POETRY: Sound, Meter, and Form

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"Sound is sense."

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Introduction

Because we are so accustomed to reading poems on the page, we often forget that poetry is first and foremost an oral art form. The oral poetic and storytelling traditions of various cultures date back thousands of years; indeed, the first poems remain forever lost in pre-history. Comparatively speaking, we’ve only been writing poems down for a short time.

Any thoughtful appreciation of poetry, then, must begin with sound, and in poetry we perceive sound as the intensity, duration, and the tonal flavor of consonants and vowels; as the music of individual words and phrases, (Irish writer James Joyce once claimed the most beautiful sounding phrase in the English language is "summer afternoon"); and, perhaps most of all, as the purposefully developed cadence of lines, stanzas, and entire poems.

Everything that exists in time has rhythm. A jazz saxophone solo, waves on a beach, a dripping faucet, a ringing telephone, a long rally in a tennis match—we even refer to the rhythm of the seasons. Rhythm may be regular, as in a tune played by a marching band, or it may be irregular, as in conversational speech.

Good writers use rhythm deliberately. In prose (short stories, novels, essays, etc.), the rhythm is not, of course, "nursery-rhyme" regular, but usually if you pay close attention you can detect a writer controlling the flow of a passage through repetition, parallelism, and by varying sentence lengths and structures. The rhythm of good prose is not accidental: rhythm sets off specific words, emphasizes phrases, and by doing so provides strong clues to meaning. Rhythm also affects us—if we let it—deeply, physically. Some of the most fundamental features of human existence involve rhythm: the heart beat, breathing, walking, and so on.

In poetry, rhythm plays an absolutely essential role. Partly because poetry is an especially compressed, intense form of literature, the poet must use every trick in his bag to relay ideas and express feelings. Traditional western (European and American) poetry is typically very regular. We use the term meter to refer to the rhythm of a poem which is so regular that when measured systematically we discover specific, definite patterns. Identifying a poem’s meter involves a set of skills collectively known as scanning or scansion. Poems written in free verse, for instance, are not strictly speaking completely free—if by "free" you mean random or haphazard. Instead, rhythms in free verse are more irregular—that is, there are no set or constant patterns.

The following activities, examples, and definitions will introduce you to the various technical features of sound and rhythm in poetry. As an integrated whole, these features comprise what is called form.

The primary objective of these lessons is to give you the knowledge and tools necessary to appreciate how poets use form to create and enhance meaning.
ACTIVITY #1: Relating sound to sense. How do poets use rhythm? Describe the rhythm of each of the excerpts below. How does each passage rely on rhythm and other elements of sound to emphasize meaning?

A. A knight in armor climbs over rocks in an effort to reach a lake before the wounded man he carries on his back dies...

Dry clashed his harness in the icy caves,
The barren chasms, and all to left and right
The bare black cliff clanged round him, as he based
His feet on juts of slippery crag that rang
Sharp-smitten with the dint of armed heels--
And on a sudden, lo! the level lake,
And the long glories of the winter moon.

- Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Morte d'Arthur"

Notice how the frequent accents and heavy, repeated consonant sounds of the first five lines help the reader imagine the struggling knight—but, then, what happens to the sound and rhythm of the last two lines? Why?

B. A three-lane expressway at the height of rush hour...

Evening traffic homeward burns,
Swift and even on the turns,
Drifting weight in triple rows,
    Fixed relation and repose,
This one edges out and by,
Inch by inch with steady eye.
But should error be increased,
    Mass and moment are released;
Matter loosens, flooding blind,
Levels drivers to its kind.

- Ivor Winters, "Before Disaster"

In what way is this passage's rhythm highly regular? Can you hear a pattern? What is it? How does this pattern serve the meaning of the excerpt?

C. Here's a Greek warrior at the siege of Troy struggling to hurl a giant boulder against his enemies...

When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
The line too labors, and the words move slow.

- Alexander Pope, "An Essay on Criticism"

This passage rather cleverly expresses the whole purpose of rhythm in poetry: if you want to describe a struggle, make the language struggle. Form reflects meaning.

(Activity #1 continued on next page...)
D. Here a thirsty man longs for water in a desert...

