



## COUNTING SYLLABLES IN SPANISH POETRY

Use your Apéndice I in *Azulejo* to help you with this. On p. 288, you need to read carefully the sections on **Número de sílabas**, **Métrica**, **Sinalefa**, **Hiato**, and **Diéresis**. The terms you will need to understand for this practice are the following: **sinalefa**, **llano**, **agudo**, y **esdrújulo**.

1. Let's start with a "**verso llano**," which ends with a "**palabra llana**," the most common stress pattern in Spanish. In this type of line of poetry, the last word of the line is stressed on the next to the last syllable. (In Spanish, words that end in a vowel, n, or s follow this stress pattern unless there is a written accent mark. Here are some examples: *hablo*, *viven*, *casa*, *comemos*, *tomate*, etc.)

Here's an example of a "**verso llano**":

*¡Una perdida estrella!*

How many syllables does this line contain?  
(Remember that in Spanish syllables usually begin with a consonant.)

*U/na/per/di/da/es/tre/lla*

If you merely count the separate syllables, you will end up with 8 syllables. However, thanks to the technique of **sinalefa**, you must combine the "a" of *perdida* with the "e" of *estrella*, eliminating one syllable. (We do this naturally in spoken Spanish, as we do in English.) But in Spanish poetry, it has a name and is done automatically when you count syllables. (When you do this for practice, I recommend that you use your pens or pencils and write a mark over every syllable or divide the syllables with lines, joining the ones that **sinalefa** requires with a little curved line.) Once you have done this, you can see that this is a seven-syllable line of poetry.

Now it's your turn:

*Te recuerdo como eras en el último otoño.*

Mark the number of syllables and then see where the vowels need to be combined. How many examples of **sinalefa** did you find? How many syllables did you end up with?

*Te/re/cuer/do/co/**mo**er/as/en/el/úl/ti/**mo**o/to/ño. = 14 syllables, thanks to two uses of **sinalefa**.*

The highlighted syllables are joined by **sinalefa** because one ends with a vowel and the next begins with a vowel. (In normal spoken Spanish, you would NOT join strong vowels like a, e, and o, which are pronounced separately, but in poetry that doesn't matter.)

Here's your last one in this group:

*Que es mi barco mi tesoro.*

Did you get 8 syllables? Good!!!!

2. Now let's try a "**verso agudo**," one whose spoken stress is on the last syllable of the final word (which may sometimes be a single-syllable word.)

*que es mi dios, la libertad,*

The last word is stressed on the last syllable, so after we count the syllables and adjust for **sinalefa**, we add one syllable to the count. Thus we have 8 syllables.

*quees/mi/dios/la/li/ber/tad* + one = 8.

Try again:

*Mi única patria, la mar.*

How many syllables are in this line of poetry? Do we need to use **sinalefa**?

You should have seen that you use **sinalefa** once, as well as adding one additional syllable to the count because the last word is a single syllable.

*Miú/ni/ca/pa/tria/la/mar.* = 7 syllables + one = 8

\*\*Remember that a weak vowel and a strong vowel within a word combine to form a diphthong, as in *pa/tria* = 2 syllables, even though there are 3 vowels.

3. Let's finish with a "**verso esdrújulo**," whose last word always has a written accent mark on the stressed syllable, which is the third from the last (the "antepenúltima"). You can remember this because the word "esdrújulo" is an example of this kind of word! (Others you know are *música*, *América*, *fantástico*, etc.) When you do the syllabic count with this kind of line of poetry, you have to subtract one syllable from the count.

Let's try it:

*Fui solo como un túnel. De mi huían los pájaros.*

You should use **sinalefa** twice, and end up with fifteen syllables. Take one away, and you get 14.

*Fui/so/lo/co/moun/tú/nel/de/mihu/i/an/los/pá/ja/ros* = 15 - 1 = 14.

(Remember that the "h" in *huían* is silent!)

## Practice

Determine the number of syllables per line in the following selections. [Answers are given at the bottom of this page.]

1. From "La mozueta de Bores", by el Marqués de Santillana:

Señora, pastor  
seré si queredes;  
mandarme podedes,  
como a servidor.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

2. From "Soneto X", by Garcilaso de la Vega

¡Oh dulces prendas por mi mal halladas,  
dulces y alegres cuando Dios quería!  
Juntas estáis en la memoria mía,  
y con ella en mi muerte conjuradas.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

3. From "Noche serena", by Fray Luis de León:

¿Quién es el que esto mira,  
y precia la bajeza de la tierra,  
y no gime, y suspira  
por romper lo que encierra  
el alma, y de estos bienes la destierra?

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

4. From the anonymous "Romance de la mora Moraima":

Yo me era mora Moraima,  
morilla de un bel catar;  
cristiano vino a mi puerta,  
cuitada, por me engañar.  
Hablóme en algarabía  
como aquél que la bien sabe.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

5. From *El libro de buen amor*, by Juan Ruiz, el Arcipreste de Hita:

¡Oh María  
luz del día  
sé mi guía

toda vía.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

6. From *Los milagros de Nuestra Señora*, by Gonzalo de Berceo:

Dieron gracias a Dios de buena voluntad.  
a la santa Reina la madre de piedad,  
quien hizo tal milagro por su benignidad,  
por quien está más firme toda la cristiandad.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

7. From "El Cuervo y el Zorro", by Félix María de Samaniego:

En la rama de un árbol,  
bien ufano y contento,  
con un queso en el pico,  
estaba el señor Cuervo.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

8. From *El libro de buen amor*, by Juan Ruiz, el Arcipreste de Hita:

Todos cuantos en su tiempo en esta tierra nacieron,  
en riqueza y cualidades tanto como él no crecieron;  
con los locos se hace loco, los cuerdos le enaltecieron,  
es manso más que un cordero, pelear nunca le vieron.

Number of syllables: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Answers

### Alternate Method of Counting Syllables

In case you're interested, here's the other way of determining how many syllables are in a line of Spanish poetry, although it's a little more complicated to explain. First, you should know some more terms:

**Agudo:** A **palabra aguda** (or a **verso agudo**) is stressed on the last (**última**) syllable, for example **habló, reloj, Dios**.

**Llano:** A **palabra llana** (or a **verso llano**) is stressed on the next-to-the-last (**penúltima**) syllable, for example **hablo, cárcel, dioses**.

**Esdrújulo:** A **palabra esdrújula** (or a **verso esdrújulo**) is stressed on the third-from-the-last syllable, for example **hablándome, propósito**, and the word **esdrújulo** itself.