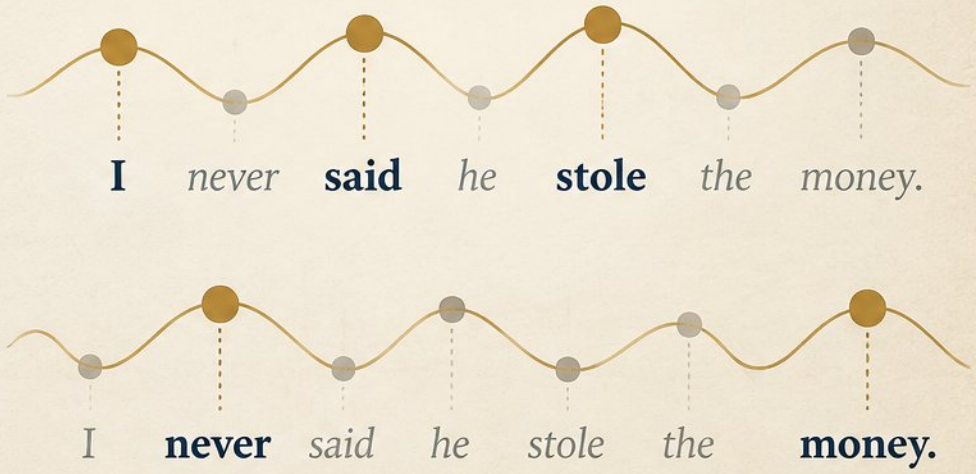
Poetic Meter:
Scanning Stress and Rhythm in English Verse

- **Opening demo:** same sentence, two stress patterns—meaning shifts
- **Why meter matters:** rhythm makes verse memorable, shapes tone, guides performance
- **Core promise:** readers scan with confidence; writers control rhythm deliberately
- **Roadmap:** stress → feet → line length → scansion → variation → writing
- **Key distinction:** rhythm is perceived flow; meter is the conventional pattern it fulfills or resists

"I never said he stole the money."



Rhythm vs. Meter: Two Levels of Verse Music

Meter

Abstract pattern (recurring)



Rhythm

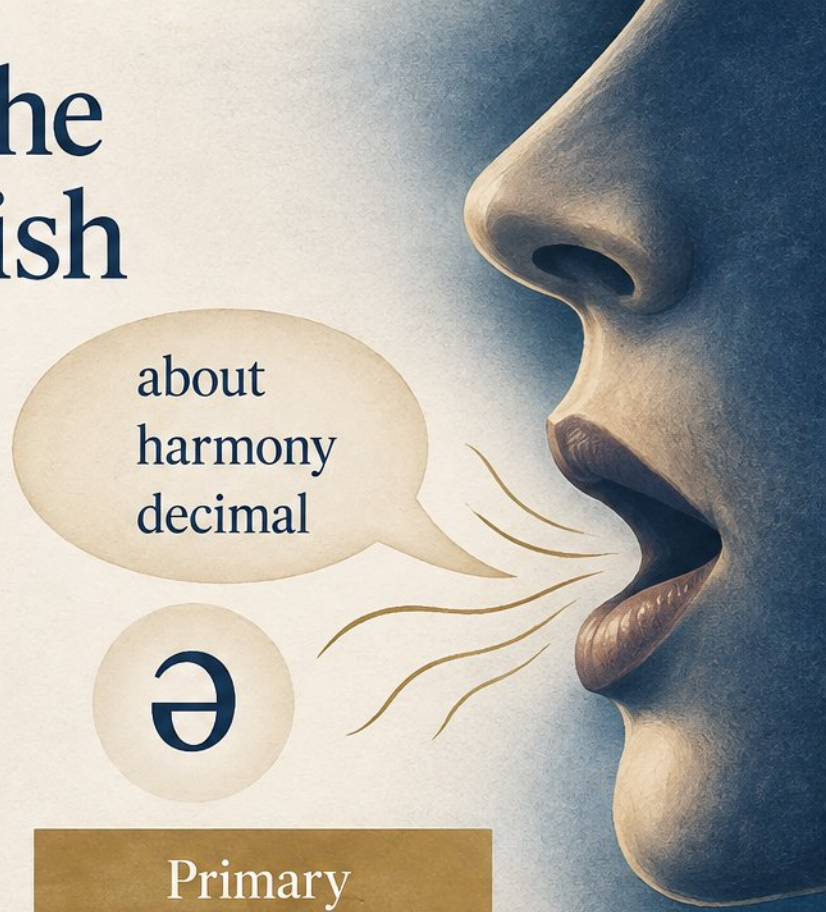
Specific realization (performed)