If there were the sound of water only
Not the cicada
And the dry grass singing
But sound of water over a rock
Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop drop
But there is no water
No water
There is
No water

- T.S. Eliot, "The Waste Land"

What separates good free verse from simply a mass of prose chopped up into line length bits? Deliberate -- though irregular -- use of rhythm. In this excerpt the poet achieves a desperate, crazed feeling through masterful control of repetition, line breaks, and cadence.

E. A scene at a high-society cocktail party...

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo

- T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

What effect is produced by the unusual rhyme of "go" and "Michelangelo"? How does rhythm work with the repetition of vowel sounds in this passage to trivialize the women at the party?

Note: I.A. Richards, an important early modernist critic, has asserted that the effect of poetic rhythm is distinctly physiological. He writes: "Its effect is not due to our perceiving a pattern in something outside us, but to our becoming patterned ourselves. With every beat of the meter a tide of anticipation in us turns and swings" (Principles of Literary Criticism, 1928). English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge was similarly impressed with rhythmic effects, which "increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention..... As a medicated atmosphere, or as a wine during animated conversation, [the expectations aroused by poetic rhythms] act powerfully, though [they] themselves [are] unnoticed" (qtd. in Osmond, English Metrists, 1921). In the Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics (1974), we read: "The pleasure universally resulting from foot-tapping and musical time-beating seems to suggest that the pleasures of [rhythm] are definitely physical and that they are as intimately connected with the rhythmic qualities of man's total experience as the similar alternating and recurring phenomena of breathing, walking," etc.
ACTIVITY #2: Finding accents. You'll probably remember that when you were introduced to dictionaries or learned to read you discovered that words could be divided into syllables and that in words of two syllables or more one syllable is accented or stressed more than the others due to intensity, duration, and/or pitch. The typical cadences of the English language consist of rough alternations of stressed and unstressed syllables, and it is both with and against this general tendency that poets work out the rhythms of their lines.

Scanning lines of poetry will reveal whether or not a regular pattern exists. These patterns consist of sequences of stressed and unstressed syllables. Therefore, we must start with individual words.

Directions: Scan the items below. Listen to the words. On which syllable(s) do you place the most emphasis? (A good way to check yourself is to "over-pronounce" the word—that is, try exaggerating the accent of one of the syllables. If you haven't rendered the word absurdly unintelligible, then you're probably accenting the correct syllable. Place this mark [✓] above the vowel of the stressed syllable; place this mark [○] above the vowel of the unstressed syllable. Words having four or more syllables usually have two accents—primary and secondary—as in "fundamental." In those cases, make the primary accent mark darker. Compound words—such as "football"—often have virtually equivalent accents.

1. hollow
2. return
3. suburb
4. suburban
5. below
6. complete
7. sunset
8. ridiculous
9. destroyer
10. musical
11. funeral
12. appendage
13. conundrum
14. accommodate
15. snowfall
16. automatically
17. impossibility
18. antiquated
19. devastating illness
20. creature feature
21. summer afternoon
22. cowardly lion
23. metaphorical language
24. Shakespearean tragedy
25. convoluted syntactical patterns
26. star-bellied sneeches
ACTIVITY #3: Scanning lines. Finding the accents in individual words is only the first step. When you come across a word with more than one syllable, the task of scansion is relatively easy: you find the stressed syllable and move on. But what do you do with a single syllable word? Is it accented? Sometimes. Which ones are? Which aren't? You must consider the relative importance of the word, the position of the word within a larger pattern, as well as other linguistic matters. Scansion is not an exact science, but with practice you'll develop a good ear. Though there are exceptions, a few rules of thumb will help:

1. Single syllable nouns, active-voice verbs, and adjectives are usually stressed.
   
   *Example:* The big cat ate the small dog in two gulps.

2. Pronouns serving as the subject of verbs are usually unstressed.
   
   *Example:* He never had a chance.

3. Articles and prepositions are usually unstressed.
   
   *Example:* Of love, I know a little.

4. Auxiliary verbs, forms of "to be", and conjunctions are rarely stressed.
   
   *Example:* I have been wrong before, and I will be wrong again.

