

Rules of Scansion

How to Find Stressed and Unstressed Syllables in English Verse

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1. What Is Scansion?

To **scan** a line of poetry is to find its rhythm. You read the line aloud, decide which syllables are **stressed** and which are **unstressed**, divide the line into **feet**, and then name the **metre**.

Most traditional English verse is *accentual-syllabic*: its rhythm depends both on the number of syllables and on the pattern of stresses. So nearly every problem in scansion comes down to one question: **which syllables carry the stress?** This note gives you the rules for answering that question.

2. Basic Terms and Symbols

Syllable. A unit of sound built around one vowel sound. Count vowel *sounds*, not vowel *letters*: *cake* has one syllable (the final *e* is silent), *gar-den* has two, and *beau-ti-ful* has three.

Stress (also called **accent**). The extra force with which a syllable is spoken. A stressed syllable sounds louder, longer and slightly higher than the syllables around it. In *GAR-den*, the first syllable is stressed.

Foot. A small unit of rhythm, usually two or three syllables, normally containing one stress.

Metre. The type of foot used in a line plus the number of feet. Five iambs, for example, make *iambic pentameter*.

These symbols are used throughout the note:

/	stressed syllable
x	unstressed syllable
	division between feet
	caesura (a pause inside the line)

Some textbooks use $\bar{\hspace{0.5em}}$ or $\acute{\hspace{0.5em}}$ for a stressed syllable and $\sim$ for an unstressed one; the idea is exactly the same. In this note, stressed syllables are also printed in CAPITALS (be-LIEVE, GAR-den), and in scanned lines the marks are placed above each syllable.

How to hear stress. Say the word naturally, then try moving the stress around: *BA-na-na*, *ba-NA-na*, *ba-na-NA*. Only one version sounds right, and it shows you the stressed syllable. When in doubt, check a good dictionary, where the mark $\prime$ comes just before the stressed syllable: /br'li:v/ for *believe*.

3. Stress Inside a Word (Rules 1–6)

Before you can scan a line, you need to know how each word is stressed when it is spoken on its own.

Rule 1. A word of two or more syllables has a fixed stress

Every English word of two or more syllables has one main stress, and its position is fixed by the language. The poet cannot move it, and neither can the reader. **The metre must fit the word, never the other way round.**

Word	Divided into syllables	Pattern
water	WA-ter	/ x
begin	be-GIN	x /
beautiful	BEAU-ti-ful	/ x x
tomorrow	to-MOR-row	x / x

Long words may also carry a lighter **secondary stress**. In *nightingale*, the main stress falls on NIGHT and a lighter stress on *-gale*. In scansion, a secondary stress counts as stressed or unstressed depending on the rhythm of the line around it.

One-syllable words are different. They have no fixed stress of their own. Whether a one-syllable word is stressed depends on what kind of word it is (Section 4) and on the words around it (Section 5).

Older pronunciations. Word stress can change over the centuries. Shakespeare, for instance, often stresses *aspect* as as-PECT. If a line seems to demand a strange stress on a long word, the pronunciation of the poet's own time may explain it.

Rule 2. The root syllable takes the stress

In most native English words the stress falls on the **root**, the part of the word that carries its basic meaning. **Prefixes** (added before the root) and **suffixes** (added after it) are normally unstressed. This is why a root keeps its stress no matter how many parts are attached to it.

Word	Prefix	Root	Suffix	Pattern
be-FRIEND	be-	friend	—	x /
for-GIVE	for-	give	—	x /
KIND-ness	—	kind	-ness	/ x
HOPE-ful	—	hope	-ful	/ x
un-FRIEND-ly	un-	friend	-ly	x / x
un-HAP-pi-ness	un-	happ(y)	-ness	x / x x

Long words borrowed from Latin, Greek or French do not always follow this simple pattern. For those words, the suffix is usually the better guide (Rule 5).

Rule 3. Prefixes are usually unstressed

Prefix	Examples
a-	a-LONE, a-RISE, a-SLEEP

Prefix	Examples
be-	be-NEATH, be-LOVED, be-SIDE
for-, fore-	for-GET, for-BID, fore-TELL
mis-	mis-TAKE, mis-LEAD
un-	un-SEEN, un-TOLD
re-	re-TURN, re-GAIN
de-	de-PART, de-FEND
dis-	dis-MAY, dis-TRUST
con-, com-	con-SENT, com-PARE
ex-	ex-PECT, ex-CLAIM
en-, em-	en-JOY, em-BRACE

Longer prefixes such as *under-*, *over-* and *inter-* often carry a lighter secondary stress, as in *un-der-STAND*, *o-ver-COME* and *in-ter-VENE*. Depending on the rhythm of the line, that lighter stress may or may not count as a beat.