- **Rhythm:** the specific, performed realization of speech—pitch, volume, duration, pauses
- **Meter:** an abstract, recurring pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, divided into feet
- **Timothy Steele:** meter is the general pattern; rhythm is the specific speech realization
- **Misconception:** meter is rigid—real poems almost never sustain perfect regularity
- **Misconception:** scansion is guesswork—it follows repeatable procedures, though ambiguity remains
- **Expressive variation** is the source of most prosodic pleasure, not a flaw

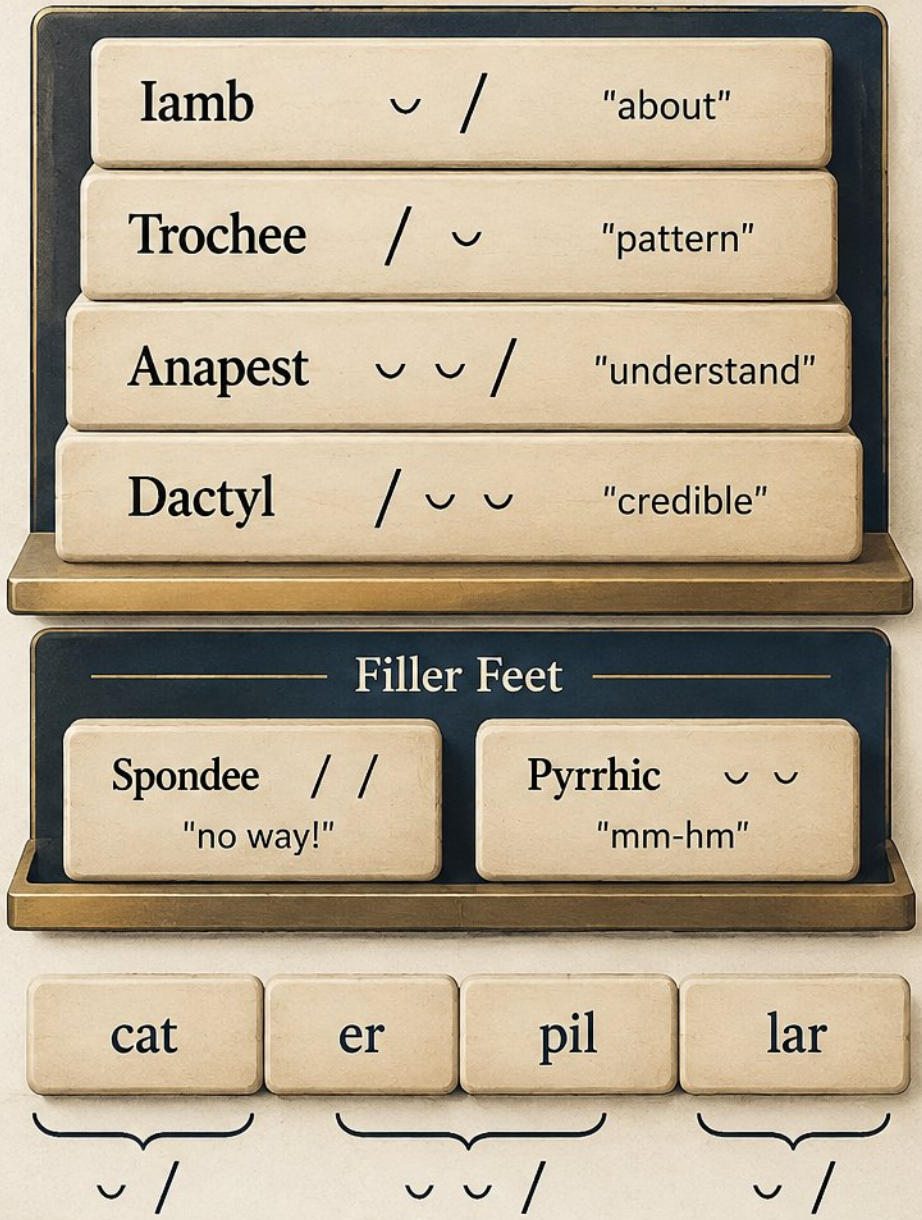
Stress, Syllables, and the Sound System of English