Directions: Keeping these principles in mind (beware of exceptions!) and using your ear, scan the following lines.

1. To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield. (Tennyson, "Ulysses")
2. April is the cruellest month. (Eliot, "The Waste Land")
3. If tired of trees I seek again mankind. (Robert Frost, "The Vantage Point")
4. I romp with joy in the bookish dark. (Mark Strand, "Eating Poetry")
5. His laughter thickened like a droning bell. (James Wright, "Dog in a Cornfield")
6. I like a look of Agony - (Emily Dickinson, #241)
7. The day is a woman who loves you. (Richard Hugo, "Driving Montana")
8. Think of the storm roaming the sky uneasily. (Elizabeth Bishop, "Little Exercise")
9. To be or not to be, that is the question. (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*)
10. I sound my barbaric yawn over the roofs of the world. (Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself")

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ACTIVITY #4: Detecting patterns. By meter we mean relatively strict and constant poetic rhythm. If meter is regarded as an "ideal" (perfectly regular) pattern, then rhythm becomes meter the more closely it approaches complete uniformity and predictability. Some literary theorists have supposed that the impulse toward metrical organization expresses a universal human impulse toward order. In any case, meter results when the natural rhythmic movements of conversational speech are heightened, organized, and regulated such that pattern emerges.

Directions: Scan the following passages. What patterns do you detect?

1. The idle life I lead
   Is like a pleasant sleep,
   Wherein I rest and heed
   The dreams that by me sweep. - Robert Bridges, "The Idle Life I Lead"

2. Workers earn it,
   Spendthrifts burn it,
   Bankers lend it,
   Children spend it,
   Gamblers lose it,
   I could use it. - Richard Armour, "Money"

3. But most by numbers* judge a poet's song
   And smooth or rough with them is right or wrong. - Pope, "An Essay on Criticism"

Follow-up: A foot is a specific combination of accented and unaccented syllables. What foot patterns can you discern in the above examples? Draw perpendicular lines between the feet. A line may have one foot, two feet, three feet, etc. How many feet do the above examples contain? In identifying the specific meter of a poem, the type and number of feet per line are considered. For example, a poem written in iambic pentameter (the most common meter in English poetry and the meter of Shakespeare's sonnets and plays) means that each line consists of five (penta) feet of iambic [a/]. Which of the examples above is written in iambic pentameter?

Note: Have you ever wondered why a poet will sometimes write "e'en" for "even"? The reason is to keep the meter regular. Eliminating a letter or an entire syllable like this is called syncope.
Identifying meter in poetry

POETIC FEET
The following are the most common “base” feet in English. Commit them, with their substitutions below, to memory:

- **Iamb**
  - An unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable
  - Destroy; to be
  - Iambic verse: *But soft! what light through yon der win dow breaks.*

- **Anapest**
  - Two unstressed syllables, followed by a stressed syllable
  - Intervene; to the brink
  - Anapestic verse: *And the sheen of their spears was like stars on the sea When the blue wave rolls night | ty on deep | Gal-i-lee.*

- **Troche**
  - A stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable
  - Topsy; listen
  - Trochaic verse: *Dou-ble | dou-ble | toil and | Trou-ble Fi-re | burn and | cau-dron | bub-ble*

- **Dactyl**
  - A stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables
  - Merrily; pussycat
  - Dactylic verse: *Take her up ten-der-ly lift her with care fash-ioned so | sien-der-ly young and so | fair.*

The following, though obviously not used for “base” feet, are frequently used for substitution:

- **Spondee**
  - Two consecutive stressed syllables
  - Hum-drum
  - Spondaic substitutions: *And the white breast of the dim sea*

- **Pyrrhic**
  - Two consecutive unstressed syllables
  - The sea | son of | mists

LINE LENGTHS

- **Monometer**
  - One foot

- **Dimeter**
  - Two feet

- **Trimeter**
  - Three feet

- **Tetrameter**
  - Four feet

- **Pentameter**
  - Five feet

- **Hexameter**
  - Six feet

- **Heptameter**
  - Seven feet

- **Octameter**
  - Eight feet

Most poetry written in English is “accentual-syllabic,” that is, the metrical pattern and rhythm is measured both by the accents and syllables in the lines. Thus, closed form poetry is described using both the type and number of poetic feet found in the lines of a given poem. For instance, a poem written in iambic pentameter contains five iambic feet per line. A poem written in dactylic trimeter consists primarily of lines of three dactylic feet. Etc.

