

Iambic Pentameter

A simple overview with basic rules for scansion & notation

Iambic pentameter is...

- A meter in poetry...
- consisting of an unrhymed line...
- composed of ten syllables...
- broken into five pairs of 2 syllables each (iambs)...
- felt by many to be the most powerful of all metrical forms in English poetry.

When read aloud such verse naturally follows a beat, **just like that of a human heart beat**. Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter most of the time.

In written form, a line of iambic pentameter looks like this:

da-dum *da-dum* *da-dum* *da-dum* *da-dum*
weak STRONG weak STRONG weak STRONG weak STRONG weak STRONG

Consider this from ***Romeo & Juliet***:

But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Romeo's lines are written in iambic pentameter, and so follow the pattern:

But-**soft!** What-**light** through-**yon** der-**win** dow-**breaks?**
It-**is** the-**east,** and-**Jul** iet-**is** the-**sun.**

Properly scanned & notated, those same two lines would look like this:

˘ , ˘ , ˘ , ˘ , ˘ ,
But soft / what light / through yon / der win / dow breaks?
˘ , ˘ , ˘ , ˘ , ˘ ,
It is / the east, / and Jul / iet is / the sun.

Notation (in pencil):

- Slash ("/") between each foot
- Mark unstressed syllable = ˘
- Mark stressed syllable = '

Remember: Key words—*words that carry meaning*—are almost always in the strong, or stressed, position.