- Content words carry stress; function words usually reduce
- Unstressed syllables often contain schwa: “about,” “harmony,” “decimal”
- Stress shifts meaning: “present/present,” “record/record,” “insight/incite”
- Primary, secondary, unstressed—levels blur in natural speech
- Stress is relative: prominence depends on neighboring syllables (4B4V)
- Pitch, volume, duration, and articulation create stress together



The Foot: Building Blocks of Meter

- A foot: recurring unit of stressed and unstressed syllables in accentual-syllabic verse
- Workhorse feet: iamb (˘ /, "about"), trochee (/ ˘, "pattern")
- Rising and falling triples: anapest (˘ ˘ /, "understand"), dactyl (/ ˘ ˘, "credible")
- Filler feet: spondee (/ /, "no way!"), pyrrhic (˘ ˘, "mm-hm")
- Notation: macron and breve, slash and x, "ti tum" sounding
- Feet span word boundaries—"caterpillar" splits across three feet



Line Length: From Dimeter to Octameter

- Line length names the number of feet: monometer (1), dimeter (2), trimeter (3), tetrameter (4)
- Continue upward: pentameter (5), hexameter (6), heptameter (7), octameter (8)
- Combine foot and length: iambic pentameter = iambs × five feet
- Tetrameter and pentameter dominate English verse; longer or shorter lines are rarer
- Shorter lines assert the beat; longer lines need the reader to assert the meter

Monometer	∪ –
Dimeter	∪ – | ∪ –
Trimeter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –
Tetrameter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –
Pentameter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –
Hexameter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –
Heptameter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –
Octameter	∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ – | ∪ –

METER GIVES
SHAPE TO MEANING

Why Iambic Pentameter Dominates English Verse

- Chaucer introduced it in the 14th century; Shakespeare, Milton, and Millay followed
- Ten syllables, five beats—close to the natural rhythm of spoken English
- The odd number of beats frees intonation from four-beat repetitiveness
- Fenton: its pre-eminence comes from its genius for variation
- Four-beat "native meter" drives ballads and nursery rhymes—a different feel
- Blank verse and the heroic couplet are built on the pentameter line



Scansion in Practice: A Five-Step Method

POETRY
LISTENS
CLOSELY

SOUND
PATTERN
MEANING

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

˘ ¯ | ˘ ¯ | ˘ ¯ | ˘ ¯ | ˘ ¯

1



Step 1:
Read aloud twice—stress lives in performance, not just the page

2



Step 2:
Mark syllables; polysyllables by dictionary, stressed monosyllables by word class

3



Step 3:
Divide into feet; keep the most iambs-preserving division

4



Step 4:
Note substitutions, promotions, demotions, elisions, feminine endings

5



Step 5:
Interpret—what does variation do to tone, pace, emphasis?



Sanity check: sound out as "ti tum"; if it stumbles, reconsider

Common Scansion Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

LISTEN / MARK / UNDERSTAND

Forcing the Pattern

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

/ ◡ | / ◡ | / ◡ | / ◡ | / ◡ | /
To be | or not | to be, | that is | the ques- tion.

A MECHANICAL, UNNATURAL READING

Listening to Natural Speech Rhythm

To be, or not to be, that is the question.

