

Speak the Speech

WHAT IS THIS STUFF?



If you flip through this book, you'll notice that most of the monologues look like poetry, while only a few look like regular paragraphs. That's because most of the plays written in Shakespeare's time were written in poetry. In fact, back then playwrights were not called playwrights, they were called poets.

The monologues in this book that look like regular paragraphs are written in prose, which is ordinary spoken or written language that does not follow any organized rhythmic pattern. Today, most plays are written in prose. In his plays, Shakespeare used prose about 30 percent of the time, to define characters of "lower" social status than his nobles, to create a colloquial, informal, or relaxed tone, or to make a character who usually speaks verse sound particularly genuine and straightforward.

The other 70 percent of the time, Shakespeare wrote in verse. Verse is simply speech or writing that has distinctive patterns of rhythm (think of a nursery rhyme or a song). These patterns are called meter. The building blocks of meter are small groupings of syllables called feet. The foot Shakespeare used predominantly is called an iamb. An iambic foot has two syllables, with the first syllable unaccented, and the second accented.

Presenting Shakespeare's favorite foot, the iamb:

x /
da-DUM

Key: / = accented syllable
 x = unaccented syllable

Some popular iambs:

x /
 escape

x /
 Club Med

x /
 massage

x /
 undress

x /
 hot fudge

When you string five iambs together the way Shakespeare often did, you've created a type of meter called iambic pentameter:

x / x / x / x / x /
 da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM

x / x / x / x /
 Vacation's over and I've gained ten pounds.

x / x / x / x /
 That old black magic has me in its spell.

x / x / x / x /
 Tonight, tonight, I'll see my love tonight.

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

Of course, not all accented syllables are created equal. When you speak a line of iambic pentameter, you'll find that you naturally stress certain accented syllables more than others.

PUTTING YOUR FOOT IN YOUR MOUTH (EXTRA CREDIT)

There are seven types of feet in this crazy world, each containing two or three syllables. The particular rhythm of each kind of foot depends on which syllable(s) are accented.

The type of meter in a piece of verse is named for the predominant type of foot and predominant number of feet per line. The number of feet per line is referred to using Greek prefixes (*di-* for 2, *tri-* for 3, *tetra-* for 4, *penta-* for 5,

hexa- for 6, etc.). So, for example, a poem containing predominantly four trochees per line is called trochaic tetrameter. Don't worry—you won't be quizzed on this.

iamb	(x /)	Our book
trochee	(/ x)	helps you
pyrrhic	(x x)	to be
amphibrach	(x / x)	a classi-
anapest	(x x /)	cally trained
dactyl	(/ x x)	thespian.
spondee	(/ /)	Amen.

WHY BOTHER?

Iambic pentameter dominates the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. More specifically, they used unrhymed iambic pentameter, which is commonly known as blank verse, and there were compelling reasons Shakespeare and his cronies bothered to write in it.

Of all the types of meter out there, iambic pentameter is the one that is most similar to the speech patterns of the English language. In fact, our speech often falls naturally into iambic pentameter. And of all the types of meter out there, blank verse is best suited to drama. The sounds of rhymed verse and other types of meter can limit the actor by coloring the content with the author's perspective about it. Blank verse, on the other hand, has a neutral tone, which allows for greater dramatic range because the content alone determines what is expressed.

If the playwrights were so concerned with approximating the natural patterns of spoken English and with having a neutral medium to work in, why did they bother to write in verse at all? Why didn't they just use prose?

Well, since you asked—word for word, verse packs a bigger punch than prose in several interrelated ways:

- Verse is an efficient and compelling means of communication. It enables the author to convey more layers of meaning in fewer words.
- Because verse is an elevated form of language, it elevates the dramatic experience. This is especially appropriate to Shakespeare's plays, because they are concerned with individuals under extraordinary circumstances, making choices with far-reaching consequences. In fact, only one of