**Assignment:** Write two original lines each of 1) iambic hexameter; 2) trochaic pentameter; 3) dactylic trimeter; 4) anapestic tetrameter
ACTIVITY #5: Identifying meter. Commit to memory the following varieties of foot and line lengths.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foot</th>
<th>Line lengths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iamb (iambic)</td>
<td>monometer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troche (trochaic)</td>
<td>dimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapest (anapestic)</td>
<td>trimeter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dactyl (dactylic)</td>
<td>tetrameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spondee (spondaic)</td>
<td>pentameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrrhic (pyrrhic)</td>
<td>hexameter</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>heptameter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>octometer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Directions: Write two original lines each of 1) iambic hexameter; 2) trochaic pentameter; 3) dactylic trimeter; 4) anapestic tetrameter.

Note: Poetry (the non-free verse variety) is accentual-syllabic, or pure accentual, or pure syllabic. The difference lies in what gets counted in the line. Accentual-syllabic verse measures pattern and number of feet -- that is, both accents and total number of syllables. Iambic pentameter and all the other foot/line length varieties are accentual-syllabic verse. Pure accentual poetry has a set number of accents per line but an irregular number of syllables. Poetry from Old English and other Germanic languages is often accentual, as is some modern poetry on the "verge" of free verse. T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, among others, wrote in accentual lines at times. Pure syllabic poetry has a set number or pattern of syllables per line, regardless of accent and therefore often sounds very much like prose. You're undoubtedly familiar with Japanese haiku, and much of the poetry in the Romance languages is syllabic. Modern English and American poets such as W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Marianne Moore have also written pure syllabic poems: many less attentive readers mistake their work for free verse.

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ACTIVITY #6: Recognizing substitutions. By now you've probably realized that if a poet keeps up a perfectly regular meter for very long the whole thing starts to sound like a nursery rhyme. You can get so caught up in the monotony of unvaried rhythm that you start to drift off, ignoring everything but the cadence. Obviously, that's deadly. Good poets, therefore, use substitutions -- an irregular foot interspersed within the other feet. For instance, after establishing a regular pattern of iambic pentameter, Shakespeare will often abruptly begin a line with a single trochaic foot. Another common substitution is the spondee [//], a foot, along with the pyrrhic [uu], which only really exists as a substitution. (Think about it: why can't you logically have pyrrhic pentameter?) But substitutions do more than provide variety within a regular rhythmic pattern: more importantly, they also draw attention to key words (and ideas) because the ear suddenly catches something that diverges from the norm.

Paul Fussell (Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, 1979) asserts the following principles of metrical variation and substitution:

1. A succession of stressed syllables without the expected intervening unstressed syllables can reinforce effects of slowness, weight, or difficulty. (See the first line in the excerpt from Pope's "An Essay on Criticism" on p. 3).

(Activity #6 continued on the next page...)
2. A succession of unstressed syllables without the expected intervening stressed syllables can reinforce effects of rapidity, lightness, or ease. (See the final two lines in the excerpt from Tennyson’s “Morte d’Arthur” on p. 3).

3. An unanticipated change or reversal in the rhythm implies a sudden movement, often discovery or illumination; or a new direction in thought, a new tone; or a change or intensification of the speaker’s manner or style or address.

Fussell uses an excerpt from Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” to illustrate some of these effects.

Listen! you hear the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand*
Begin, and cease, and then again begin . . .

And here is Fussell’s commentary:

Against an iambic background, the initial trochaic substitution in line 1 constitutes an unexpected reversal of the metrical movement which emphasizes a shift in the address; in line 2, the spondaic substitution in the 4th position suggests the slowness of the sea wave as it coils back upon itself, gathering force to shoot itself up the beach; in line 3 the pyrrhic substitution in the 1st position suggests the speed with which the wave “flings” itself up the sand, while the troche in the 3rd position and the spondee in the 4th position suggests the force needed to propel the waves up the beach; and in line 4, the return to iambic regularity, after these suggestive variations, transmits a feeling of the infinite, monotonous continuance of the wave’s process.