◡ / | ◡ / | ◡ / | ◡ / | / ◡ | /
To be | or not | to be, | that is | the ques- tion.

A SPEECH-FAITHFUL READING

COMMON FOOT TYPES

◡ / — Iamb

/ ◡ — Trochee

◡ ◡ / — Anapest

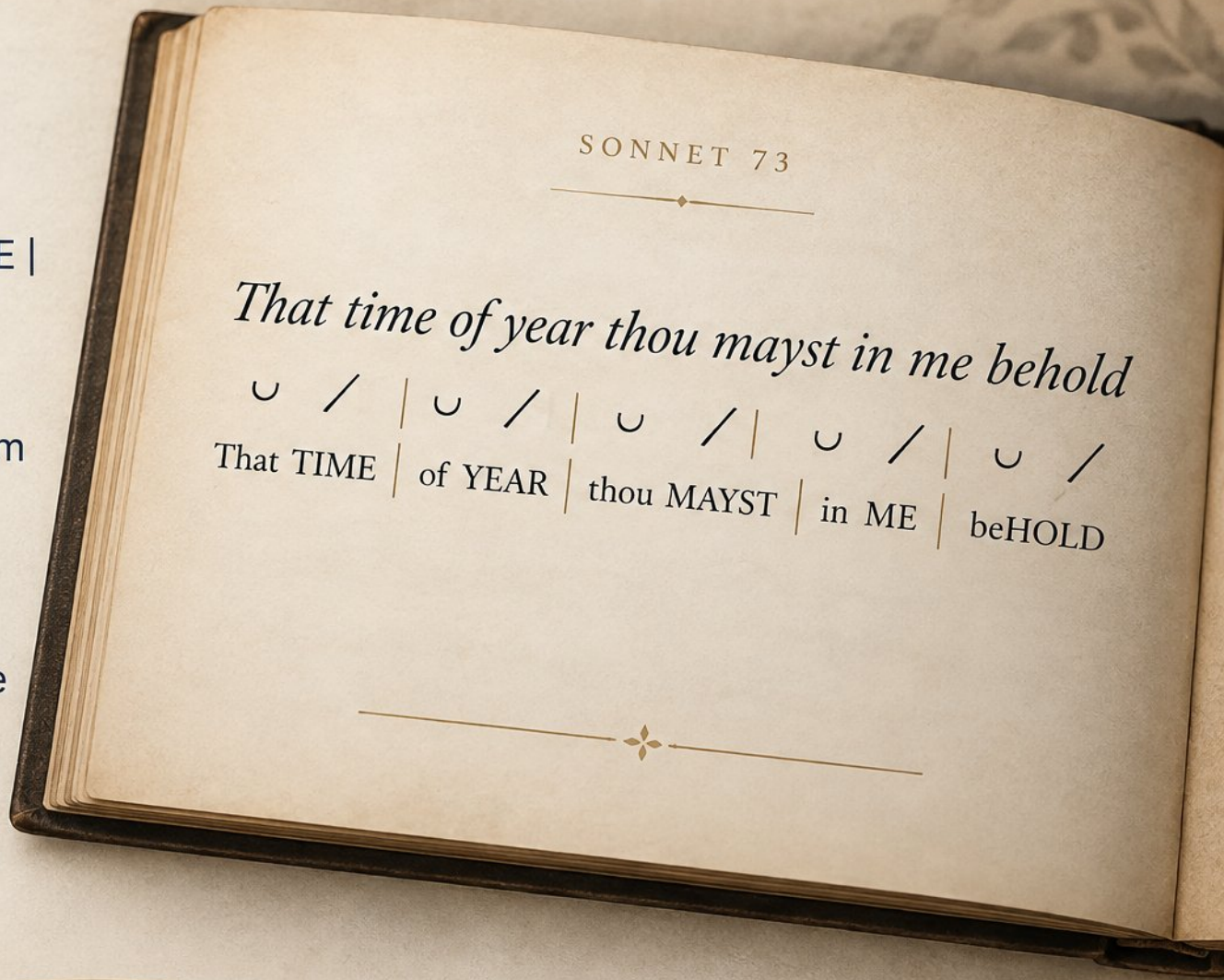
/ ◡ ◡ — Dactyl

- Forcing the pattern: stressing every even syllable without listening
- Ignoring natural speech rhythm: violating a word's dictionary stress
- Over-marking: making every syllable a stress or missing secondary stress
- Two adjacent inverted feet almost never happen—check for a mistake
- Inverted final foot is rare: Lear's "Never, never, never, never, never"
- Scansion is a tool, not a verdict—ambiguity is normal

