

# The Craft of Poetry

**Rhythm in Poetry** an addendum to the newsletter of The Poetry Society of Virginia, for members who are new to writing poetry.

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## RHYTHM IN POETRY

Poetry need not rhyme and it need not have a regular beat. But poetry **MUST** have rhythm. If there is no rhythm, you do not have a poem. There are five basic types of rhythm:

**QUANTITATIVE** rhythm was the rhythm of classic Greek and Latin poetry. The structure of those languages, with their long or short vowel sounds, was the basis of this rhythm. Quantitative rhythm is totally foreign to the English language. Remember it for historical purposes only.

**ACCENTUAL** rhythm was used in Old English. *Beowulf* was written in accentual rhythm. In accentual rhythm you count only the accented syllables. Ignore the number and sequencing of unaccented syllables. This rhythm is usually written with lines of two accents, then a pause (called a caesura in poetry circles), then two more accents. There is usually alliteration (repetition of initial sounds of the words.) Here is an example from *The Poet's Handbook* by Judson Jerome, Writer's Digest Books:

"Older than English: how evil emerges  
on a moor in the moonlight, emotionless, faceless"

**SYLLABIC** rhythm is one in which you count all syllables, and pay no attention to accents. All lines are end stopped and there are no caesuras. Syllabic rhythm is used commonly in unaccented

languages, like Japanese and French. The Japanese poetry form of haiku, with its three lines of five, seven and five syllables, is an example of syllabic rhythm. Here is an example by me:

"A great blue heron.	5 syllables
Pond with a dozen goldfish.	7 syllables
Now only heron."	5 syllables

There are other "rules" for haiku in addition to syllable count, but we won't go into them now.

**ACCENTUAL/SYLLABIC** rhythm pays attention to both accented and unaccented syllables. Much modern poetry and most English language poetry of the last few centuries is written in accentual/syllabic rhythm. It began with Chaucer. It is written in metric feet. A foot is a series of two or three syllables in a measured (or metric) pattern of accented and unaccented syllables. The feet are named with strange words derived from Greek.

### Feet with rising rhythms:

***iamb***: unaccented syllable followed by an accented syllable. Here is an example of iambic pentameter, or a line with five iambic feet:

"My learned Lord we pray you to proceed" from Shakespeare "Henry V"

***anapest***: two unaccented syllables followed by one accented syllable. Here is an example from Jerome's book:

"With a skip and a hop will the anapest trot."

#### **Feet with falling rhythms:**

***trochee***: accented syllable followed by an unaccented syllable. Example:

"Once upon a midnight dreary" from Poe's *Raven*

***dactyl***: accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables. Example:

"One more unfortunate weary of breath." From Hood's *The Bridge of Sighs*. The last foot in this example drops the two unaccented syllables at the end; this is called catalexis, another weird Greek word. It is similar to a rest in musical notation.

#### **Feet with rare forms:**

***spondee***: two accented syllables

***pyrrhus***: two unaccented syllables

**FREE VERSE** rhythm is also called **cadenced rhythm** by my mentor Dr. Joseph Adams. The English language naturally groups words into little groups with a falling voice at the end of the word group (*cadere* in Latin means to fall.) Much of Walt Whitman's poetry is written in cadenced rhythm, for instance:

"Out of the cradle, endlessly rocking;  
Out of the mockingbird's throat, musical shuttle."

This is a tough rhythm to do well.

Stuart C. Nottingham