Foundation of the Sonnet: Iambic Pentameter

A **sonnet** is a classic form of short poem. What makes a sonnet? Most English sonnets have these characteristics:

- Sonnets have 14 lines. The last word of each line rhymes with the last word of one other line.
- Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables. In special cases, a line may have eleven, but that comes later
- The ten syllables of each line have a special stress rhythm: ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM.

Stress Patterns in English Words

Most English words have alternating soft-hard stress patterns. Take the word "invent." "Invent" is a two syllable word with a soft stress and a hard stress. How can you tell? Try it both ways:

"**in**vent" "in**vent**"   *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

Try reading it with an exaggerated sense of stress:

"IN-vent" "in-VENT"   *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

Try reading it with your mouth closed, using "mmm" sounds.

"MMM-mm" "mm-MMM"   *Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?*

"Invent" is a word with a soft first syllable and a **hard** second syllable.
Most dictionaries provide stress instruction alongside their definitions.

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words.

1. window   "WIN-dow" or "win-DOW"
2. open   "O-pen" or "o-PEN"
3. decide   "DE-cide" or "de-CIDE"
4. absent   "AB-sent" or "ab-SENT"

5. allowed   "AL-lowed" or "al-LOWED"
6. eraser   "ER-as-ER" or "er-AS-er"
7. chimpanzee "CHIM-pan-ZEE" or "chim-PAN-zee"
8. banana   "BA-na-NA" or "ba-NA-na"

Some words can change meaning based on stress. The word "refund" can be "RE-fund" or "re-FUND," for example. The spelling is the same, but the stress changes, and so does the meaning.

Circle the proper stress pattern for the word "refund" in each sentence.

9.   I'm going to ask the store for a _____ . ("RE-fund" / "re-FUND")

10.   The clerk refused to _____ our money?   ("RE-fund" / "re-FUND")

11.   I'll use my _____ to buy some headphones.   ("RE-fund" / "re-FUND")

Draw empty circles underneath soft stresses and solid circles underneath hard stresses. For example:

apple   Toyota   explode   happy   orangutan   *(There is no g at the end of orangutan.)*
● ○   ○ ●○   ○ ●   ● ○   ○ ●○ ●

12. describe   16. dangerous*   20. ambitious

13. fossil   17. button   21. alarm

14. José   18. yo-yo   22. modern

15. minister   19. Linda   23. purple

*Note: Dangerous is a **dactyl**: "DAN-ger-ous." ("**It** can be **dan**gerous, **runn**ing with **knives**" is a dactylic phrase.) But in a sonnet, this word would usually sound okay as "DAN-ger-OUS." ("The **dead**ly **don't** seem **dan**ger**ous** at **all**.") It's important to sound these words out honestly when you write! Just because **you** can talk yourself into it doesn't mean the reader/audience will oblige!

Stress Patterns Across Multiple Words

Sometimes, the stress pattern is so strong that it extends across pairs of words. We say "**hot** dog," for example. Here are some other phrases and their normal stress patterns:

blue jeans   **French** fries   French **toast**   threw **up**   good **luck**   time **out**   first **aid**

Stresses can change, if the meaning of the pair of words is different for a particular conversation. For example, if someone said: "Can we get French **toast** at this restaurant?" You might respond: "No, they don't have **French** toast, just **plain** toast." Stress changes meanings in sentences, too. Consider the difference between these two questions:

Is **Joe com**ing **HERE** to**mor**row?   and   Is **Joe com**ing here **toMORRow**?

Is Joe coming here or someplace else tomorrow?   *Is Joe coming here tomorrow, or some other time?*

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words:

24.   "BREATH mint" or "breath MINT"   26.   "ICE cream" or "ice CREAM"

25.   "BAD breath" or "bad BREATH"   27.   "ICED tea" or "iced TEA"

Write down what each of the following sentences means, following the examples given:

This **is**n't **where** I **left** my **bi**cycle.   *I left my bicycle somewhere, but not here.*