Rule 4. Watch for noun–verb pairs

Some two-syllable words are spelt alike but stressed differently according to their part of speech. Used as a **noun or adjective**, the word is stressed on the **first** syllable; used as a **verb**, on the **second**.

Noun or adjective (/ x)	Verb (x /)
a RE-cord	to re-CORD
a PRES-ent	to pre-SENT
an OB-ject	to ob-JECT
a CON-duct	to con-DUCT
a RE-bel	to re-BEL
a SUR-vey	to sur-VEY
a PER-fect day	to per-FECT a skill

Memory aid: *nouns stress the front, verbs stress the back*. Always check the part of speech before marking one of these words.

Rule 5. Know the three kinds of suffix

(a) Neutral suffixes stay unstressed and leave the stress of the base word where it was: *-ness*, *-less*, *-ful*, *-ly*, *-ing*, *-ed*, *-er*, *-est*, *-ish*, *-dom*, *-hood*, *-ship*, *-ment*.

Base word	With a neutral suffix
HAP-py	HAP-pi-ness
PIT-y	PIT-i-less
for-GET	for-GET-ful

Base word	With a neutral suffix
en-JOY	en-JOY-ment
CHILD	CHILD-hood

(b) Stress-attracting endings take the stress onto themselves. Most of them come from French: *-ee, -eer, -ese, -ette, -esque, -ique, -oon, -aire*. Examples: ref-er-EE, moun-tain-EER, Jap-a-NESE, ga-ZETTE, pic-tur-ESQUE, an-TIQUE, bal-LOON, mil-lion-AIRE.

(c) Stress-shifting suffixes move the stress to the syllable **just before** the suffix: *-tion/-sion, -ic, -ical, -ity, -ian, -ious*.

Base word	Derived word	Suffix
ED-u-cate	ed-u-CA-tion	-tion
de-CIDE	de-CI-sion	-sion
PO-et	po-ET-ic	-ic
a-CAD-e-my	ac-a-DEM-ic	-ic
HIS-to-ry	his-TOR-i-cal	-ical
PER-son-al	per-son-AL-i-ty	-ity
MU-sic	mu-SI-cian	-ian
MYS-ter-y	mys-TER-i-ous	-ious

A few words break the *-ic* pattern, such as CATH-o-lic, LU-na-tic and AR-a-bic. The lesson for scansion: a longer word does not always keep the stress of its base word, so check each word as it actually appears in the line.

Rule 6. Compound words

Compound nouns are usually stressed on the first part: MOON-light, SUN-set, HEART-beat, BLACK-bird. Compare a compound with an ordinary phrase:

Compound noun	Ordinary phrase
a BLACK-bird (a particular kind of bird)	a black BIRD (any bird that is black)
a GREEN-house (a glass house for plants)	a green HOUSE (a house painted green)

The second part of a compound keeps a light stress, so in verse *moonlight* may scan as / x or, beside weaker syllables, as / /.

Compound pronouns stress the second part: my-SELF, him-SELF, our-SELVES.

4. Major Words and Minor Words (Rules 7–13)

When words are joined in a sentence, they are not all stressed equally. The principle is simple: **words that carry meaning are stressed; words that only hold the sentence together are not.**

Rule 7. Major words are normally stressed

Major words (also called *content words* or *full words*) carry the meaning of a sentence.

Kind of word	Examples
Nouns	sea, heart, garden, Death
Main verbs	sing, run, remember
Adjectives	dark, bright, lovely
Adverbs	soon, slowly, here, now
Demonstratives	this, that, these, those
Question words	who? what? where? why? how?
Negatives	no, not, never
Numerals	one, three, hundred
Interjections used as exclamations	Hark! Alas! (see Rule 13)

A quick test. Imagine sending a very short text message. *I am coming to the station on Monday* becomes *Coming station Monday*. The words you keep are the major words, and they carry the stresses: I am COM-ing to the STA-tion on MON-day.

Rule 8. Minor words are normally unstressed

Minor words (also called *function words* or *form words*) show how the other words relate to each other. They have little meaning on their own.

