



Metre in Poetry: The Beat and Rhythm of Words

KS4 ENGLISH LITERATURE

Ages 11-14 ⌚ 3 min read

What Is Metre?

Metre is the pattern of rhythm in poetry. It's created by the way **syllables** (the sounds that make up words) are stressed and unstressed in lines of verse. Think of it like the heartbeat of a poem—regular and repeating.

When you read a poem aloud, you naturally emphasise some syllables more than others. Poets use this deliberately to create a musical quality in their writing. The pattern they create is called the **metre** of the poem.

Think of it like a drum beat in music. Just as a drummer plays strong beats and soft beats in a pattern (boom-tap-boom-tap), poets create stressed and unstressed syllables in a pattern (DUM-da-DUM-da). The pattern repeats throughout the poem, making it feel rhythmic and pleasing to the ear.

How Does Metre Work?

In English poetry, **stressed syllables** are the ones you emphasise when you say a word. **Unstressed syllables** are quieter and less prominent. When you put these together in a regular pattern, you create metre.

For example, the word 'ca-thon' has the stress on the first syllable: CA-thon. The pattern of one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable is called an **iamb**. Different patterns have different names. A **trochee** is the opposite—stressed then unstressed (DUM-da). A **dactyl** is stressed followed by two unstressed syllables (DUM-da-da).

Why Do Poets Use Metre?

Poets use metre for several reasons. It makes poems memorable and easier to remember. It also creates a pleasant musical quality when you read them aloud.

Shakespeare and other famous poets often used a metre called **iambic pentameter**

—ten syllables per line with five iambs (stressed-unstressed pairs). This became a very popular pattern in English poetry.

Think of it like a song chorus. You remember pop songs partly because they have a catchy, repeating rhythm. Poetry works the same way—the repeating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables makes lines stick in your head.

Understanding metre helps you appreciate how skilfully poets craft their words. It's not just about what poems say—it's about how they sound when you read them aloud. Learning to hear and recognise metre is an important skill in studying literature.