

Today, audiences expect films and television plays to use language which is everyday and familiar. But in Shakespeare's time, audiences expected actors, especially in histories and tragedies, to speak in verse. The 'poetic' style of verse was felt to be particularly suitable for kings, great affairs of war and state, or tragic themes.

Shakespeare's verse is written in iambic pentameter (which simply means that each line has five stresses). Typically the five stressed (/) syllables alternate with five unstressed (x) syllables, giving a ten-syllable line. To help you feel the rhythm, tap out the stresses:

x / x / x / x / x /  
But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

The danger when verse is analyzed in this way is that it looks like algebra, and seems to suggest a mechanical, repetitive rhythm:

de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum, de dum

Actors always try to insure that verse, rhymed or unrhymed (blank verse) does not sound boring and monotonous on stage. They use the clues that Shakespeare provides to match the rhythm to the thoughts and feelings of the characters.

In Shakespeare's early plays the rhythm of the verse tends to be very regular. The lines are often 'end-stopped', each line making sense on its own, with a pause at the end of the line. In *Titus Andronicus* (a very early play) Titus speaks in measured, formal style, even at the most melodramatic moments, as for example when he threatens the two men he intends to kill and bake in a pie:

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,  
And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,  
And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
And make two pasties of your shameful heads.

As Shakespeare's playwriting developed, he used fewer end-stopped lines. He made much greater use of enjambement (running on), where one line flows on into the next, seemingly without pause. *Macbeth*, for example, contains a great deal of enjambement:

I have lived long enough. My way of life  
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf.

coffin  
pie crust  
pasties  
meat pies

sere  
withered



- 1 To experience the five-beat rhythm of iambic pentameter, speak Titus's lines aloud, and physically emphasize the five stresses: clap hands, tap your desk, march around the room, or work out a rhythmical movement with a partner to accompany the lines. Do the same with the verse lines on the accompanying worksheet.
- 2 Feel the rhythm! Listen to your heartbeat and you can hear the basic rhythm of weak and strong stresses: de-dum, de-dum, de-dum.
- 3 Make up eight to ten lines of your own in iambic pentameter.

# Verse: find the lines 1

USE WITH PAGE 28

In the following passages, Shakespeare's blank verse has been printed as prose, with all punctuation removed and with no capital letters.

- A** but soft what light through yonder window breaks it is the east and juliet is the sun  
arise fair sun and kill the envious moon who is already sick and pale with grief that  
thou her maid art far more fair than she
- B** two households both alike in dignity in fair verona where we lay our scene from  
ancient grudge break to new mutiny where civil blood makes civil hands unclean  
from forth the fatal loins of these two foes a pair of star crossed lovers take their life  
whose misadventured piteous overthrows doth with their death bury their parents  
strife the fearful passage of their death marked love and the continuance of their  
parents rage which but their childrens end naught could remove is now the two  
hours traffic of our stage the which if you with patient ears attend what here shall  
miss our toil shall strive to mend
- C** if music be the food of love play on give me excess of it that surfeiting the appetite  
may sicken and so die that strain again it had a dying fall o it came oer my ear like  
the sweet sound that breathes upon a bank of violets stealing and giving odour  
enough no more tis not so sweet now as it was before o spirit of love how quick and  
fresh art thou that notwithstanding thy capacity receiveth as the sea naught enters  
there of what validity and pitch soeer but falls into abatement and low price even in a  
minute so full of shapes is fancy that it alone is high fantastical




Turn the passages back into verse lines. Remember, there are usually five stressed syllables in each line (iambic pentameter), but because Shakespeare used verse so flexibly, it is best to speak the words aloud, trying to find the rhythm. For example, passage B should start like this:

*Two households, both alike in dignity,  
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,  
From ancient grudge ...*

In the following passages, Shakespeare's blank verse has been printed as prose, with all punctuation removed and with no capital letters.

- D how if when i am laid into the tomb i wake before the time that romeo come to redeem me theres a fearful point shall i not then be stifled in the vault to whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in and there die strangled ere my romeo comes or if i live is it not very like the horrible conceit of death and night together with the terror of the place as in a vault an ancient receptacle where for this many hundred years the bones of all my buried ancestors are packed where bloody tybalt yet but green in earth lies festering in his shroud where as they say at some hours in the night spirits resort alack alack is it not like that i so early waking what with loathsome smells and shrieks like mandrakes torn out of the earth that living mortals hearing them run mad
- E rebellious subjects enemies to peace profaners of this neighbour stained steel will they not hear what ho you men you beasts that quench the fire of your pernicious rage with purple fountains issuing from your veins on pain of torture from those bloody hands throw your mistempered weapons to the ground and hear the sentence of your moved prince
- F three civil brawls bred of an airy word by thee old capulet and montague have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets and made veronas ancient citizens cast by their grave beseeming ornaments to wield old partisans in hands as old cankered with peace to part your cankered hate if ever you disturb our streets again your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace for this time all the rest depart away you capulet shall go along with me and montague come you this afternoon to know our farther pleasure in this case to old free town our common judgement place once more on pain of death all men depart
- G where shall we dine o me what fray was here yet tell me not for i have heard it all heres much to do with hate but more with love why then o brawling love o loving hate o any thing of nothing first create o heavy lightness serious vanity misshapen chaos of well seeming forms feather of lead bright smoke cold fire sick health still waking sleep that is not what it is this love feel i that feel no love in this

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