Kind of word	Examples
Articles	a, an, the
Prepositions (one syllable)	of, to, in, on, at, by, for, from, with
Conjunctions (one syllable)	and, but, or, nor, as, if, than, that
Personal pronouns	I, me, you, he, him, she, her, it, we, us, they, them, thou, thee
Possessives	my, your, his, her, its, our, their, thy
Relative pronouns	who, which, that (when they join clauses)
Auxiliary (helping) verbs	am, is, are, was, were, be, have, has, had, do, did, shall, will, can, may, must, would, should, could
Others	<i>to</i> before a verb (<i>to go</i>); <i>there</i> in <i>there is</i> and <i>there are</i>

Notice the word **normally**. Minor words can take stress in certain situations, which the rules below explain.

Rule 9. Articles

The articles *a*, *an* and *the* are the weakest words in English and are almost never stressed in verse. In the worked example in Section 8, both appearances of *the* fall on unstressed syllables. In older poetry, *the* is often shortened to *th'* before a vowel (*th' eternal*), which removes one syllable from the count.

Rule 10. Prepositions

One-syllable prepositions (*of, to, in, on, at, by, for, from, with*) are normally unstressed.

Two-syllable prepositions usually stress the second syllable, which carries the core meaning: a-BOVE, a-MONG, a-CROSS, be-FORE, be-NEATH, be-TWEEN, be-YOND, up-ON, with-IN, with-OUT. A few stress the first syllable: IN-to, UN-to, AF-ter, O-ver, UN-der.

A preposition becomes stressed when it ends a clause without its object (WHAT are you LOOK-ing AT?), when it works as an adverb after a verb (COME IN; the SUN went DOWN), when it carries a contrast (the KEY is ON the TA-ble, NOT UN-der it), or when the metre promotes it (Rule 14).

Rule 11. Conjunctions

One-syllable conjunctions (*and, but, or, nor, as, if, than, that, though, when, while*) are normally unstressed.

Two-syllable conjunctions usually stress the second syllable: be-CAUSE, al-THOUGH, un-LESS, un-TIL. A few stress the first: EI-ther, NEI-ther, WHETH-er.

A conjunction may take stress when it marks a strong turn in the thought (a *But* or *Yet* that opens a new stage of a sonnet, for example) or when the metre promotes it. One line from Gray shows both an unstressed and a promoted *and*:

x / x / x / x / x /
And leaves | the world | to dark | ness and | to me

Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

The first *And* begins the line and is unstressed. The second *and* stands between two weaker syllables, *-ness* and *to*, so the metre gives it a light beat.

Rule 12. Pronouns and auxiliary verbs

Pronouns. Personal pronouns (*I, he, them, thee*) and possessives (*my, his, thy*) are normally unstressed. They take stress when there is emphasis or contrast: NOT YOU, but HIM.

The same word can behave in two ways. *Who* is stressed when it asks a question (WHO SENT you?) but unstressed when it joins clauses (the MAN who SENT you). *That* is stressed when it points (GIVE me THAT) but unstressed when it joins clauses (the BOOK that I READ).

Auxiliary verbs. Helping verbs are unstressed when a main verb follows: I have SEEN it; she was SING-ing. They become stressed when used as the main verb (I HAVE a PEN), in negative forms (CAN'T, WON'T, DID-n't), when emphatic (I DID LOCK the DOOR), or at the end of a clause (YES, I WILL). Forms of *be* usually stay unstressed even as the main verb: the SKY is BLUE.

Rule 13. Interjections

Interjections (*O, Oh, Ah, Alas, Lo, Hark, Hurrah*) express sudden feeling and stand outside the grammar of the sentence. Two cases need to be kept apart.

(a) An interjection used as an exclamation, standing on its own and followed by a pause or an exclamation mark, is normally stressed.

/ / x /
Hark, hark! the lark

Shakespeare, Cymbeline

Two-syllable interjections simply keep their fixed word stress (Rule 1): a-LAS, a-LACK and hur-RAH are x /, while BRA-vo is / x.

(b) The vocative O, placed directly before the name of someone or something being addressed, is normally unstressed. It behaves like a minor word, and the stress falls on the name that follows.

x / x x /
O Rose | thou art sick

William Blake, "The Sick Rose"

By tradition, *O* (with a capital and no comma after it) is used for address, while *Oh* (usually followed by a comma or exclamation mark) expresses feeling. A short *Oh* or *Ah* that runs straight into a phrase is often light too; set off by a real pause, it is more likely to be stressed.

