

A BEGINNING GUIDE TO SHAKESPEARE'S VERSE

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Writing in the Shakespeare plays falls into three categories: **1) Rhyming Verse**, **2) Blank Verse**, and **3) Prose**. The explanations and examples included here are meant as a technical guide to understanding the **construction** of Shakespeare's language in rhyming and blank verse (prose is a construction that we use everyday so it is not covered in this guide).

But since the plays were meant to be **spoken**, not read, these are not the only tools that we can use to **decipher meaning**, or **interpret a character's emotions, motivations, and actions**.

The basic rules of verse are simply **a starting point**. They provide the initial clues for understanding and enjoying a style of writing that might, at first, seem old-fashioned and boring. Instead, this language is very powerful, and learning the key to unlocking and **using** that power can be **fun and exciting!**

The verse also makes it much easier to learn and retain the lines when you are acting Shakespeare—just as it is easier for us to memorize song lyrics. Because there is an underlying **rhythm**, or **beat**, the words get into our bodies as well as our heads. That's why it's important to **physicalize the exercises** described in this Guide.

1. RHYMING VERSE: “poetry” as we generally think of it. There is a distinct rhythm, and the ends of sentences or phrases rhyme (usually an exact rhyme, but sometimes words are used that almost rhyme). **Think of Mother Goose nursery rhymes, or modern hip-hop songs. These are familiar examples of rhyming verse.**

Sonnets: Rhyming verse is always found in the sonnets.

If I could write the beauty of your eyes
And in fresh numbers number all your graces
The age to come would say, "This poet lies,
Such heavenly touches ne'er touched earthly faces."

Sonnet #17

Some glory in their birth, some in their skill
Some in their wealth, some in their body's force,
Some in their garments, though newfangled ill,
Some in their hawks and hounds, some in their horse

Sonnet # 91

In *Romeo & Juliet*, Act I, Sc 4, the lovers speak a sonnet to each other, alternating verses:

Romeo: If I profane with my unworthy hand
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this—
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

Juliet: Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

In general, **comedies use rhyming verse** throughout the dialogue more than tragedies or dramas, and **fairies and witches always use it to cast spells or weave enchantments**. When characters in a play resort to rhymes, they do it to **emphasize** what they're saying. For instance, **Fools** break into rhyme in scenes that otherwise have no rhyming in them. In the first example, the Fool has made a discovery. In the second example, the Fool is using the rhyme to make a joke out of what is actually not a very nice statement.

For often have you writ to her and she in modesty
Or else, for want of idle time could not again reply,
Or, fearing else some messenger that might her mind discover,
Herself hath taught her love himself to write unto her lover
Speed in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*

Fools had ne'er less grace in a year for wise men are grown foppish
And know not how their wits to wear, their manners are so apish
Fool in *King Lear*

Note that in the first example, the actor would have to say “modesti” to make it rhyme with “reply”, and this can be justified by the fact that he is mocking the woman he speaks of. In the second example, “foppish” and “apish” are what is called a “**near rhyme**”. It is not exact, but it serves the same function in the verse.

In the sonnets, the words at the end of *every other line* rhyme. When two rhyming lines are found together, this is called a **rhyming couplet**.

In Act II, Sc 3 of *Romeo & Juliet*, we are introduced to the Friar, who speaks completely in rhyming couplets, and Romeo joins him in this when he comes to see the Friar. This tells us that **the scene is light-hearted**, and that **the Friar is closely linked to the Fool character**.

But tragic plays use rhyming couplets too, also to emphasize the point. For instance, Macbeth has long speeches throughout the play that end with rhyming couplets, and they **always highlight the troubled nature of his thoughts**.

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest **show**.
False face must hide what the false heart doth **know**. Act I, Sc7

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not Duncan, for it is a **knell**
That summons thee to Heaven, or to **Hell**. Act II, Sc 1

More shall they speak, for now I am bent to know,
By the worst means, the worst. For mine own **good**
All causes shall give way. I am in **blood**
Stepped in so far that should I wade no **more**
Returning were as tedious as go **o'er**.
Strange things I have in head that will to **hand**,
Which must be acted ere they may be **scanned**. Act III, Sc 4

(The last text selection actually has a *triple* rhyming couplet, making it especially powerful and important!)

2. BLANK VERSE: lines written in a poetic meter but the ends of sentences or phrases do not rhyme

Shakespeare's blank verse is usually in **iambic pentameter**; which means that there are **five measures (pentameters)** and **two syllables within each measure**, with the **accent** (or emphasis) **placed on the second syllable**. [Note: "penta" means "five" and "meter" means measure; iambic refers to where the accent is placed]. Thus, there are generally 10 syllables to a Shakespearean line of blank verse; this is considered **"regular"**. It is important to realize that "iambic" is the natural rhythm of the English language. If you are a native English speaker, you will automatically emphasize every second syllable.

