantly) inventoried herself, after Viola had eloquently tried asking her to leave a copy of her beauty (an heir). In more colloquial English, Viola might have said, “*You... you... are too proud.*” Thus, the first line seems a better fit in *melding meaning with the stresses*.

## “Missing Syllables” to Mark Time

With poetry plays, the syllable counts often help you time the speech of characters. They’re kind of like clockwork between characters. Character one’s cogs spin around 4/10 of a circle, and character two’s cogs take it the rest of the way, the other 6/10 of a circle. Sometimes, they’re clearly marked with spacing, as in this example:

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In Act 1, Scene 5 of *Twelfth Night* when Olivia falls in love with Viola (after Viola has told Olivia how she'd love her in her “master's flame”), Olivia follows “the fate of the syllables,” and says her first line immediately to finish the 10-count of Viola's finishing line.

*Viola:* But you should pity me.

*Olivia:* You might do much.

Often, there's ambiguity. For example, Olivia's next line is six syllables, “What is your parentage?” Viola's next line is a perfect 10-syllable pentameter. Olivia's line can be said with either a space before or a space after. If Olivia waits the pace of 4 syllables, she could be interpreted as if she's gathering her thoughts from having fallen in love with Viola in the previous line. Or, she could be in silence while finding reason for rejecting her love by asking her for her parentage. (Or another reason to affirm her love.) If she says it immediately, it could be as if she's trying to hide the transparency of her love in that previous line. This would give some space afterwards for Viola to gather her thoughts for her next line, which she has to say carefully to not reveal the fact that she's actually a girl (and not from around here!).

### Eleven or more syllables in a Pentameter?

When there are (or can interpreted to be) more than ten syllables in a line, those lines can either be contracted down or used to emphasize a dramatic meaning—they're often the black sheep in entire passages full of perfect 10-syllable pentameter.

### Contracting Down

In Act 1, Scene 1 of *Twelfth Night*, Orsino gives his famous “music be the food of love” speech. One line there is often contracted down, with “spirit” read as one syllable, “Oh Spirit of Love, how quick and fresh art thou.”

### Non-Ten Syllable Pentameters as “Spoken Beats”

Hamlet's famous existential speech is actually eleven syllables: “To be or not to be, that is the quest(ion).” (However, I have also heard it being forced into a ten-syllable line, “To be or not to be, that is the que'ion.” *That* sounded weird!) The extra syllable is classified as either a *masculine* ending if it's stressed or a *feminine* ending if it's unstressed. Feminine endings are great for questions, as they make you sound naturally uncertain. Masculine endings are good for commands or clear-cut changes. The eleventh (or twelfth or higher) syllable in a pentameter is also the world's most elegant soapbox—in that the way you formulate your line to express that eleventh syllable can serve to express something emotional, and a change your character's speech in passage. The extra syllable can be seen as a “spoken beat,” though you might not pause, but there's always a dramatic effect that can be conveyed (usually a change).

### Caesura

We'll end with the caesura, which is a break in the middle of a line of poetry. This is usually marked with a period, exclamation mark, or semicolon. As in, now!