THE ENGLISH MAJOR'S
PROSODY CHEAT SHEET

A Note from the Author/Collator/Editor/Fellow Cheater:

It's obvious in poetry, more than in any other genre, that language carries meaning. Poetry, with its crystallized language, its beautiful vocality, foregrounds words and the way they strike your ear.

But poetry is a give-and-take between structure and sound. All that beauty is constructed on and in a scaffold of rhyme, rhythm, and meter. The study of this scaffolding is called prosody. The usual definition of prosody is the study of the laws that govern the ways in which the regular patterns of sound and beats in poetry are arranged.

And prosody has its own kind of beauty and intelligence. Yes, it's a sometimes difficult discipline, sometimes puzzling, and sometimes just confusing. But it's essential to your understanding of the genre.

The more I learn about it, the more I am amazed at poets who can manipulate the formal trappings of the genre to make the form itself carry, support, and comment on various meanings.

While I have stolen/borrowed/co-opted much of this material, I attempt to acknowledge the various sources at the conclusion of the document.

Poetry, Reading, and Intimidation

Yes, poetry requires concentration and attention to every single word. It can be intimidating

Areas Covered:

Rhyme

Rhyme is the correspondence of terminal sounds of words or of lines of verse. In English use, rhyme is the repetition of the terminal syllables of two lines of verse, where those syllables have the same medial vowel(s) and final consonant(s), but different initial consonant(s).

Rhymes are classified into different types according to where they fall in a line or stanza or according to the degree of similarity they exhibit in their spellings and sounds.

Rhymes based on number:

Masculine Rhyme (also "single rhyme"): Rhyme that occurs *in a single accented syllable*:

moon / June   bait / hate   cat / sat   feet / neat

Feminine Rhyme (also "double rhyme): Rhyme that occurs *in two syllables, one accented and one unaccented*:

hairy / scary   fitting / sitting   faker / make her   trundle / bundle

Triple Rhyme (also "compound rhyme"): Rhyme that occurs *in three syllables, one accented and two unaccented*:

vanity/humanity   liable/pliable   flourishing/nourishing   scornfully/mournfully

Rhymes based on placement:

End Rhyme (also "full rhyme," "true rhyme," "perfect rhyme"): Rhyme that occurs between the vowels in different lines of verse:

> Tyger, tyger, burning bright
> In the forests of the night,
> > (William Blake, "The Tyger")

Internal Rhyme: Rhyme that occurs within a line of verse, or within several lines, but is not limited to the terminal words:

> The grains beyond age, the dark veins of her mother
> > (Dylan Thomas, "A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London")

Rhymes based on the level of sound matching:

Full Rhyme (also "perfect rhyme," "true rhyme"): The stressed vowel sound in both words must be identical, as well as any subsequent sounds. But the articulation that precedes the vowel sound must differ. This is the most obvious form of rhyme.

> Whose woods these are I think I know,
> His house is in the village though.
> > (Robert Frost, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening")

Near Rhyme (also "imperfect rhyme," "slant rhyme," "half rhyme," "oblique rhyme," "partial rhyme"): Repetitions of vowels or consonants not conforming to the strict definition of "full rhyme." Rhymes that are close, but not exact:

> If love is like a bridge
> or maybe like a grudge,
> > (George Wolff, "To My Wife")

Assonant Rhyme (also "vowel rhyme"): Rhyming with similar vowels and different consonants. The vowels match, but the consonants don't:

dip / limp   man / prank   gape / hate   feet / sheep

Consonant Rhyme: Rhyming with similar consonants and different vowels. The consonants match, but the vowels don't:

limp / lump   bit / bet   dust / frost   moth / breath

Eye Rhyme (also "sight rhyme"): Rhyming based on similarity of spelling rather than sound. These often reflect historical changes in pronunciation:

move / love   cough / bough   food / good   death / wreath

> 'Tis the last rose of summer,
> Left blooming alone;
> All her lovely companions
> Are faded and gone;
> > (Thomas Moore, "The Last Rose of Summer")

Rhythm

A **foot** is the metrical unit by which a line of poetry is measured. A poetic foot measures both length (in numbers of syllables), and sound (in stressed and unstressed vowel sounds). One foot can match one single word, or it can span several words.

There are many different types of feet. When the accent is on the second syllable of a two-syllable word (con-*tort*), the foot is an "iamb"; the reverse accentual pattern (*tor*-ture) is a "trochee." Other feet that commonly occur in poetry in English are the "anapest" (two unaccented syllables followed by an accented syllable: in-ter-*cept*), and the "dactyl" (one accented syllable followed by two unaccented syllables: *su*-i-cide).