In sooth, I know not why I am so sad;
It wearies me, you say it wearies you;

using slash marks to break up the meter, we see there are five

In sooth, / I know / not why / I am / so sad;
It wear / ies me, / you say / it wear / ies you;

using an "x" we can see that the second syllable of each meter should be stressed when reading the text out loud (this is called the accented syllable)

 x x x x x
In sooth, / I know / not why / I am / so sad;
 x x x x x
It wear / ies me, / you say / it wear / ies you;

So, the rhythm of blank verse in iambic pentameter is usually pronounced

da dum / da dum / da dum / da dum / da dum

A good way to practice getting the beats right is to clap on every stressed syllable, or better yet, get on your feet and stomp it out!

Once you have tried a number of lines this way, you realize that it would get pretty boring if every line were pronounced exactly the same, but there are a number of reasons why they are not. First, we don't place the same *amount* of emphasis on every accented syllable. **Some words are more important than others**, and are stressed more (in the first example above, "sad" gets more emphasis than "know", even though both are accented).

Also, **the placement of punctuation, choice of words, the sound of words** (harsh consonant sounds vs. soft vowel sounds), help keep regular blank verse lines from sounding alike. All of the lines below have ten syllables, with the accent on the second syllable of each meter, but they sound very different when pronounced out loud.

A horse, a horse! My kingdom for a horse!

She lov'd me for the dangers I had pass'd.

Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!"

As I do live by food, I met a fool,

Tis but thy name that is my enemy

Exercise: First, divide the lines into five meters (using slash marks), and place an "x" over the second syllable of each meter. Then speak each line out loud (**remember,**

Shakespeare is meant to be spoken and heard, not read!). Keeping the accent on the second syllable, experiment with how much emphasis you place on each word. Use clapping or stomping to make your choices really clear. **See if the emotion changes with more or less emphasis.** For instance, in the first line, the word "horse" is always the accented syllable (the second syllable in a meter). But you might not place equal stress on the word all three times. What will happen if the first two "horses" have a medium stress, and the last gets a heavy emphasis. How does this make the speaker feel? Or, how do you feel if you place the most emphasis on the first "horse", then less on the second and even less on the third? **Experimenting with the amount of stress is a great way to start exploring what the character is going through in the moment.**

Irregular Blank Verse:

Although most of the lines in Shakespeare are written in regular blank verse, there are many which have **more or less than 10 syllables**. The reasons for adding or taking away syllables, or reversing the accent often help to clarify meaning, add emotional weight, or allow room for a change of thought. For instance, Juliet begins her famous balcony speech with this line:

O Ro / meo, / Rome / o, where / fore art / thou Ro / meo?

This seems like it has 7 meters and 14 syllables. Yet, the lines immediately following are all regular iambic pentameter lines, so we have to assume that Shakespeare meant for us to use the regular rules to discover where the emphasis should go in this first line. There are many possibilities. If we accent the second syllable of each meter, the pronunciation will sound very strange (in fact, it is almost impossible to say it that way!) Where do we begin? We might try making it two lines of regular verse, rather than one irregular line:

O Ro / meo, / Rome / o,
Wherefore / art thou / Rome / o?

Although this looks more understandable, we now have two lines with 7 syllables. **But, what do we do with the missing syllables?** We can *pause* for 3 syllables in each line, which makes sense in terms of Juliet's thoughts. She first enjoys saying Romeo's name twice, and then realizes that there is a problem with his name (he is a Montague, her mortal enemy). With pauses, the lines would look like regular iambic pentameter lines. In the first choice, Juliet pauses before she realizes that Romeo's name is the problem, and then pauses again before she thinks of a solution. In the second choice, she takes a longer pause before her realization, and no pause before moving on to the solution.

O Ro / meo, / Rome / o, pause/ pause pause
Wherefore / art thou / Rome / o? pause/ pause pause
or
O Ro / meo, / Rome / o, pause/ pause pause
pause pause / pause Where /fore art / thou Ro / meo?

in either case, the lines are now regular and they work better with the ones that follow:

Deny / thy fa /ther and / refuse / thy name
Or, if / thou wilt / not, be / but sworn / my love
And I'll / no long / er be / a Cap / ulet

Irregular verse therefore offers us the opportunity to **have fun with a line**, and to think of different ways to interpret Shakespeare's intention in using more or less than 10 syllables.

Sometimes, irregular verse lines have 4 or 6 meters, but the accent placement remains the same, so they are still considered iambic in their rhythm.

