

Poetry Ear-Training: Finding the beat

1. Break the line into syllables:
The | fal | con | can | not | hear | the | fal | con | er
2. Use your ear. Stressed syllables are usually louder or emphasized, and they are often said more slowly.
3. Use your brain. These rules usually apply:
 - a. Multi-syllabic words have fixed accents (as opposed to one-syllable words, whose stress may vary according to context).
 - b. The accent in multi-syllabic words falls on the root of the word, not prefixes or suffixes:
 - a. Slów | ly. Re | ác | tion in | ví | s | ible
 - c. English (as opposed to foreign) multi-syllabic words *are more likely* to be stressed earlier in the word than later.
 - d. When three unstressed syllables are adjacent, one of them (probably the middle one) will pick up a secondary stress.
 - e. In a three-syllable word with two unstressed syllables, one of those syllables may well pick up a secondary stress.
 - f. For mono-syllabic words, context is everything. But some grammatical rules help. An interrogative next to a noun is less likely to be stressed; an interrogative next to a helping verb is more likely to be stressed (“Who goes there? What have you done?”) One-syllable word types are listed according to the likelihood that they will be stressed, in decreasing order of likeliness (but remember that the metrical contract helps define which words to emphasize, and emphasis ultimately determines the stress pattern of one-syllable words):
 - o Adjectives, adverbs, nouns and proper nouns (Bób loves Súa)
 - o Verbs
 - o Pronouns (hě loves hěr)
 - o Demonstratives (“this”, “that,” “there”) and words that turn sentences into questions (“what,” “why,” “where” “how”)
 - o Helping verbs and infinitive-makers (“is,” “have,” “to”) (example: “is leaving,” “to wonder,” “have felt”)
 - o Prepositions (“to,” “from,” “towards”), expletives (“there is” or “it is”) and conjunctions
 - o Articles (“a,” “an,” and “the”)

In a 10-word iambic line, the pattern tells us what to stress:

“Thěy sháll hăve nóne I swéar bŭt thése my jóints”.

4. Feel your chin. It drops more for accented syllables than those without accents.

Scanning for patterns:

1. If there are words you are unsure about, leave a question mark above them for now.
2. Mark all the syllables you know are accented or stressed with a ´.
3. Mark all the syllables you know are not accented with a ˘.
4. Determine the dominant meter of the first 3-4 lines. You can do this by a process of elimination:
 - a. if each stressed syllable is usually followed by a single unstressed syllable, the meter is either iambic or trochaic.
 - If the lines **usually** begin with an unstressed syllable and end with a stressed syllable, they are iambic.
 - If they **usually** begin with a stressed syllable and end with an unstressed syllable, they are trochaic.
 - b. If each stressed syllable is **usually** followed by two unstressed syllables, the meter is either dactylic or anapestic. Though it probably doesn’t matter which, dactyls are much more common in English (see item 3 above). Dactylic lines often begin with an unaccented pickup syllable stolen from the end of the previous line :

O | whére are you | gó ing? said | Réad er to | Rí der

That | vá lley is | fá tal when | fúr nac es | búrn

5. Once you know the dominant meter, use the metrical contract to determine the rest of the stresses. Read the lines aloud, overemphasizing the stresses and beating time until you hear the rhythm in your head. This will tell you how to say the syllables you aren't uncertain about. For example, taken in isolation, a line like this one from Yeats's "The Second Coming," with its string of monosyllabic words, would be hard to scan:

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

However, once the primarily iambic meter of Yeats's "The Second Coming" is established, we know to read it

Thé blóod | dímm̄ed tíde | ís lóosed, | and é | vrý whére.

Ultimately every line is working either with or against the iambic pattern or "contract"; the pattern or contract is the metronome that sets the beat.

Variation

For your assignment, I would like you to write between 10 and 20 unrhymed lines of perfect iambic pentameter. But it's worth noting that, in real life, iambic pentameter is not perfect or strict. It has a way of working either with or against the beat, and that causes movement and syncopation (against) or evenness.