The mnemonic phrase, "**I T**ake **A D**rink **S**ometimes," or **ITADS** should be sufficient for your needs. (In this memory device, unaccented comes first, and the lowest number of syllables comes first.)

Title	Order	Marking	Example 1	Example 2
I Iamb	unaccented accented	‿ ◞	Accord	Canucks
T Trochee	accented unaccented	◞ ‿	Volvo	Steelers
A Anapest	Unaccented unaccented accented	‿ ‿ ◞	Grand Marquis	Buccaneers
D Dactyl	accented unaccented unaccented	◞ ‿ ‿	Cadillac	Patriots
S Spondee	accented accented	◞ ◞	X-5	White Sox

Meter

Meter is an arrangement of sound elements into strong and weak beats or accents. Types of meter are classified according to the number of feet (see above) in a line. The number of feet in a given line is marked as a form of the word "-meter." These are the standard English lines:

Name	Number of Feet
Monometer	one foot
Dimeter	two feet
Trimeter	three feet
Tetrameter	four feet
Pentameter	five feet
Hexameter (also the "Alexandrine")	six feet
Heptameter (also the "Fourteener" when the feet are iambic)	seven feet

Here's a set of examples from John Hollander (whose *Rhyme's Reason: A Guide to English Verse* is the fundamental tool for this kind of work, and it's actually funny as well):

> If she should write
> Some verse tonight
> This *dimeter*
> Would limit her.
> BUT:
>
> Iambic *trimeter*
> Is rather easier.
> AND:
>
> *Tetrameter* allows more space
> For thoughts to seat themselves with grace.
> NOW:
>
> Here is *pentameter*, the line of five
> That English poetry still keeps alive.
> In other centuries it was official
> Now, different kinds of verse make it seem special.

     ´   ´   ´   ´   ´ ´

Six downbeats in a line that has twelve syllables
Make up the *alexandrine*, which, as you can hear,
Tends to fall into halves—one question, one reply.

     ´   ´   ´   ´   ´   ´   ´

Fourteeners, cut from ballad stanzas, don't seem right for song
Their measure rumbles on like this, for just a bit too long.

Classifying and counting the number of feet in a line allows us to describe the line. The most common English meter is iambic pentameter, in which each line contains ten syllables, or five iambic feet:

   ˘   ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.
                  (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses")

Types of Lines

End-stopped: a line of poetry which ends with a period or other punctuation.

Enjambed: a line of poetry which carries over syntactically to the next line.

Common Rhymed Groups of Lines

Couplet: A sequence of two rhymed lines, usually rhythmically identical and often forming a complete unit of thought:

> This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
> To love that well which thou must leave ere long.
> <div align="right">(Shakespeare, "Sonnet 73")</div>

Heroic Couplet: a pair of rhymed lines in iambic pentameter (the traditional heroic epic form).

> Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes,
> And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies.
> <div align="right">(Alexander Pope, "The Rape of the Lock")</div>

Triplet: A group of three lines with the same rhyme:

> Whenas in silks my Julia goes,
> Then, then, methinks, how sweetly flows
> The liquefaction of her clothes.
> <div align="right">(Robert Herrick, "Upon Julia's Clothes")</div>

Common Unrhymed Groups of Lines

Blank Verse: Unrhymed iambic pentameter.

> Something there is that doesn't love a wall.
> That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
> And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
> <div align="right">(Robert Frost, "Mending Wall")</div>

Free Verse: lines with no prescribed pattern or structure.

> The fog comes
> on little cat feet.
>
> It sits looking
> over harbor and city
> on silent haunches
> and then moves on.
> <div align="right">(Carl Sandburg, "Fog")</div>

Stanzas and Rhyme Schemes

Stanzas have specific names:

Name	Number of Lines
Couplet	Two lines
Tercet	Three lines
Quatrain	Four lines
Quintain (or quintet or cinquain)	Five lines
Sestet (or sextet)	Six lines
Septet	Seven lines
Octave	Eight lines

Rhyme Schemes

A rhyme scheme is the pattern of rhyme between lines of a poem. It is usually referred to by using letters to indicate which lines rhyme; lines designated with the same letter all rhyme with each other:

The little toy dog is covered with dust,	**a**
But sturdy and stanch he stands;	**b**
And the little toy soldier is red with rust,	**a**
And his musket moulds in his hands.	**b**

