**Rhythm**  
  
Rhythm in poetry refers to the measured flow of words, a wave-like recurrence of beat or accent.

Rhythm in poetry does not work like a metronome but it does reveal a pattern.  The writer's strategy of placement, repetition, sound and punctuation affect the rhythm of the writing, and the feeling it gives the reader.  Mood in conversation is easy to discern; in writing, without benefit of intonation and gesture, mood is more difficult to discern (e.g.) Come here.   
  
Remember that a sentence is a thing of movable parts, an endlessly adaptable structure that is completely under the control of the writer.  Play boldly with sentences - add, subtract, divide and multiply.  
  
Check out these examples:   
  
The lone and level sands stretch far away.   
  
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In the room the women come and go   
talking of Michelangelo.

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I have seen them riding seaward on the waves   
combing the white hair of the waves blown back   
when the wind blows the water white and black.

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As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations   
of "Dead! Dead!" absolutely bursting from the tongue and   
not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at   
once - within the space of a single minute, or less,   
shrunk - crumbled - absolutely rotted away beneath my   
hands.

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Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to   
breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change   
the brooding mind, or raise it up.

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I remember the smell of the sea and seaweed, wet flesh,   
wet hair, wet bathing dresses, the warm smell as of   
a rabbitty field after rain, the smell of pop and   
splashed sunshadows and toffee, the stable-and-straw   
smell of hot, tossed, tumbled, dug and trodden sand,   
the will-and-gaslamp smell of Saturday night...

Look at the poem “United Colours of Benneton” by amuna baraka-clarke on page 202. Read it out loud. How would you describe the rhythm of the poem? How does the rhythm add to the meaning of the poem?

**Scansion/Meter in Rhythm**  
  
Meter refers to the repetition in a poetic line of a regular rhythmic unit.  The meter of a line is determined by the relations of stronger and weaker stresses in syllables.  In English poetry, we refer to stressed and unstressed syllables, and we group these syllables into metric feet.  A foot is a rhythmic unit in a line.  The common metric feet in English are based on two and three syllable words:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Name | Syllables | Stresses | Examples |
|  |  |  |  |
| iamb | 2 | È  / | alone, despair, enjoy |
| trochee | 2 | / È | gently, older, disco |
| spondee | 2 | /  / | hat rack, heartbreak, ice cream |
| pyrrhic | 2 | È È | in the, of a |
| anapest | 3 | È È  / | interrupt, to the moon |
| dactyl | 3 | / È È | openly, merrily, idiot |
| amphidrach | 3 | È / È | banana, confusion |

\* pyrrhic is not that common as it is usually the end or the beginning of a 3-syllable foot.

A metric line is called a verse.  It is named according to the number of metric feet it contains.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Name | Feet per Line |
|  |  |
| monometer | one foot per line |
| dimeter | two feet per line |
| trimeter | three feet per line |
| tetrameter | four feet per line |
| pentameter | five feet per line |
| hexameter | six feet per line |
| heptameter | seven feet per line |
| octameter | eight feet per line |

(e.g.) Rhythm isn't easy = trochaic trimeter

(e.g.) The wind beneath my wings = iambic trimeter

(e.g.) The dark and lonely city fills the night = iambic pentameter   
  
(e.g.) Losing money really makes me angry =  trochaic pentameter

(e.g.) He emerged from the shadows and pulled out a gun = anapestic tetrameter

(e.g.) Why don't we talk about poetry? = dactyllic trimeter

**Exercise A** - Write a few multi-words examples of each of the following meters:   
  
1. Iambic Pentameter   
  
2. Trochaic Tetrameter

3. Anapestic Tetrameter

4. Dactyllic Trimeter + one trochee.

**Exercise B -** Complete each of the following.  
  
1. Write a single sentence which suggests one of the following:   
  
an express train   
a horseman riding   
a child asleep   
wind in the trees   
a rocket launching.   
  
Please do not confuse rhythm or beat with rhyme.  Rhyming often causes an artificiality in writing as it forces you to “settle” for certain diction choices.  Rhythm, on the other hand, is a positive natural force in a piece of poetry or prose.   
  
2. Rhythm must suit the mood or theme of a poem.  Make a list of words which are:   
  
quiet   
  
noisy   
  
slow   
  
quick   
  
What letters and sounds are characteristic of each type? Make a list. 

3. Besides sound, rhythm is linked to the beats (patterns of sound) in a word.  Take a look at the [meter/scansion](http://members.shaw.ca/compuglobalhypermeganet/ewcfolderrhythm.htm) information again with the list of stressed and unstressed syllables in two and three syllable words.  Finish two of the examples below by maintaining the rhythm that is established.   
Do NOT rhyme.   
  
Into the shop ...   
  
The moon arose...   
  
No one wants to ...

**Exercise C -** Rhythm Analysis - Examine the following excerpts from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*and observe how he uses rhythm.  You do not need to analyze the rhyme scheme.

1. Identify the two and three syllable feet that are employed for each line/stanza.   
  
2. Define the overall pattern that exists in the lines/stanzas where appropriate.

Here's an excerpt from the beginning of the poem:

*The mariner stops a wedding guest from entering the church and tells him his "tale".* 

The Bridegroom’s doors are opened wide,                  5   
And I am next of kin;   
The guests are met, the feast is set:   
May’st hear the merry din.’   
  
He holds him with his skinny hand,   
‘There was a ship,’ quoth he.                                          10   
‘Hold off! unhand me, gray-beard loon!’   
Eftsoons his hand dropt he   
-----------------   
*The mariner with his crew of 200 were stuck in a storm headed toward the South Pole..*  
The ice was here, the ice was there,   
The ice was all around:                                                    60   
It cracked and growled, and roared and howled,   
Like noises in a swound!                                                 (swound: fainting fit)  
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*By this point, the mariner has killed the bird of good omen (the albatross) and weird stuff starts happening...*  
All in a hot and copper sky,   
The bloody Sun, at noon,   
Right up above the mast did stand,   
No bigger than the Moon.

[ don't forget about "implied" unstressed syllables... ]

Day after day, day after day,                                           115   
We stuck, nor breath nor motion;   
As idle as a painted ship   
Upon a painted ocean.   
  
And the Albatross begins to be avenged.   
  
Water, water, every where,   
And all the boards did shrink;                                         120   
Water, water, every where,   
Nor any drop to drink.   
  
The very deep did rot: O Christ!   
That ever this should be!   
Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs                              125   
Upon the slimy sea.   
  
About, about, in reel and rout   
The death-fires danced at night;   
The water, like a witch’s oils,   
Burnt green, and blue and white.                                    130