

Shakespearean Verse and Prose

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The language used by Shakespeare in his plays is in one of three forms: [prose](#), [rhymed verse](#) or [blank verse](#), each of which he uses to achieve specific effects (more on the [functions of prose, rhyme and blank verse](#) below). To recognize these types of language and understand how Shakespeare uses them in his plays, you need to be familiar with a number of technical terms.

Meter: a recognizable rhythm in a line of verse consisting of a pattern of regularly recurring stressed and unstressed syllables.

Foot/feet: a metric "foot" refers to the combination of a strong stress and the associated weak stress (or stresses) that make up the recurrent metric unit of a line of verse.

Iamb: a particular type of metric "[foot](#)" consisting of two syllables, an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable ("da DUM"); the opposite of a "[troche](#)." An unstressed syllable is conventionally represented by a curved line resembling a smile (a U is as close as I can get here). A stressed syllable is conventionally represented by a / . Thus, an iamb is conventionally represented U / .

Iambic pentameter: A ten-syllable line consisting of five [iambs](#) is said to be in **iambic pentameter** ("penta" = five). Its stress pattern (five pairs of unstressed/stressed syllables) is conventionally represented U /U / U /U / U / Example: "The course of true love never did run true" (MND I.i.134). As you read this line aloud, listen for the stress pattern: da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM (i.e. the COURSE of TRUE love NEVer DID run TRUE).

Troche: the opposite of an [iamb](#); a particular type of metric "[foot](#)" consisting of two syllables, a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable ("DA dum"). An unstressed syllable is conventionally represented by a curved line resembling a smile (a U is as close as I can get here). A stressed syllable is conventionally represented by a / . Thus, a troche is conventionally represented / U .

Trochaic rhythm: made up of [troches](#). The opposite of [iambic](#), a trochaic rhythm has a pattern of stressed/unstressed accent conventionally represented/U /U / U / U . . . Example: "Double, double, toil and trouble;/ Fire burn and caldron bubble" (MAC IV.i.10-11). As you read these lines aloud, listen for the stress pattern: DA dum DA dum DA dum DA dum (i.e. DOUble DOUble TOIL and TROUble).

Recognizing Prose, Rhyme and Blank Verse

1. [Prose](#) refers to **ordinary speech** with no regular pattern of accentual rhythm. Lines of text do not all have the same number of syllables nor is there any discernible pattern of stresses. If you are unsure if a passage is in prose or in blank verse, look for the following **visual clue:** a long passage in prose is typically printed in your text like an ordinary paragraph with right and left justification. The lines of print extend from left to right

margin with no "hard return" in the middle of a sentence. **Standard rules of capitalization** are followed: only proper nouns (names and place names), the pronoun "I" and the first letter of a new sentence are capitalized.

2. **Rhymed verse** in Shakespeare's plays is usually in **rhymed couplets**, i.e. two successive lines of verse of which the final words rhyme with another. The rhyme pattern of verse in rhyming couplets is conventionally represented **aa bb cc** etc., with the letters a, b, and c referring to the rhyming sound of the final word in a line. (A single rhymed couplet may also appear at the end of a speech or scene in blank verse, in which case it is called a **capping couplet**.) When the two lines of a rhyming couplet are in **iambic pentameter**, they are called **heroic couplets**. Example: Helena's lament in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) (I.i.234-9):

Love looks not with the eyes, but with the <i>mind;</i>	("a" rhyme)
And therefore is winged Cupid painted <i>blind.</i>	("a" rhyme)
Nor hath Love's mind of any judgment <i>taste;</i>	("b" rhyme)
Wings, and no eyes, figure unheedy <i>haste:</i>	("b" rhyme)
And therefore is Love said to be a <i>child,</i>	("c" rhyme)
Because in choice he is so oft <i>beguiled.</i>	("c" rhyme)

Because rhyme is easy to hear, typically no **visual clue** is needed for you to recognize that a passage is in rhyme; however, note in the rhymed passages [above](#) and [below](#) that **1) the line of print does not extend to fill the whole page** (there is a "hard return" after every rhyme word, so that the text appears as a column that does not fill the whole page); and **2) the first word of every line is capitalized** without regard to [standard rules of capitalization](#). These two **printing conventions** are a **visual clue** that a speech is in **verse** rather than in [prose](#).

Exception: While most rhyming verse in Shakespeare's plays is in couplets, **songs** typically have a more complex rhyme pattern, as in the following passage from Ariel's song ([The Tempest](#) 1.2.397-402) with the rhyme pattern **ababcc**:

Full fathom five thy father <i>lies</i> ;	("a" rhyme)
Of his bones are coral <i>made</i> ;	("b" rhyme)
Those are pearls that were his <i>eyes</i> ;	("a" rhyme)
Nothing of him that doth <i>fade</i>	("b" rhyme)
But doth suffer a sea <i>change</i>	("c" rhyme)
Into something rich and <i>strange</i> .	("c" rhyme)

3. **Blank Verse** refers to **unrhymed iambic pentameter**. Blank verse resembles **prose** in that the final words of the lines do not rhyme in any regular pattern (although an occasional **rhyming couplet** may be found). Unlike prose, there is a recognizable **meter**: most lines are in **iambic pentameter**, i.e. they consist of ten syllables alternating unstressed and stressed syllables (there may be some irregularities, such as an occasional **troche** mixed in with the **iamb**s or an extra unstressed syllable at the end of a line).