Worked Example 1: Regular Iambic Pentameter

POETRY · PATTERN · MEANING

- **Passage:** “That time of year thou mayst in me behold” (Shakespeare, Sonnet 73)
- **Mark syllables:** That TIME | of YEAR | thou MAYST | in ME | beHOLD
- **Baseline:** five iambs, ten syllables, steady rising rhythm
- Regularity itself produces a calm, reflective tone
- **Contrast:** Wordsworth’s “The world is too much with us” for a second baseline
- Guided annotation exercise with answer key



VERSES SHAPE THOUGHT

Worked Example 2: Trochaic Inversion and Anapestic Variation

Longfellow
Trochaic Tetrameter

"Tell me not in mournful numbers"

— ∪ | — ∧ | — ∪ | — ∪

Trochaic tetrameter—
feel the falling opening.

Poe
Trochaic Octameter

"Once upon a midnight dreary"

— ∪ | — ∪ | — ∪ | — ∪ |
— ∪ | — ∪ | ∪ ∧ | — ∪

Eight trochees,
driving and hypnotic.

"Twas the Night Before Christmas"
Anapestic Variation

"'Twas the night before Christmas"

∪ ∪ — | ∪ ∪ — | ∪ ∪ —

Two slacks then a stress,
galloping pace.

- Frost's "Mowing" shows liberal anapestic substitutions inside an iambic sonnet
- Compare metrical pattern vs. performed rhythm, then annotate in groups