(Eugene Field, from "Little Boy Blue")

My mother's maids, when they did sew and spin,	**a**
They sang sometimes a song of the field mouse,	**b**
That for because their livelihood was but so thin	**a**
Would needs go seek her townish sister's house.	**b**
She thought herself endured to much pain:	**c**
The stormy blasts her cave so sore did souse...	**b**

(Sir Thomas Wyatt, from "Second Satire")

Typical rhyme schemes:

Name	Rhyme Scheme
Couplet	aa
Tercet	aaa
Terza Rima	aba bcb cdc …
Heroic Quatrain	abab
Enclosed-rhyme quatrain ("In Memorium" stanza)	abba
Ballad or Hymn Stanza	abcb
Quintain (or quintet or cinquain)	ababb
Limerick	aabba
Sestet (or sextet)	
English Sestet	ababcc
Italian Sestet	abcabc
Septet	
Rime Royal	ababbcc
Octave	
Ottava Rima	abababcc
Ballade Stanza ("Monk's Tale" stanza)	ababbcbc
Spenserian Stanza	ababbcbcc
Petrarchan or Italian sonnet	abbaabba cdcdcd, cdecde, or cdeedc
Shakespearean or English sonnet	abab cdcd efef gg
Spenserian sonnet	abab bcbc cdcd ee

Poetic Forms

Ars Poetica: This isn't really a structured form; it's a term meaning "the art of poetry." An *ars poetica* poem expresses that poet's aims for poetry and/or that poet's theories about poetry. See "Adam's Curse" by W.B. Yeats, or "Ars Poetica" by Archibald Macleish.

Aubade: A love poem or song welcoming or lamenting the arrival of the dawn. See "The Sunne Rising" by John Donne or "Leave-Taking" by Louise Bogan.

Ballad: In the English tradition, it usually follows a form of rhymed (abcb) quatrains alternating four-stress and three-stress lines. Folk (or traditional) ballads are anonymous and recount tragic, comic, or heroic stories. A typical ballad is a plot-driven song, with one or more characters hurriedly unfurling events leading to a dramatic conclusion.

> The night John Henry is born an ax
> of lightning splits the sky,
> and a hammer of thunder pounds the earth,
> and the eagles and panthers cry!
>
> (Melvin B. Tolson, "The Birth of John Henry")

Blank Verse (also "heroic verse"): Unrhyming iambic pentameter.

Common Measure: A quatrain that rhymes abab and alternates four-stress and three-stress iambic lines. It is the meter of the hymn and the ballad (but not necessarily the rhyme scheme).

Concrete Poetry (also "pattern poetry"): Verse that emphasizes nonlinguistic elements in its meaning, such as a typeface or layout that creates a visual image of the topic. See "Easter Wings" by George Herbert or "Sonnet in the Shape of a Potted Christmas Tree" by George Starbuck.

Confessional Poetry: Self-revelatory verse associated with a number of American poets writing in the 1950s and 1960s, including Robert Lowell, W.D. Snodgrass, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and John Berryman. See "Daddy" by Sylvia Plath or "Memories of West Street and Lepke" by Robert Lowell.

Dramatic Monologue (also "persona poem"): This form shares many characteristics with a theatrical monologue: an audience is implied; there is no dialogue; and the poet speaks through an assumed voice—a character, a fictional identity, or a persona. Because a dramatic monologue is by definition one person's speech, it is offered without overt analysis or commentary, placing emphasis on subjective qualities that are left to the audience to interpret. See "My Last Duchess" by Robert Browning or "Gunga Din" by Rudyard Kipling.

Epistle: A letter in verse, usually addressed to a person close to the writer. See "8 Count" by Charles Bukowski or "Hotel" by Lorna Dee Cervantes.

Elegy: Peter Sacks gives the most succinct definition: "a poem of mortal loss and consolation." The elegy began as an ancient Greek metrical form and is traditionally written in response to the death of a person or group. Though similar in function, the elegy is distinct from the epitaph, ode, and eulogy: the epitaph is very brief; the ode

solely exalts; and the eulogy is most often written in formal prose. See "Clearances" by Seamus Heaney or "Lycidas" by John Milton.

Epic: An epic is a long, often book-length, narrative in verse form that retells the heroic journey of a single person, or group of persons. Elements that typically distinguish epics include superhuman deeds, fabulous adventures, highly stylized language, and a blending of lyrical and dramatic traditions. See *The Aeneid* by Virgil or *Omeros* by Derek Walcott.