I pray / thee stay / with us, / go not / to Wit/ tenberg [6 meters]

Earth gapes, / hell burns, / fiends roar, / saints pray [4 meters]

Some lines begin with the **accent on the first syllable**, which is determined by the sense of the line. These are called **trochaic** measures:

Ay, or drinking, fencing, swearing, quarrelling,

Then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel

It would make no sense to emphasize "or" more than we do "Ay". "Ay" is clearly in response to another line, and by starting off with the accent on the first syllable, it remains on the first syllable of **all the action words** (drinking, fencing, etc.) This too makes more sense in terms of how we actually speak. We would not stress "ing" in everyday language, and we don't do it in Shakespeare either!

OTHER CLUES TO UNDERSTANDING MEANING, EMOTION AND MOTIVATION

Once we know the basic rules of verse, we can look at lines or sections of text and use other information to find out more about its meaning. None of these tools help us much unless we **SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OUT LOUD**. Play with the amount of emphasis, the speed with which you say particular lines, your volume, and tone of voice. **There is no "right or wrong" way to play!**

Additional analysis methods include:

Punctuation

Repeated Words and Sounds

Onomatopoeia

Single syllable words

Imagery

PUNCTUATION: The punctuation marks in Shakespeare's verse not only help us understand what is happening in the play, but can also indicate how a character is feeling or thinking, or how a line can be delivered by an actor.

Full Stops: Indicates the end or closing of a thought. Sometimes a sentence will continue for many lines before coming to a full stop.

Period: indicates the end of a sentence and of a thought (just as in contemporary English)

Exclamation point: reflects a moment of much emotion--anger, ecstasy, inspiration, surprise, pain, etc. Should be delivered in a big way.

Question Mark: indicates the end of a thought but makes sure the question asks a question.

In Shakespeare's verse, pauses and changes of vocal tone are very important.

Colon (:) or **Dash (—):** tells us that it is not the end of the thought, therefore we should not come to a complete stop when speaking. It is literally "connected" to what comes next, so there should be a noticeable change of tone. Sometimes we can think of a colon or dash as meaning "because". We also tell our actors to "breathe and leap" because we think that whatever follows a colon **should be BIG!**

Semi-Colon (;): again, this is not the end of the thought. Unlike a colon or dash, the tone change with a semi-colon is more of a side-thought, and we can add a silent “and”, “thus” or “so” in our speaking of the line.

Comma (,): not really a pause—very important in identifying parenthetical clauses (see below) as well as lists of things. **REQUIRES** some kind of vocal change or shift—extra emphasis on what follows the comma, louder or softer, etc.

Parentheses (): sets a word or phrase inside a sentence apart from the rest (a thought within a thought). The information adds more detail to clarify the larger thought. This requires the biggest change in vocal tone. Oftentimes a parenthetical statement will exist in Shakespeare without the punctuation marks (either commas or parentheses), but you can hear the vocal shift when speaking the text out loud.

REPEATED WORDS AND SOUNDS: Whenever Shakespeare repeats the same word (or root word) it is an indication that this concept or meaning is very important. When speaking the text out loud, repeated words should get extra emphasis. This allows us to discover what a character is trying to achieve through repetition, depending on the word and the circumstance.

There are also many repeated *sounds*, not just words, which add to the imagery and evoke particular feelings or emotions.

Alliteration: The repetition of two or more consonant sounds. There is a subtle build with every repetition, and different sounds have different emotional effects (Bs and Ds have a different feel than Ts and Ks for instance). Alliteration most often occurs at the beginning of each word (tongue twisters are the most common form: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers); but there are a lot of repeated consonant sounds *within* words in Shakespeare's verse. The following speech of Iago's from *Othello* has many Ss, which can sound like hissing or whispering. Thus, we might guess that Iago is up to no good.

I do/ not like/ the of/**fice**.
But **sith**/ I am/ entered/ in **this**/ cause **so**/ far,
Pricked to't/ by fool/**ish** hon/**esty**/and love,
I will/ go on./ I lay/ with Ca/**ssio** late/ly,
And be/ing trou/bled with/ a rag/ing tooth,
I could/ not **sleep**./
There are/ a kind/ of men/ so loose/ of **soul**
That in/ their **sleeps**/ will mut/ter their/ **affairs**.
One of/ **this** kind/ is Ca/**ssio**.
In **sleep**/ I heard/ him **say**/, "**S**weet Des/demon/a,
Let **us**/ be war/y, let/ **us** hide/our **loves**!"
And then/, **sir**, would/ he gripe/ and wring/ my hand,
Cry "Oh/ **s**weet crea/ture!" /Then **kiss**/ me hard,
As if/ he plucked/ up **kis/ses** by/ the **roots**
That grew/ upon/ my **lips**;/ laid his/ leg o'er/ my thigh,/ /
And **sigh**/, and **kiss**/, and then/ cry, "Cur/**s**ed fate/
That gave/ thee to/ the Moor!"