5. Rhythm, Meaning and Syllable Count (Rules 14–16)

Rule 14. Stress is relative: promotion and demotion

In scansion, *stressed* and *unstressed* are relative terms. You mark a syllable as stressed when it is **stronger than the syllables next to it**, not because it is loud in itself. This produces two common effects.

Promotion. A minor word or weak syllable standing between two even weaker syllables can take a metrical beat.

x / x / x / x /
I wan | dered lone | ly as | a cloud

William Wordsworth, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud"

In ordinary speech *as* is unstressed. Here it sits between *-ly* and *a*, both weaker still, so the iambic rhythm gives it a beat. Mark it /, but read it lightly; a promoted syllable should never be shouted.

Demotion. A major word squeezed between two stronger stresses can lose some of its weight.

x / x / x / x /
The long | day wanes: | the slow | moon climbs

Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses"

By the metre, the nouns *day* and *moon* fall in unstressed positions. Yet a careful reader still gives them much of their natural weight, so many readers mark those feet as spondees:

x / / / x / / /
The long | day wanes: | the slow | moon climbs

Either marking can be defended. The crowding of heavy syllables is exactly what makes the line move so slowly, like the tired day it describes.

Rule 15. Meaning comes first

Emphasis and contrast can put stress on any word, even one that is normally light. Rule 12 says that forms of *be* are usually unstressed, but in Hamlet's question *be* means "to exist" and carries the whole weight of the thought, so it is stressed along with *not*:

x / x / x /
To be, | or not | to be

Shakespeare, Hamlet

Read every line for its sense. When a mechanical, sing-song reading clashes with the natural meaning, the natural reading wins, with one limit: never change the fixed stress of a word of two or more syllables (Rule 1).

Rule 16. Count syllables the way the poet does

Poets sometimes shorten or stretch words to fit the metre.

Device	Examples
Contraction (elision)	o'er (over), e'er (ever), ne'er (never), e'en (even), 'tis (it is), heav'n (heaven), th'
Flexible words	<i>fire, hour, flower, power, heaven</i> may count as one syllable or two
The -ed ending	Normally not a separate syllable (<i>loved, walked</i>) except after <i>t</i> or <i>d</i> (<i>want-ed, end-ed</i>). Older poems mark a sounded -ed with an accent: <i>belovèd</i> (be-LOV-ed), <i>wingèd</i> (WING-ed)
-ion endings	In Shakespeare and other older verse, -tion is sometimes stretched to two syllables (<i>na-ti-on</i>)

x / x / x / x / x /
The low | ing herd | wind slow | ly o'er | the lea

Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard"

Read *o'er* as one syllable and the line has exactly ten syllables. (Notice also that *wind*, a verb, is lightened between the stresses on *herd* and *slow*: another example of demotion.)

6. Feet and Metre

Once the stresses are marked, group the syllables into feet.

Foot	Pattern	Word example	Line example
Iamb	x /	a-LONE	the CUR-few TOLLS the KNELL of PART-ing DAY (Gray)
Trochee	/ x	GAR-den	TY-ger TY-ger, BURN-ing BRIGHT (Blake)
Anapaest	x x /	in-ter-VENE	and the SHEEN of their SPEARS was like STARS on the SEA (Byron)
Dactyl	/ x x	BEAU-ti-ful	HALF a league, HALF a league (Tennyson)
Spondee	/ /	two strong monosyllables	BREAK, BREAK, BREAK (Tennyson)
Pyrrhic	x x	two weak monosyllables (<i>of the</i>)	appears only as an occasional substitute foot

Iambs and anapaests give a **rising** rhythm (they end on the stress); trochees and dactyls give a **falling** rhythm (they begin on the stress).

Feet in the line	Name
1	monometer
2	dimeter

Feet in the line	Name
3	trimeter
4	tetrameter
5	pentameter
6	hexameter (a line of iambic hexameter is called an <i>alexandrine</i>)
7	heptameter
8	octameter

To name the metre, combine the foot and the line length: five iambs make **iambic pentameter**; four trochees make **trochaic tetrameter**.