Epigram: A short, pithy saying, usually in verse, which is often (but not necessarily) ironic, satirical, humorous or clever, with a quick, satirical twist at the end. The subject is usually a single thought or event. The word "epigram" comes from the Greek *epigraphein*, meaning "to write on, inscribe," and originally referred to the inscriptions written on stone monuments in ancient Greece. See "In a Station of the Metro" by Ezra Pound or "Fire and Ice" by Robert Frost.

Ode: A formal, often ceremonious lyric poem that addresses and often celebrates a person, place, thing, or idea. "Ode" comes from the Greek *aeidein*, meaning to sing or chant, and belongs to the long and varied tradition of lyric poetry. Originally accompanied by music and dance, and later reserved by the Romantic poets to convey their strongest sentiments, the ode can be generalized as a formal address to an event, a person, or a thing not present. See "To Autumn" by John Keats or "In Celebration of My Uterus" by Anne Sexton.

Pastoral: A poem that deals with shepherds and rustic life. Pastoral poetry is highly conventionalized; it presents an idealized rather than realistic view of rustic life. Common topics of pastoral poetry include love and seduction; the value of poetry; death and mourning; the corruption of the city or court vs. the "purity" of idealized country life; and politics (generally treated satirically: the "shepherds" critique society or easily identifiable political figures). See "Damon the Mower" by Andrew Marvell or "Vespers" by Louise Glück.

Prose Poem: A prose composition that, while not broken into verse lines, demonstrates other traits such as symbols, metaphors, and other figures of speech common to poetry. See "Grace" by Joy Harjo or "Idem the Same: A Valentine to Sherwood Anderson" by Gertrude Stein.