Exercise: Identify all of the repeated words and all of the S sounds in this monologue, and then **speak it aloud**, over-emphasizing those words and all of the S sounds. See what kind of emotional reaction you have. There are also many K and hard C repetitions in the second half of the speech, as well as Ls. Find out what happens to your feelings when you emphasize these sounds with each different

reading. What do the sounds make you think of? [Clue: the harsher sounds will invoke more violent emotions; the L sounds roll off the tongue, almost like a lullaby. What choices might we make about Iago's intentions with these readings?] Also note which lines are regular iambic pentameter, and which are irregular. What might the pauses mean if a line has less than 5 meters?

Assonance: Like alliteration, but vowel sounds are repeated instead. Think of Juliet's opening line in the balcony scene, with all those O sounds. When you say it out loud, and really let the Os stretch out, what emotions do you feel?

ONOMATOPOEIA: A word that sounds like what it describes (such as Buzz or Hiss). The use of these words also creates an emotional response in both the speaker and the audience and should be emphasized.

SINGLE SYLLABLE

WORDS: When a line of verse consists of many or all single syllable words, it is an indication to slow down and make sure each word is given weight—it usually means the line is meant to be emphatic.

IMAGERY: Shakespeare uses imagery in his verse just as any other poet would, and it occurs in different ways. It can be a literal description of a real event or thing, or it can be a comparison between two things (as in similes and metaphors). These descriptions generally use heightened language that "paints" the images with words. Imagery can also be built up by the use of different words that reflect the same concept (such as the repeated use of actual names and words that describe names and titles in Juliet's balcony speech).

Understanding all of the hidden meaning in Shakespeare's verse is like reading **a good mystery story**. There are **clues** throughout the language that tell us **what characters are thinking and feeling**, and even whether they are telling the truth or lying. Using the methods explained above, you can take a single speech in any of the plays, and find many layers and many messages. Ultimately, however, Shakespeare's language was always meant to be spoken and heard, so these tools are most important in conveying those hidden meanings to an audience.

WORKING WITH THE "FIRST FOLIO"

All of the text analysis methods described above may be used with any version of a Shakespeare play. Since there were different copies of the plays floating around in the Elizabethan era, all existing printed editions have been edited by someone, who made choices from those copies as to punctuation, line inclusion and word usage.

However, there is only one version that provides a number of additional tools to unlock **the meaning of the language in performance**

The First Folio is the name commonly given to the publication that included all of the known Shakespeare plays and sonnets in one book for the very first time. (Folio simply refers to the *size* of the paper on which something was printed. A Folio was a full sheet; quartos were full sheets folded in 4...or quarters. Paper was very expensive so a Folio edition was something special.)

The First Folio was published in 1623 (several years after Shakespeare's death), and many consider it to be the "authority" on what the plays actually contained. Very few of the plays were published while he was alive. In Elizabethan England, copyright laws were not strong and plays, especially popular ones, were big money-makers. If a rival company had access to a script, they could do their own production and cut into the original production

company's profits. Also, the scripts **belonged to the company** for which they were written (**not to the author as they do today**), so there was less of an incentive to publish the work, for the reasons noted above. The publishers of the First Folio claimed to have the original "**prompt books**"; that is, the complete original scripts owned by the acting company. For the early Shakespeare plays this would have been The Lord Chamberlain's Men; for the later plays, this company was patronized directly by King James and became the King's Own Company of Players.

Regardless of whether we believe that the First Folio is the best source of the text as originally written, **it does contain many clues that help the actor discover what their motivations and intentions are. This is not about word choice...it is about the way the words are presented to the actor. What they LOOKED like.** Remember, people would not have been able to read these plays before they went to the theatre, so the **ACTOR** was the primary person to whom the script had to **give instruction**. And there were no directors as we know them today, so there was not someone in charge who could tell actors what everything meant. **They had to be able to get all their "direction" from the script.**

In addition, **actors were not given the complete play.** As we mentioned, paper was expensive, and companies would also run the risk of the actor selling the script to a rival company. **So actors were given only their own lines, in a narrow scroll (or roll, from which we get the term "role").** There were a few lines of the previous character's speech included (or the actors' **"cues"**), so each actor would know *when* to say their lines, but otherwise, they were pretty much on their own.

By learning the First Folio text analysis techniques, you can literally DIRECT YOURSELF in performing the plays, and create compelling, dynamic characters for your audience!

FIRST FOLIO CLUES:

Capitalization
Punctuation
Spelling
Character Naming