

Poisonous Poetry Iambic Pentameter

In English, words have stressed and unstressed syllables. The stressed syllables are where we place the emphasis in a word. So, for example, the word **lion** has one stressed syllable (**li**) and one unstressed syllable (**on**).

When we want to mark the stressed and unstressed syllables on a text, we use a ' mark for stressed and a ^ for unstressed, like this:

‘ ^

lion

Iambic pentameter is a particular rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables. Iambic means **foot** (a pattern of beats). Pentameter means **measure of five**.

When lines of text are written in iambic pentameter, they have five feet, composed of one unstressed and one stressed syllable.

Put simply, this means that they have ten syllables with an alternating rhythm of stressed and unstressed syllables, like this:

^ ‘ ^ ‘ ^ ‘ ^ ‘ ^ ‘

O she doth teach the torches to burn bright

Shakespeare's plays use iambic pentameter a lot - it was considered to be the most formal way of speaking. When iambic pentameter is used in a text it is known as blank verse. Shakespearean sonnets almost always use iambic pentameter.

As well as being a formal way of speaking, many consider that iambic pentameter echoes the rhythm of a heartbeat - so it is particularly good for love poetry!