Fussell continues:

In English verse the most common substitution is the replacement of the initial iamb by a troche [as in Arnold above]. This initial trochaic substitution is usually found even in the most metrically regular of poems, for the unvaried iambic foot becomes insupportably tedious after very many repetitions. In fact, failure to employ metrical variation is one of the [signs] of a bad poet. [Consider] the following example (Henry Van Dyke, “America for Me”):

I know that Europe’s wonderful, yet something seems to lack:
The Past is too much with her, and the people looking back.
But the glory of the Present is to make the Future free—
We love our land for what she is and what she is to be.

The absence of an instinct for meaningful metrical variation goes hand in hand with the complacent ignorance of the ideas and the fatuity of the rhetoric.

Directions: Scan the following initial four lines from sonnets by Shakespeare (first) and John Donne (second). The conventional sonnet consists of iambic pentameter. Circle and label the substitutions. Aside from providing rhythmic variety, how do the substitutions serve to enhance meaning?

My mistress eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun*;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.

(Activity #6 continued on the following page...)
Batter my heart, three-personed* God; for You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

*reference to the Trinity

Follow-up: Write one original line each of: 1. iambic pentameter with a trochaic substitution in the first foot; 2. iambic tetrameter with a spondaic substitution in the second foot; 3. trochaic hexameter with a pyrrhic substitution anywhere you like.

Note: Due to the nature of the English language, the most common metrical foot is iambic. If you flip through any of the major anthologies of English poetry (Norton's is the standard), you'll find that well over 95% of the metered poems are iambic. Various literary periods had their favored line lengths, but whether you were an Elizabethan sonneteer, a Romantic partial to ode forms, or a Victorian writing dramatic monologues, chances are excellent you were churning out iambs -- with, of course, effectively positioned substitutions.

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ACTIVITY #7: Classifying forms. Certain metrical patterns in conjunction with specific rhyme schemes constitute recognized forms. We use small letters to denote the rhyme scheme, so that abab signifies a group of four lines in which lines one and three rhyme and two and four rhyme.

THE STANZA

A *stanza* is a group of lines united by rhyme and/or separated from other lines by space. (Poems do *not* have paragraphs!) Stanzas can be categorized according to the number of lines they contain: couplet (two), triplet (three), quatrain (four), quintet (five), sestet (six), septet (seven), octave (eight).

SPECIAL FORMS

Throughout the history of literature, special stanzaic patterns have emerged. The following are some of the most important.

1. Ballad: The ballad stanza is four lines, rhymed abcb; the first and third lines are typically tetrameter (or 4 beats, if pure accentual) with lines two and four being trimeter (or 3 beats).

Ballads enjoyed enormous popularity in the 16th and 17th centuries in England. The ballad originated as a folk form typically centering upon a short narrative. Many church hymns use this form. Emily Dickinson, (American, 19th c.) exploited the form to great effect.

(Activity #7 continued on the following page...)
2. English (Shakespearean) sonnet: 14 lines of iambic pentameter with the following rhyme scheme: abab; cdcd; efef; gg. Three quatrains and a concluding couplet.

Shakespeare's famous sonnets are only the tip of the iceberg of one of English poetry's most enduring forms. Virtually every literary period has had sonneteers, including the twentieth century, during which modern poets such as E.E. Cummings revolutionized the form.

3. Italian (Petrarchan) sonnet: 14 lines of iambic pentameter with the following rhyme scheme: abbaabba; cdecde (or cdcdcd). One octave and one sestet; the sestet's rhyme scheme can vary quite a bit.

The Petrarchan sonnet uses fewer rhymes than the English. Italian is a language with many similar word endings. The number of successful Petrarchan sonnets written in English are few.

4. Heroic couplet: Rhyming, paired lines of (most often) iambic pentameter.

The poets of the 18th century -- Alexander Pope, Samuel Johnson to name just two -- favored this form. It was considered elegant during an age when appreciation of ancient classical symmetries was at its height. The English poets writing in heroic couplets saw the form as analogous to those used by the great Greek and Latin epic poets, Homer and Virgil.


