

# Meter

## Types of Meter

1. Meter is the Greek word for “measure.”
2. There are three meters most commonly used by poets in the English language.
3. These are accentual meter, syllabic meter and accentual-syllabic meter
4. In accentual meter the accented stresses are counted and the syllables are variable.

An the example below is from *Beowulf* (trans. Michael Alexander)

. . . on the last of his **harryings**, // **Hygelac** the **Great**,  
as he **stood** before the **standard**// **astride** his **plunder**,  
**defending** his **war-haul**: // **Weird** struck him **down**;  
in his **superb pride** //he **provoked** disaster  
in the **Frisian feud**// This **fabled** collar  
the **great war-king wore** // **when** he **crossed**  
the **foaming** water.

5. In syllabic meter the syllables are counted the stresses are varied.
6. In accentual-syllabic meter both accents and syllables are measured and counted.
7. In English, one tradition established its dominance: the accentual-syllabic meter.

	Accented stresses counted	Syllables counted
accentual meter	☆	
syllabic meter		☆
<b>accentual-syllabic meter</b>	☆	☆

## The Character of Different Types of Meter

1. Accentual meter is often called “stress meter” or “strong stress meter.” Its origins lie far back in English poetry.
2. Accentual meter is common in the ballad and the nursery rhyme. It is heavily stressed and clearly heard when the poem is read.
3. Syllabic meters, on the other hand, are not easily heard. Because they count syllables, their force is most easily seen on the page: Syllabics are essentially a visual contract with the reader.

4. In accentual-syllabic meters—the combination of these—both syllables and accent are measure and counted and are often referred to as “feet.”
5. These “feet” are patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. The variations, pauses, musical effects, and dissonances within the accentual-syllabic line are where much of the force and power of meter occurs.

### Definitions of the Most Common “Feet” in Accentual-Syllabic Meter

1. A poetic foot is a measured unit of meter, made up of stressed and unstressed syllables.
2. The **iamb** is the most common foot. It is a short stress followed by a long one. An example is *about*.
3. A **trochee** is a less commonly used foot, but it is clear and striking at the start of a line. It is a long stress followed by a short one. An example is *That is*. Or *dropsy*.
4. A **dactyl** is a long stress followed by two short ones. An example is *happily*.
5. An **anapest** is two short stresses followed by a long one. An example is *in a tree*.
6. A spondee is two long stresses. An example is *humdrum*.

One way to remember the four most common feet is through a mnemonic device known as the **Four Women of Poetry**. Each of the names below illustrates the pattern of the metrical foot on the same line.

<b>Iamb</b>	<b>Irene</b>	i REEN
<b>Trochee</b>	<b>Erin</b>	ER in
<b>Dactyl</b>	<b>Jennifer</b>	JEN nif er
<b>Anapest</b>	<b>Annemarie</b>	anne ma REE