Rhythm Beyond the Foot:
Variation, Pace, and Enjambment

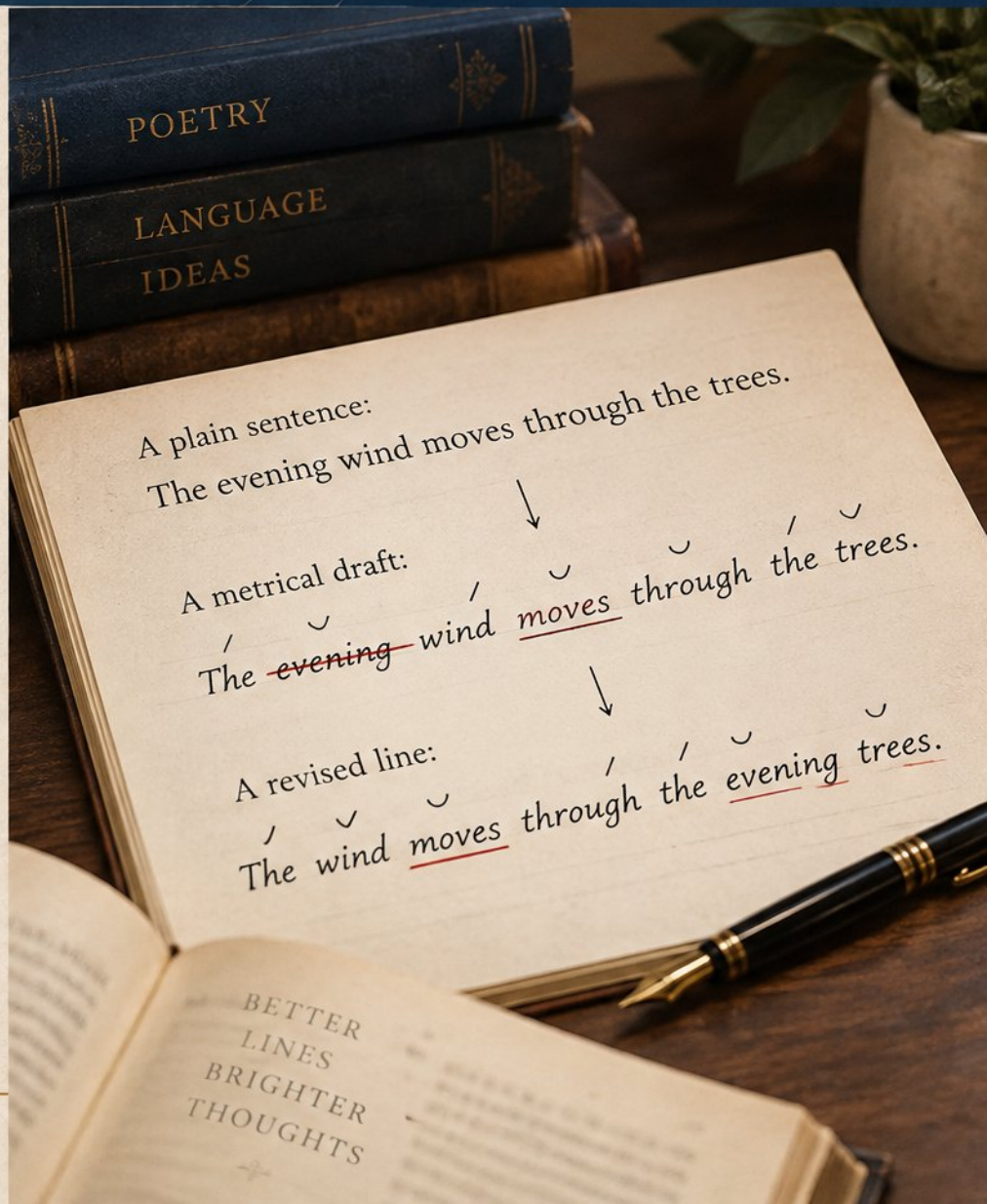
- Substitution as expressive tool: trochaic inversion, spondee, missing beat, headless line
- Feminine endings add an unstressed syllable: Hamlet's "that is the question"
- Monosyllabic lines with caesuras take longer to say than smooth polysyllabic lines
- Enjambment (from French enjamber, "to straddle"): syntax runs past the line end
- End-stopping: syntax and meter coincide, producing closure
- Caesura placement and breath shape performance; free verse keeps rhythm too



Writing with Meter:
Draft, Revise, and Break Rules Deliberately

WORDS
RHYTHM
MEANING

- Match meter to tone: pentameter reflects, tetrameter drives, anapest accelerates
- Draft a plain sentence, scan it, keep existing iambs, then add, cut, swap, reorder
- Revise for stress clashes, unwanted substitutions, awkward elisions, tongue-twisters
- Read aloud; notice where the tongue must hurry to fit the tempo
- Break rules deliberately for emphasis—know the norm first
- Exercise: turn one sentence into a metrical line, then revise freely



SAME IDEAS. A STRONGER RHYTHM.

Meter Today: Rap, Spoken Word, and Contemporary Debates



- Myth: meter is obsolete or only for sonnets—rappers and spoken-word artists still use it
- Rap as metrical practice: the beat is the meter; the MC's flow is its rhythm (Adam Bradley)
- Global Englishes reshape rhythm: K'naan's rhymes show stress-timed vs. syllable-timed tension
- Scansion controversies: stress ambiguity and the limits of notation on the page
- Performance and recording change our sense of rhythm—listen to recordings alongside the text

Practice Workshop and Key Takeaways

- **Rapid-fire drill:** name the feet and line type from short lines
- **Peer review:** scan a partner's draft, suggest rhythm fixes
- **Key takeaways:** stress is relative; feet are building blocks; variation is meaning
- **Take-home plan:** scan three lines daily; read aloud before revising
- **Resources:** Poetry Foundation glossary, *For Better For Verse*, Steele, Finch
- **Closing discussion:** what rhythm will you listen for next?



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