At least one literary historian (Thompson, *The Founding of English Metre*, 1961) estimates that as much as three-fourths of all English poetry is blank verse. Like the sonnet, this form can be found in all periods, from Shakespeare to Robert Frost.

6. Ode: complex stanzas consisting of varied interlocking rhyme patterns and line lengths.

The regular or Pindaric ode imitates, as best it can, the scheme of the Greek ode as developed by Pindar, with its three "movements." The Romantic poets of early 19th century England developed English variations. Keats, Wordsworth, and Shelley were among its practitioners.

7. Other traditional forms:

   a) terza rima: a three line stanza with interlocking rhyme (aba, bcb, cdc, ded, etc.).

   b) rime royal: a seven line stanza in iambic pentameter rhyming ababbcc.

   c) ottava rima: an eight line stanza of iambic pentameter rhyming abababcc.

   d) Spenserian stanza (after English poet Edmund Spenser): a nine-line stanza consisting of eight iambic pentameter lines followed by a line of iambic hexameter; the rhyme scheme is ababbc.

   e) Some of the French forms adopted by English writers include the rondeau, the rondel, the triolet, the villanelle, the ballade, the chant royal, and the sestina. Consult any good dictionary of literary terms for details regarding these forms.

**Directions:** 1. Write a single ballad stanza. 2. Write a heroic couplet.
ACTIVITY #8: Describing types of rhyme. Rhyme serves four purposes: 1) as a combining agency for stanzas; 2) as a means of controlling pace; 3) as an element of sound capable of reflecting and enhancing meaning; 4) as a musical device pleasing in and of itself. Below are some of the varieties of rhyme.

One way rhymes are classified is according to their position.

*End rhyme* occurs at the ends of lines.

*Internal rhyme* occurs when rhymes exist between two or more words in the same line, or between the end of one line and the middle of an adjacent line.

A second way rhymes are classified is according to the similarities of sounds between words.

*True, full, or perfect* rhymes consist of final, identical sounding syllables that are stressed with different letters preceding the vowel sounds. So *fun* and *run* are perfect rhymes because the vowel sounds are identical and are preceded by different consonants.

*Half, slant, or imperfect* rhymes occur when the same vowel sound is repeated but not the same concluding consonant. For example: *cold* and *bolt* are half rhymes; so are *depicts* and *fix.*

*Visual or sight* rhymes don't sound the same at all, though they look as though they should rhyme. *Move* and *love* are examples of sight rhymes.

Directions: 1. Write a ballad stanza that makes use of at least one internal rhyme and one sight rhyme.

2. Write a heroic couple that uses slant rhyme.

**Note:** The origin of rhyme, like poetry itself, is rooted in pre-history. The fact that the number of sounds available for any language is limited and its many words must be combinations of these limited sounds is probably largely responsible for the rise of rhyme. Every language will jingle now and then. Whether those jingles become systematic and deliberate devices depends on many factors. Systematic rhyming, however, has appeared in such widely separated languages (e.g., Chinese, Sanskrit, Arabic, Norse, Provencal, Celtic) that its spontaneous development in more than one of them can be safely assumed. Theorists believe that human beings must have long been pleased by verbal jingles before they realized they might have a use in organizing their verses. Rhyme is indeed only one instance of that animating principle of all the arts: the desire for similarity in dissimilarity and dissimilarity in similarity. Perhaps because human beings are creatures with paired limbs and organs, we take pleasure in repetitions, not merely simple duplications, but approximations, complements, and counterpoints.

But rhyme is more than a matter of finding any old echo. Much can go wrong. The beauty of rhyme for English readers is "lessened by any likeness the words may have beyond that of sound" (G.M. Hopkins, *The Notebooks and Papers*). Even when the rhymes are separately unexceptional, they may be weakened by repetition at no great interval. Such lapses, besides being unenterprising, are destructive of stanzaic patterns. Then again hackneyed rhymes (*breeze-trees; true-blue*) can hardly yield the pleasure of surprise, and inevitable rhyming partners (*strength-length; anguish-languish*) still less. But bizarre rhymes are often no more successful. A last weakness in rhyme is to let rhyme too obviously dictate the sense. Mastery of rhyme means at least in part never seeming to *have* to rhyme.