If you are unsure if a passage is in blank verse or in prose, **READ IT ALOUD**. If you can discern the regular rhythmic pattern of **iambic pentameter** (da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM), it is in blank verse.

If you are STILL uncertain whether the passage is in blank verse or **prose**, look for the following **visual clue**: as in **rhymed verse**, in blank verse **1) the line of print does not extend to fill the whole page** (there is a "hard return" at the end of every line, so the text appears as a column that does not fill the whole page); and **2) the first word of every line is capitalized** without regard to **standard rules of capitalization**. Example: Theseus's speech to Hippolyta (MND I.i.15-19):

Hippolyta, I wooed thee with my sword,	(end of line is not end of sentence)
And won thy love, doing thee injuries.	(capital A falls in middle of sentence)
But I will wed thee in another key,	(end of line is not end of sentence)

With pomp, with triumph, and with
reveling.

(capital W falls in middle of
sentence)

If this passage were in [prose](#), the standard rules of capitalization would apply, so the words "And" and "With" would not be capitalized, because they fall in the middle of a sentence. REMEMBER: like rhymed verse, blank verse can be recognized by these two [printing conventions](#) which are a **visual clue** that a speech is in **verse** rather than in [prose](#).

The Functions of [Prose](#), [Rhyme](#) and [Blank Verse](#) in Shakespeare's Plays

PROSE is used whenever verse would seem bizarre: in serious letters ([Macbeth](#) to Lady Macbeth; [Hamlet](#) to Horatio), in proclamations, and in the speeches of characters actually or pretending to be mad (Lady Macbeth; Hamlet and Ophelia; Edgar and King Lear) -- verse is apparently too regular and orderly for expressing madness. Prose is used for cynical commentary (e.g. Jacques and Touchstone in [As You Like It](#); Edmund in *King Lear*) or reducing flowery speech to common sense terms (all over [As You Like It](#)). It is used when the rational is contrasted with the emotional (Brutus vs. Antony in *Julius Caesar*). It is used for simple exposition, transitions, or contrast (the first scenes of [As You Like It](#), [The Tempest](#), *King Lear* or *A Winter's Tale*). It is used for scenes of everyday life (Bottom and company in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#); Corin in [As You Like It](#); William, Bates and Court in [Henry V](#)); for low comedy (Bottom and company; Touchstone and Audrey in [As You Like It](#); Fluellen and Pistol in [Henry V](#); Sir Toby Belch, Maria and Malvolio in [Twelfth Night](#)); and for bantering, relaxed or unbuttoned conversation (Celia, Rosalind and Touchstone in [As You Like It](#); Gower, Fluellen, MacMorris and Jamie in [Henry V](#); Prince Hal and Falstaff in *2 Henry IV*).

PLEASE NOTE: it is **NOT ACCURATE** to say that "the lower classes speak prose and the upper classes speak verse." The highborn cousins Rosalind and Celia speak prose to one another in [As You Like It](#), as do King Henry and Katherine of France in [Henry V](#). [Hamlet](#), Prince of Denmark, tends to use prose both when he is being very rational and when he is very irrational (but the passionate Hamlet speaks in verse). Similarly, when the lower classes figure in serious or romantic situations, they may speak verse (e.g. Silvius and Phebe in [As You Like It](#); the gardeners in *Richard II*).

RHYME is often used for ritualistic or choral effects and for highly lyrical or sententious passages that give advice or point to a moral (the Duke's speech at the end of Act 3 in *Measure for Measure*). Rhyme is used for songs (Amiens in [As You Like It](#); Feste in [Twelfth Night](#); Ariel in [The Tempest](#)); in examples of bad verse (the *Pyramus and Thisbe* play in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#) and Orlando's bad poetry in [As You Like It](#)); in Prologues, Epilogues and Choruses (the Chorus in [Henry V](#); Puck's epilogue); in masques (Hymen in [As You Like It](#); Iris, Ceres and Juno in [The Tempest](#)) and in plays-within-plays (*Pyramus and Thisbe* in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#); the Mousetrap play in [Hamlet](#)), where it distinguishes these imaginary performances from the "real world" of the play. It is also used for many manifestations of the supernatural (e.g. the witches in [Macbeth](#); the fairies in [A Midsummer Night's Dream](#); Ariel in [The Tempest](#)) -- but not for ghosts (e.g. Hamlet's father), who retain the human use of blank verse.

BLANK VERSE is employed in a wide range of situations because it comes close to the natural speaking rhythms of English but raises it above the ordinary without sounding artificial (unlike the "singsong" effect produced by dialogue in rhyme). Art elevates and distills the everyday; writing in blank verse helps sharpen that distinction. [Blank verse](#), as opposed to [prose](#), is used mainly for passionate, lofty or momentous occasions and for introspection; it may suggest a refinement of character. Many of Shakespeare's most famous speeches are written in blank verse: [Macbeth's](#) and Lady Macbeth's plotting; the great soliloquies of [Henry V](#) and [Hamlet](#); Caliban's complaints and Prospero's farewell to magic in [The Tempest](#). As noted above, a speech or scene in blank verse may end with a single rhyming couplet known as a [capping couplet](#). It is used to lend a final punch, a concluding flourish or a note of climax to the end of a speech or scene.

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