28.   This **is**n't **where** I **left MY bi**cycle.   _____

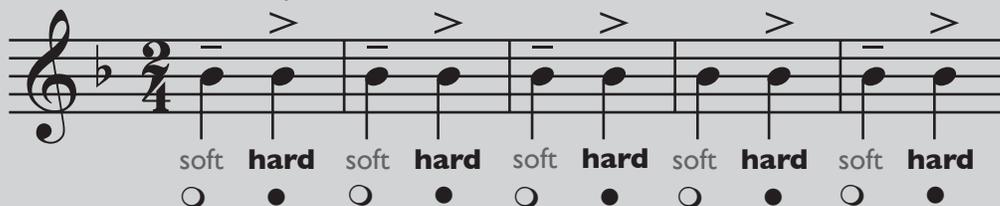29.   This **is**n't **where** I **left** my **BIcyCLE**.   _____

I **think** that **Bob**by **HATES** the **pur**ple **hat**.   *I think that Bobby really hates the purple hat.*

30.   I **THINK** that **Bob**by **hates** the **pur**ple **hat**.   _____

31.   I **think** that **Bob**by **hates** the **PURple** hat.   _____

Building Syllables and Stresses Into Lines

Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables, like so:

If you read music at all, you might realize that there are five measures. Each measure has two beats, with one quarter note on each beat. Sonnets work the same way. Each line of a sonnet has five **iambs** ("EYE-ams"). A line in a sonnet ought to come out to five iambs, or ten syllables. A line of five iambs is called **iambic pentameter**. A line would get these stress circles: ○● ○● ○● ○● ○●.

Exercises

Put stress circles under each of these lines of iambic pentameter. Draw ○ for soft stress, ● for hard stress.

32.   Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!

33.   Sin from thy lips? Oh, trespass sweetly urged!

34.   I can't eat ice cream, or I'll get bad breath.

Exercises

Look at these everyday sentences. Draw circles under them. Decide if each is iambic pentameter or junk.
(When it comes to sonnets, a sentence is either one or the other.)

35. I don't think I could eat another bite.   iambic pentameter   junk

36. Not even my math teacher solved that one.   iambic pentameter   junk

37. Who orders onion rings on a first date?   iambic pentameter   junk

38. Is it too late to add a side of fries?   iambic pentameter   junk

39. You said that we could buy tickets later!   iambic pentameter   junk

40. Man, some people have no sense of humor!   iambic pentameter   junk

41. Do I like boardgames? Like Monopoly?   iambic pentameter   junk

42. Does anybody have some Tylenol?   iambic pentameter   junk

43. Excuse me? I have some ibuprofen.   iambic pentameter   junk

44. My goldfish died, but I'm over it now.   iambic pentameter   junk

Making Iambic Pentameter from Lines of Text:

The tricky part about writing sonnets is that you can't just ignore iambic pentameter when you feel like it. If there's a sentence or a thought to express in a line, then you must figure out how to convey that thought in the proper form. Take the sentence "Who orders onion rings on a first date?" This sentence is not iambic pentameter:

Who orders onion rings on a first date?   *How could you re-write it in iambic pentameter?*
●   ●   ○ ●○   ●   ○ ○ ●   ●

Start by looking for words that you **must** bring over to the new sentence. There is no good synonym for "onion rings," so you'll need those three syllables exactly as they are. Fortunately, "**on**ion **rings**" has the right stress pattern. The pair "first date" could be "**first** date" or "**first date**" depending on the meaning. Here are two versions of this thought in iambic pentameter:

On **first** dates, **no** one **or**ders **on**ion **rings**.   or   On **first** dates **he** eats **on**ion **rings**? That **fool**!

The two sentences above are not perfect replicas of the original thought. They have most of the same meaning and tone, but they are different. One of them is now two sentences, or a sentence and an exclamation. Notice that "eats" has become a synonym for "orders" in one of the sentences. Also, question marks or exclamation points usually put a hard stress on the last word (or syllable) of a sentence.

This process of re-wording and revising is where the most time and effort go into writing good sonnets. Few poets can write sonnets on the spot! Most sonnets need to go through several drafts.

Exercises

Pick three of the "junk" sentences from up above. Re-write them as iambic pentameter. Keep as much of the original meaning as you can, although you may have to change verb tenses or switch synonyms.

45. _____

46. _____

47. _____