(Much of this Note relies on *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics, 1974.*)
ACTIVITY #9: Hearing other sounds. Many other sounds of similarity contribute to poetry. Some literary theorists consider these sub-species of rhyme.

1. **ALLITERATION**: the repetition of the initial letter or sound in two or more words in close proximity.

   *Example:*
   
   I caught this morning morning’s minion, kingdom of daylight’s dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in his riding of the rolling underneath him steady air....
   - G.M. Hopkins, "The Windhover"

2. **ASSONANCE**: the similarity or repetition of a vowel sound within two or more words. If assonance occurs at the ends of lines, it is customarily referred to as some form of rhyme (perfect or half), but if the repetition occurs within lines and across lines, it is considered assonance.

3. **ONOMATOPOEIA**: the use of a word to represent or imitate natural sounds. *Examples*: buzz, crunch, gurgle, sizzle. Though not considered a variety of rhyme, its expressive value (if not overused) in poetry can be impressive.

Consider the following two lines from Tennyson:

   The moan of doves in immemorial elms,
   The murmur of innumerable bees

How do alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia all work together to advance meaning?

* 

Directions: 1. Write two heroic couplets that make use of alliteration. 2. Write four lines of blank verse that make use of assonance and include at least one instance of onomatopoeia.

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ACTIVITY # 10: Demystifying free verse. As mentioned in the INTRODUCTION on p. 2, poems written in free verse are not completely free. While they have no regular rhyme scheme and no regular meter, they still do rely on rhythm and sound to enhance meaning. Indeed, patterns are present in free verse. Only very poor free verse is haphazardly arranged with no attention to line breaks, cadence, and flow. But if free verse has no regular patterns and yet isn't random, what gives it form and shape?

Let's let John Hollander use free verse to illustrate how free verse works. The following comes from his wonderful book Rhyme's Reason (1981):

Modern free verse, influenced by the inventiveness of Walt Whitman in English (and Arthur Rimbaud among others in French), can be of many sorts; since a line may be determined in almost any way, and since lines may be grouped on the page in any fashion, it is the mode of variation itself which is significant. Here are examples of a number of different types:

Free verse is never totally "free":
It can occur in many forms.
All of them having in common one principle—
Nothing is necessarily counted or measured
(remember biblical verse—see above).
One form—this one—makes each line a grammatical unit.
This can be a clause
Which has a subject and a predicate,
Or a phrase
Of prepositional type.
The in-and-out variation of line length
Can provide a visual "music" of its own, a rhythm
That, sometimes, indented lines
Can reinforce.
Our eye—and perhaps in a funny, metaphorical way, our breath itself—
Can be dragged far out, by some rather longer line, across the page.
Then made to trip
On short lines:
The effect is often wry.
Yet such verse often tends
To fall very flat.

Another kind of free verse can play a sort of rhythmic tune at the end of lines, moving back and forth from those that stop to those that are enjambed as sharply as that first one.
Aside from the rhythmic tension
Of varying the ebb and flow of sense along the lines, of making them seem more (like this one), or less, like measured lines (like this one), this sort of free verse can direct our attention as well as any iambic line, for instance, to what our language is made up of:
It can break up compound words at line-ends, sometimes wittily,
Like tripping hurriedly over what, when you look down, turns out to have been a grave stone.

A milder kind of vers libre
As it was called
earlier in this century
Hardly ever enjambed its lines,
But used the linear unit
And even stanzalike gatherings of lines
As a delicate way of controlling,
Of slowing
The pace of the reading eye
Or speeding it up across the page again.
It could single out words
And hang them in lines all their own
Like sole blossoms on branches,
Made more precious by their loneliness.

Some free verse is arranged in various graphic patterns like this that suggest the barely-seen but silent ghost of a classical verse form
Like a fragment of Sapphic...