Variations. Real poems are rarely perfectly regular. Look out for an **inverted foot** (often a trochee at the start of an iambic line), a **feminine ending** (an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line), **catalexis** (a missing final unstressed syllable, as in Blake’s *Tyger* line, whose last foot is a single stressed syllable), and the **caesura** (a pause within the line, marked ||). A poem’s metre is named after the foot that dominates it, even when some feet vary.

7. How to Scan a Line: Step by Step

1. **Read** the line aloud naturally, more than once.
2. **Count** the syllables, watching for contractions and *-ed* endings (Rule 16).
3. **Mark** the fixed stress of every word of two or more syllables (Rules 1–6).
4. **Mark** one-syllable major words / and one-syllable minor words x (Rules 7–13).
5. **Adjust** for promotion, demotion and emphasis (Rules 14–15).
6. **Divide** the line into feet with |, following the pattern that repeats most often.
7. **Name** the foot, count the feet, and name the metre.
8. **Note** any variations.

8. Worked Example

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day (Thomas Gray, “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard”)

Word	What kind of word?	Rule	Marking
The	article (minor word)	9	x
curfew	noun, stressed on its first syllable	1, 7	/ x
tolls	main verb (major word)	7	/
the	article (minor word)	9	x
knell	noun (major word)	7	/
of	preposition (minor word)	10	x
parting	root <i>part</i> + neutral suffix <i>-ing</i>	2, 5	/ x

Word	What kind of word?	Rule	Marking
day	noun (major word)	7	/

x / x / x / x / x /
 The cur | few tolls | the knell | of part | ing day

Result: ten syllables arranged in five iambs, so the metre is **iambic pentameter**.

9. Quick Revision Chart

Usually STRESSED	Usually UNSTRESSED
Nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs	Articles
Root syllables	Prefixes and neutral suffixes
Stress-attracting endings (-ee, -eer, -ese)	Auxiliary verbs and forms of <i>be</i>
Question words (<i>who? what?</i>)	Relative <i>who, which, that</i>
Demonstratives (<i>this, that</i>)	Personal pronouns and possessives
Negatives (<i>no, not, never</i>)	One-syllable prepositions
Interjections used as exclamations (<i>Hark! Alas!</i>)	One-syllable conjunctions
Prepositions ending a clause or used as adverbs (<i>come IN</i>)	The vocative <i>O</i> before a name
Any word given emphasis or contrast	<i>to</i> before a verb; <i>there</i> in <i>there is</i>

Three golden rules

1. The stress of a word of two or more syllables is **fixed**. Never distort it.
2. The stress of a one-syllable word is **flexible**. Its meaning and its neighbours decide.
3. Stress is **relative**. Mark a syllable stressed if it is stronger than the syllables around it.

Remember that scansion involves judgement. Two careful readers may mark a line slightly differently. What matters is that you can justify every mark you make with these rules.

10. Practice

Scan these lines: mark the stresses, divide the feet, and name the metre. Answers follow.

1. *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?* (Shakespeare, Sonnet 18)
2. *She walks in beauty, like the night* (Byron, "She Walks in Beauty")
3. *I am monarch of all I survey* (William Cowper)
4. *Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary* (Edgar Allan Poe, "The Raven")

Answers

1. Iambic pentameter

x / x / x / x / x /
 Shall I | com-pare | thee to | a sum | mer's day?

com-PARE follows the root rule (Rule 2), and *to* is promoted between *thee* and *a* (Rule 14). Some readers stress *Shall* rather than *I*, making the first foot a trochee; both readings can be defended.

2. Iambic tetrameter

x / x / x / x /
 She walks | in beau | ty, like | the night

She (pronoun), *in* (preposition) and *the* (article) are unstressed; *BEAU-ty* keeps its fixed stress; the preposition *like* is promoted.

3. Anapaestic trimeter

x x / x x / x x /
 I am mon | arch of all | I sur-vey

Survey is a verb here (all that I survey), so it is stressed on the second syllable, sur-VEY (Rule 4). *MON-arch* keeps its fixed stress; *I*, *am* and *of* are minor words; *all* carries the sense and takes the stress.

4. Trochaic octameter

/ x / x / x / x / x / x / x
 Once u | pon a | mid-night | drear-y, | while I | pon-dered, | weak and | wear-y

u-PON stresses its second syllable (Rule 10), which begins the second foot. *MID-night*, *DREAR-y*, *PON-dered* and *WEAR-y* keep their fixed stresses; *and* is unstressed; *while* is promoted to fill the beat.