Sometimes feet are just reversed. Most reversals happen in at the beginning of a line or after a caesura.

Béíng yoŭr sláve, whát shóuld Ĩ dó bŭt ténd
ŭpón thē hoŭrs ānd tímes ōf yóur dēsíre?

Some iambic lines also have an 11th unstressed syllable, called the feminine ending:

To bé or nót to bé—thát is the quéstion.

Some writers in the Renaissance liked to "elide" or combine syllables, especially when one ends with a vowel and the next begins with one:

That I may rise and stand, o'ērthrow me, ānd bend

Donne, who wrote the line above, also liked to over-stress some words by stressing three in a row:

Ās yēt bŭt knóck, bréathe, shíne, and séek to ménd

Richard Wilbur, like John Milton, liked to introduce dactyls and spondees to alternate a regular meter with a galloping meter:

Thé eyes op̄en to' ā cry' ōf pŭllēys,
And sp̄iritēd from sleēp, thē astóunded sóul
Hāngs for a móment bódilēss and símp̄le
As fálse dáwn.

Outside the open window
The mórning air is all awásh with ángels.

Here Wilbur imitates Donne with a forced elision. I've used an = to show when an unstressed syllable picks up a secondary stress.

Note how he "steps" the line after the caesura. He gets this from the Anglo-Saxons.

In great blank verse, the tension is created with the variation on the iambic line:

The queén, my lórd, is déád.

She shoúld have díed hereafter;
There would have béen a tíme for súch a wórd.
Tomoórow, =and tomoórow, =and tomoórow,
Creéps in this pétty páce from daý to daý
To the lást sylláble of recórded tíme,
And all our yésterdaýs have líghted fools
The wáý to dústy deáth. Óut, óut, briēf cándle!
Life's but a wáلكing shádw, ~ a póor pláyer
That strúts and fréts his hóur upón the stáge
And theén is heárd no móre: it =s a tale
Told by an ídiot, full of souúnd and fúry,
Sígnyfíng nóthing.

Again, the = sign shows how a normally unstressed word like "and" is given an unnatural stress. The odd weight on "and" shows that Macbeth is nearly overwhelmed with the awful prospect of living forever.

I used the ~ sign to show when normally stressed syllables are forced into an unstressed pattern.

Now try one of these:

The Birches

When I see birches bend to left and right
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay
As ice-storms do. Often you must have seen them
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning
After a rain. They click upon themselves
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells
Shattering and avalanching on the snow-crust—
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed
So low for long, they never right themselves:
You may see their trunks arching in the woods
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun.
But I was going to say when Truth broke in
With all her matter-of-fact about the ice-storm
I should prefer to have some boy bend them
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball,
Whose only play was what he found himself,
Summer or winter, and could play alone.

Time Cats

To console you for growing old, I got you a gift
to take you out of time. Not poems, which are always
ending after they start. And not knitting,
which if worn you might wear out. The best
gifts are light, but not too light, and flow
everywhere, like the ache of debt. This year
your gift should signify the infinite.
So I got you kittens, tricked by your own fingers
from the wild. Because they compound eternally,
but warmer. Because a single box contains
all kittens till it's opened. Because a kitten
mewing makes a butterfly make a tornado.
Because a knotting of kittens extends in a plane
forever. Because a dying kitten is
impossibly light, and a lost kitten's cry
is bottomless. And since each kitten wells
with the cat of danger, we know every cat
wears kittens like an urge. None is ever
really lost. Then cats point both ways always.
Now you are grown, here are all your kittens,
new again, like money you found in the laundry.
Heft them gently. Feel in their small hearts
your trembling. Calm them in the morning
of your fears. When you are sad, speak
them like cadences, kitten of cross-fire,
kitten of backflip, kitten of glory, kitten of
clutching, kitten of pestering and plummet, spindly
kitten, hungry kitten, kitten of solace.