Free verse can, like a shrewd smuggler, contain more
Measured kinds of line, hidden inside its own more random-seeming ones; and when a bit of song comes, blown in on a kind of wind, it will move across my country "tis of thee, sweet land of liberty,
Of thee I sing—the accented verses get cut up by line breaks that reveal something about them we'd never seen before: it's a little like putting a contour map over a street plan
(Customs inspector: are you trained to hear heroic couplets beating on the ear if they are hidden in the lines of free verse, as in the case of these above?)

Free verse can build up various stanzalike units without rhyme or measured line length to hold them together, but the power of blank space between them marks out their rhythms as surely as the timing of some iambic clock but, of course, silently: the ear alone can't tell where they end.
And to be able to wander, free
verse can amble about
on a kind of nature walk
the lines following no
usual path, for
then the poem might seem
to have wandered into
another kind of meter's backyard
but
sometimes
seeming
to map out the syntax,
sometimes
seeming to do almost the
opposite,
this kind of meandering verse can
even
oddly
come upon a flower
of familiar rhythm
a sight for sore
ears, or encounter
a bit later
on,
once again a patch of
trochees growing somewhere
(like an old song)
and
take one by the
tem
and
break
it
off

From the above illustrations, it's clear that one of the main problems a free verse poet must solve is
where and how to break lines.

Here are some key terms that relate to pauses and line breaks. The term caesura is used to identify a
pause inside a line usually dictated by punctuation. When a caesura occurs at the end of the line, the
line is said to be end stopped. When the voice must continue onto the next the line without pause, the
line is enjambed. Light enjambment occurs when the break comes between phrases; heavy enjambment
occurs when the poet splits a phrase.

So, as a poet of free verse, you must ask yourself a lot of questions that poets using meter don't have to
worry as much about. Where do you break your lines? Do you end stop your lines or enjamb them?
And if you do enjamb them, do use heavy or light (or both) varieties, or a mixture of end stop and
enjambment? Are your lines short, long, or of mixed length? Do they all begin at the lefthand margin,
or are they indented? Do you imitate the look of regular stanzas? How do you want the poem to
appear visually on the page? And behind the answer to each of these questions there must be
justification, a strategic reason.

Directions: Below, written in block form, is a modern free verse poem called "Beginning." Rearrange it,
making it look like a poem. End-stop the lines, enjamb them, or both. Use short lines, long lines, or
both. Be prepared to defend your decisions.

BEGINNING

The moon drops one or two feathers into the field. The dark wheat listens. Be still.
Now. There they are, the moon's young, trying their wings. Between trees, a slender
woman lifts up the lovely shadow of her face, and now she steps into the air, now she is
gone wholly, in the air. I stand alone by an elder tree, I do not dare breathe or move. I
listen. The wheat leans back toward its own darkness, and I lean toward mine.

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Key Terms

You should be to identify, use, and analyze each of the terms below. Remember that understanding sound, meter, and form in poetry depends upon your ability to discuss how these features work to advance meaning. It's not enough to say, "Here's trochaic substitution," or "This poet uses a lot of slant rhyme," or "This first stanza is loaded with alliteration." You must also be able to describe the effects of these devices and techniques.

Meter
Accent/Stress
Foot
  iamb
  Trochee
  Dactyl
  Anapest
  Spondee
  Pyrrhic
Substitution
  Pure Accentual
  Accentual-Syllabic
Pure Syllabic
Line length
  Monometer
  Dimeter
  Trimeter
  Tetrameter
  Pentameter
  Hexameter
  Heptameter
  Octometer
Syncope
Stanzaic Forms
  Ballad
  Sonnet
    Shakespearean
    Petrarchan
  Heroic couplet
  Blank verse
  Terza rima
  Rime royal
  Ottava rima
  Spenserian stanza

Line breaks
Enjambment
End stop
Caesura
Feminine ending
Masculine ending
Free verse
Rhyme
  Rhyme scheme
  Perfect rhyme
  Slant/half rhyme
  End rhyme
  Internal rhyme
  Sight rhyme
Alliteration
Assonance
Onomatopoeia
Bibliography

The titles below are excellent sources for further information about sound, meter, form, and related matters. Entries with an asterisk are those which were especially helpful in the preparation of these lessons.


