Foundation of the Sonnet: Iambic Pentameter

A sonnet is a classic form of short poem. What makes a sonnet? Most English sonnets have these characteristics:

- Sonnets have 14 lines. The last word of each line rhymes with the last word of one other line.
- Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables. In special cases, a line may have eleven, but that comes later.
- The ten syllables of each line have a special stress rhythm: ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM.

Stress Patterns in English Words

Most English words have alternating soft-hard stress patterns. Take the word “invent.” “Invent” is a two-syllable word with a soft stress and a hard stress. How can you tell? Try it both ways:

“invent” “in-vent”  Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?

Try reading it with an exaggerated sense of stress:

“IN-vent” “in-VENT”  Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?

Try reading it with your mouth closed, using “mmm” sounds.

“MMM-mm” “mm-MMM”  Does one of those sound more correct? Which one?

“invent” is a word with a soft first syllable and a hard second syllable.

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words.

1. window  “WIN-dow” or “win-DOW”  5. allowed  “AL-lowed” or “al-LOWED”
2. open  “O-pen” or “o-PEN”  6. eraser  “ER-as-ER” or “er-AS-er”
3. decide  “DE-cide” or “de-CIDE”  7. chimpanzee “CHIM-pan-ZEE” or “chim-PAN-zee”
4. absent  “AB-sent” or “ab-SENT”  8. banana  “BA-na-NA” or “ba-NA-na”

Some words can change meaning based on stress. The word “refund” can be “RE-fund” or “re-FUND,” for example. The spelling is the same, but the stress changes, and so does the meaning.

Circle the proper stress pattern for the word “refund” in each sentence.

9. I’m going to ask the store for a __________. (“RE-fund” / “re-FUND”)
10. The clerk refused to ______ our money? (“RE-fund” / “re-FUND”)
11. I’ll use my ______ to buy some headphones. (“RE-fund” / “re-FUND”)

Draw empty circles underneath soft stresses and solid circles underneath hard stresses. For example:

apple  Toyota  explode  happy  orangutan  (There is no g at the end of orangutan.)

12. describe  16. dangerous*  20. ambitious
13. fossil  17. button  21. alarm
14. José  18. yo-yo  22. modern
15. minister  19. Linda  23. purple

*Note: Dangerous is a dactyl: “DAN-ger-ous.” (“It can be dan-ger-ous, running with knives” is a dactylic phrase.) But in a sonnet, this word would usually sound okay as “DAN-ger-OUS.”

(“The deadly don’t seem dan-ger-ous at all.”) It’s important to sound these words out honestly when you write! Just because you can talk yourself into it doesn’t mean the reader/audience will oblige!
Stress Patterns Across Multiple Words

Sometimes, the stress pattern is so strong that it extends across pairs of words. We say “hot dog,” for example. Here are some other phrases and their normal stress patterns:

- **blue jeans**
- **French fries**
- **French toast**
- **threw up**
- **good luck**
- **time out**
- **first aid**

Stresses can change, if the meaning of the pair of words is different for a particular conversation. For example, if someone said: “Can we get **French toast** at this restaurant?” You might respond: “No, they don’t have **French toast**, just **plain toast**.” Stress changes meanings in sentences, too. Consider the difference between these two questions:

- **Is Joe coming HERE tomorrow?**
- **Is Joe coming here toMORRow?**
- **Is Joe coming here or someplace else tomorrow?**
- **Is Joe coming here tomorrow, or some other time?**

Exercises

Circle the proper stress pattern for the following words:

24. “**BREATH mint**” or “**breath MINT**”
25. “**BAD breath**” or “**bad BREATH**”
26. “**ICE cream**” or “**ice CREAM**”
27. “**ICED tea**” or “**iced TEA**”

Write down what each of the following sentences means, following the examples given:

- **This isn’t where I left my bicycle.**
- **I left my bicycle somewhere, but not here.**

Write down what each of the following sentences means, following the examples given:

28. **This isn’t where I left MY bicycle.**

29. **This isn’t where I left my BiCyCLe.**

30. **I think that Bobby HATES the purple hat.**

31. **I think that Bobby hates the PURple hat.**

Building Syllables and Stresses Into Lines

Each line of a sonnet has ten syllables, like so:

If you read music at all, you might realize that there are five measures. Each measure has two beats, with one quarter note on each beat. Sonnets work the same way. Each line of a sonnet has five **iambs** (“EYE-ams”). A line in a sonnet ought to come out to five iambs, or ten syllables. A line of five iambs is called **iambic pentameter**. A line would get these stress circles: ○○ ○○ ○○ ○○ ○○.

Exercises

Put stress circles under each of these lines of iambic pentameter. Draw ○ for soft stress, ● for hard stress.

32. **Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!**
33. **Sin from thy lips? Oh, trespass sweetly urged!**
34. **I can’t eat ice cream, or I’ll get bad breath.**
Exercises

Look at these everyday sentences. Draw circles under them. Decide if each is iambic pentameter or junk. 
(When it comes to sonnets, a sentence is either one or the other.)

35. I don’t think I could eat another bite. iambic pentameter junk
36. Not even my math teacher solved that one. iambic pentameter junk
37. Who orders onion rings on a first date? iambic pentameter junk
38. Is it too late to add a side of fries? iambic pentameter junk
39. You said that we could buy tickets later! iambic pentameter junk
40. Man, some people have no sense of humor! iambic pentameter junk
41. Do I like boardgames? Like Monopoly? iambic pentameter junk
42. Does anybody have some Tylenol? iambic pentameter junk
43. Excuse me? I have some ibuprofen. iambic pentameter junk
44. My goldfish died, but I’m over it now. iambic pentameter junk

Making Iambic Pentameter from Lines of Text:

The tricky part about writing sonnets is that you can’t just ignore iambic pentameter when you feel like it. If there’s a sentence or a thought to express in a line, then you must figure out how to convey that thought in the proper form. Take the sentence “Who orders onion rings on a first date?” This sentence is not iambic pentameter:

Who orders onion rings on a first date?

How could you re-write it in iambic pentameter?

Start by looking for words that you must bring over to the new sentence. There is no good synonym for “onion rings,” so you’ll need those three syllables exactly as they are. Fortunately, “onion rings” has the right stress pattern. The pair “first date” could be “first date” or “first date” depending on the meaning. Here are two versions of this thought in iambic pentameter:

On first dates, no one orders onion rings. or On first dates he eats onion rings? That fool!

The two sentences above are not perfect replicas of the original thought. They have most of the same meaning and tone, but they are different. One of them is now two sentences, or a sentence and an exclamation. Notice that “eats” has become a synonym for “orders” in one of the sentences. Also, question marks or exclamation points usually put a hard stress on the last word (or syllable) of a sentence.

This process of re-wording and revising is where the most time and effort go into writing good sonnets. Few poets can write sonnets on the spot! Most sonnets need to go through several drafts.

Exercises

Pick three of the “junk” sentences from up above. Re-write them as iambic pentameter. Keep as much of the original meaning as you can, although you may have to change verb tenses or switch synonyms.

45. _________________________________________________________________________________________
46. _________________________________________________________________________________________
47. _________________________________________________________________________________________