

## KEY TERMS FOR READING POETRY

To scan a line of poetry, you can start by tracking the number of syllables it has and noting whether those syllables are stressed or unstressed. For example, try reading this line (the very first one in *The Merchant of Venice*) out loud:

In sooth I know not why I am so sad

Listen for a repeating pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (stressed syllables are in bold below):

In **sooth** I **know** not **why** I **am** so sad

Scansion also involves organizing poetic lines into feet. A *foot* is a group of two or three syllables. In the example above, each of the feet has two syllables: an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one (feet are separated with a vertical bar below):

In **sooth** | I **know** | not **why** | I **am** | so sad

This particular kind of foot—two syllables, unstressed then stressed—is called an *iamb*.

So, now we know that we have five feet in our line and we've established a pattern in which each foot has two syllables: unstressed and then stressed. That's enough to label this line of poetry as iambic pentameter (pentameter because it has five feet). Much of Shakespeare's verse is written in iambic pentameter, but there are also quite a few variations—or the plays would be very tedious to hear!

For example, sometimes you will see a two-syllable foot that has a stressed-unstressed pattern instead. This is called a *trochee*. In the works of Shakespeare, trochees often appear in the first syllable of the line and add greater emphasis to the beginning of the line. You will also see poetic lines of various lengths: they aren't all going to be ten syllables. Sometimes, you will find an unstressed syllable at the end of a line—this is called a *feminine ending*—often as the eleventh syllable in the line. If you want to read more about the terms used to identify poetic phenomena, see this glossary: <http://prosody.lib.virginia.edu/glossary/>

There are a few other things you'll want to pay attention to when reading Shakespeare's verse. One is rhyme; if you read the rest of Antonio's speech, you'll note that the lines do not rhyme. Unrhymed iambic pentameter is called *blank verse* (not to be confused with *free verse*, which is poetry that doesn't have a regular rhythm or line length). You will see some rhyming lines, often rhymed couplets at the ends of scenes or speeches, so take note of those as well.

You can also look for whether clauses or sentences end with each verse line or continue on into the next. An *enjambéd line* is one where the sense of the verse runs from one line into another (such as when Solanio says: "The better part of my affections would / Be with my hopes abroad")

later in the first scene of *Merchant*). Often, you will be able to tell whether or not a line is enjambed by looking for punctuation like periods or semicolons at the end of the line. You will also see cases where lines of verse are spit between two characters—that is, where one character starts the line and a second character finishes it. Finally, you'll want to pay attention to the sections of the play that are *not* verse; Shakespeare's plays are written in a mixture of poetry and prose, so you'll want to be aware of which you're reading as you go.