

Iambic Pentameter

From Ken Ludwig's How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare

Iambic pentameter is the name of the most widely used verse form in English literature. It was used by Chaucer in *The Canterbury Tales* and by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, and Shakespeare uses it as the staple verse form for all his plays.

Iambic pentameter is simply a verse form where each line has five beats (hence the word *pentameter*, since *penta* is the Greek root for “five”) and each beat is an iamb (the Greek root for “foot”). An iamb sounds like this:

da DUM

So a perfectly regular line of iambic pentameter---which is made up of five iambs---sounds like this:

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

One of the most wonderful things about iambic pentameter is how closely it imitates normal English speech. It is just the length we speak before needing a new breath, and it has the bounce and flexibility of a typical English sentence. This is why so many of the great English writers adopted this form as the basis for their dramatic poetry.

Bear in mind that when Shakespeare uses iambic pentameter, he isn't trying to be fancy or “poetic.” He is simply telling his story as clearly and accurately as possible. The fact that it often sounds “poetic” in the high-flown sense is because he has so much to say, and because what he has to say is so complex.

Not all Shakespeare's lines of poetry, however, are in regular iambic pentameter. In fact, most of his lines are irregular. This means that they still have five beats and they approximate an English speaker's phrasing, but they don't gallop along only in iambs.

An irregular line might go like:

da DUM DUM da da DUM da DUM da DUM

Or it might go:

DUM da da DUM da da da DUM DUM DUM

There are three reasons Shakespeare varies the meter. First, if you had to hear one regular iambic pentameter line after another for an entire play it would put you to sleep. It is the variation in the lines that keeps the experience alive and interesting.

Second, Shakespeare uses the variation in the rhythm to create the tensions and the releases, the smoothness and staccatos, the bombast and sweetness that help him tell his stories. The great Shakespearean director, Sir Peter Hall, likens Shakespeare's manipulation of iambic pentameter to the way a great musician plays jazz. First the musician creates a recurring rhythm to set up the beat. Then he starts riffing, and he brings his art to bear through all the variations that make his interpretation so interesting.

Finally, changing the meter is a way that Shakespeare tells us exactly how to say the line. It can slow the actor and give gravity and weight to a moment in the text.

The following are metric feet:

Disyllables

iamb	da DUM
trochee or choree	DUM da
spondee	DUM DUM
pyrrhic or dibrach	da da

Trisyllables

dactyl	DUM da da
tribrach	da da da
amphibrach	da DUM da
anapaest or antidactylus	da da DUM
bacchius	da DUM DUM
antibacchius	DUM DUM da
cretic or amphimacer	DUM da DUM
molossus	DUM DUM DUM

Feminine ending Involves the addition of an eleventh syllable, as in Shakespeare's famous line, "*To be, or not to be; that is the question.*"