Sestina: A complex French verse form, usually unrhymed, consisting of six stanzas of six lines each and a three-line envoy. The end words of the first stanza are repeated in a different order as end words in each of the subsequent five stanzas; the closing envoi contains all six words, two per line, placed in the middle and at the end of the three lines. In place of a rhyme scheme, the sestina relies on end-word repetition to effect a sort of rhyme. The patterns of word repetition are as follows, with each number representing the final word of a line, and each row of numbers representing a stanza:

```
1 2 3 4 5 6
6 1 5 2 4 3
3 6 4 1 2 5
5 3 2 6 1 4
4 5 1 3 6 2
2 4 6 5 3 1
(6 2) (1 4) (5 3)
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See "Homes" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman or "If See No End In Is" by Frank Bidart.

Sonnet: A fourteen-line poem, usually composed in iambic pentameter, employing one of several rhyme schemes. There are three major types of sonnets, upon which all other variations of the form are based: the "Petrarchan" or "Italian" sonnet, the "Shakespearean" or "English" sonnet, and the "Spenserian" sonnet.

A **Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet** consists of an octave rhymed abbaabba and a sestet rhymed either cdecde, cdccdc, or cdedce. The octave poses a question or problem, relates a narrative, or puts forth a proposition; the sestet presents a solution to the problem, comments upon the narrative, or applies the proposition put forth in the octave. Since this form presents an argument, observation, question, or some other answerable charge in the octave, a turn, or *volta*, occurs between the eighth and ninth lines. This turn marks a shift in the direction of the foregoing argument or narrative, turning the sestet into the vehicle for the counterargument, clarification, or whatever answer the octave demands. See "Sonnets from the Portuguese 43: How do I love thee? Let me count the ways" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning or "Sonnet 19: When I consider how my light is spent" by John Milton.

The **Shakespearean (English) sonnet** is divided into three quatrains and a couplet rhymed abab // cdcd // efef // gg. The couplet plays a pivotal role, usually arriving in the form of a conclusion, amplification, epigrammatic comment, or even refutation of the narrative or problem put forth in the previous three stanzas, often creating an epiphanic quality to the end. See "America" by Claude McKay or "Holy Sonnets: Batter my heart, three-person'd God" by John Donne.

The **Spenserian sonnet** uses three quatrains and a couplet like the Shakespearean, but links their three rhyme schemes in this way: abab // bcbc // cdcd // ee. The Spenserian sonnet develops its theme in two parts like the Petrarchan, its final six lines resolving a problem, analyzing a narrative, or applying a proposition put forth in its first eight lines. See Amoretti by Edmund Spenser or "The Snowdrop" by John Clare.

Terza Rima: Invented by the Italian poet Dante Alighieri in the late 13th century to structure his three-part epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*, terza rima is composed of tercets woven into a rhyme scheme that requires the end-word of the second line in one tercet to supply the rhyme for the first and third lines in the following tercet: aba // bcb // cdc // ded . . . . See "Complaints to his Lady" by Geoffrey Chaucer or "Ode to the West Wind" by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Villanelle: A French nineteen-line poetic form consisting of five tercets followed by a quatrain. There are two refrains and two repeating rhymes, with the first and third line of the first tercet repeated alternately until the last stanza, which includes both repeated lines. The first and third lines of the first stanza repeating alternately in the following stanzas. These two refrain lines form the final couplet in the quatrain. Thus lines 1, 6, 12, and 18 are the same, as are lines 3, 9, 15, and 19. Lines 1 and 3 form a final couplet. The lines rhyme: aba // aba // aba // aba // aba // abaa. See "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop or "Do Not Go Gentle" by Dylan Thomas.

Scansion

To start scanning, read the poem to yourself, paying attention to how the words sound. Always mark the stressed syllables first, with a ╱ then fill in the unstressed syllables with a ‿ . Or, if doing this in a word processor, you can also use ALL CAPS for stressed, lower-case for unstressed.

Mark the end rhyme of every line with single letters. Determine the kind and number of feet in each line.

When we scan a poem we name a complete poetic line by the kind of foot, use the adjective form for the foot, followed by the length of meter.

Names for poetic events

Caesura: a pause, break, or cut in a poetic line, occurring where a phrase, clause or sentence ends, causing a pause in the rhythm. In scanning a poem, it is marked ‖, with 2 parallel vertical lines placed at the break.

Medial Caesura: a pause in the middle of a line.

Hypermetric line: a line of regular, metered verse in which there is one more syllable than the metric pattern requires.

Catalectic line: a line of regular, metered verse in which there is one fewer syllable than the metric pattern requires

Not all lines contain only one kind of foot. For example, quite often the first foot of an iambic line is reversed, making it a trochee. As you'll see, these poetic laws are meant to be interpreted, and they are often bent. Here's a very regular example of scansion, from Robert Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening":

Whose WOODS these ARE i THINK i KNOW.	4 feet, all iambs	a
His HOUSE is IN the VILLage THOUGH;	4 feet, all iambs	b
He WOULD not MIND me STOPping HERE	4 feet, all iambs	a
To SEE his WOODS fill UP with SNOW.	4 feet, all iambs	b

The basic foot here is the iamb, and there are four of them in each line. The first stanza of Frost's poem, therefore, is in iambic tetrameter. All rhymes are masculine, and the rhyme scheme is abab, alternate rhyme.

And here's a slightly irregular example from Wilfred Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth":

˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´ ˘ ´˘ ´˘ What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?	5 feet: all iambs, + 1 unaccented syllable	a
´˘˘ ´ ˘ ´˘ ´˘ ´ Only the monstrous anger of the guns.	5 feet: 1 trochee, + 4 iambs	b
´˘˘ ´˘˘ ´˘ ´˘ ´˘ Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle	5 feet: 2 dactyls + 3 trochees	a
˘ ´˘ ´ ˘ ´˘ ´˘´ Can patter out their hasty orisons.	5 feet: all iambs	b

The basic foot here is the iamb, and there are five of them in each line. So it's basic iambic pentameter. Although the 2nd and 3rd lines here seem to go against the scheme, you can chalk up the dactyls to a poetic attempt to imitate both stuttering speech and the rattling of a rifle. The rhyme scheme is abab, with the a rhymes feminine and the b rhymes masculine. Again, the alternating rhymes echo the sound of the rifles.

Quoting Poetry

If you're quoting one, two, or three lines of poetry, you mark the end of a line by placing a space and a / (a virgule) followed by another space:

> William Carlos Willams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" ends thus: "beside the white / chickens."

If a short quotation of poetry spans two stanzas, signal a stanza break with two virgules:

> Williams composes a place full of "water // beside the white / chickens."

Verse quotations of more than three lines should be treated like a block quotation of prose. That is, they should begin on a new line. Unless the quotation involves unusual spacing, indent each line one-half inch from the left margin and double-space between lines, adding no quotation marks that do not appear in the original:

> Williams' minimalist modernist poem calls attention to the fact that we, as readers, are looking at a work of art which takes as its subject itself:
>
> > so much depends
> > upon
> >
> > a red wheel
> > barrow
> >
> > glazed with rain
> > water
> >
> > beside the white
> > chickens.

Stolen From

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