Poetry Terms: Brief Definitions

**Alliteration**: The repetition of identical consonant sounds, most often the sounds beginning words, in close proximity. Example: pensive poets, nattering nabobs of negativism.

**Allusion**: Unacknowledged reference and quotations that authors assume their readers will recognize.

**Anaphora:** Repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of a line throughout a work or the section of a work.

**Apostrophe:**Speaker in a poem addresses a person not present or an animal, inanimate object, or concept as though it is a person**.**Example: Wordsworth--"Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour / England has need of thee"

**Assonance**: The repetition of identical vowel sounds in different words in close proximity. Example: deep green sea.

**Ballad:** A narrative poem composed of quatrains (iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter)  rhyming x-a-x-a. Ballads may use refrains.  Examples: "Jackaroe," "The Long Black Veil"

**Blank verse:** unrhymed iambic pentameter. Example: Shakespeare's plays

**Caesura:** A short but definite pause used for effect within a line of poetry. Carpe diem poetry: "seize the day." Poetry concerned with the shortness of life and the need to act in or enjoy the present. Example: Herrick’s "To the Virgins to Make Much of Time"

**Chiasmus (antimetabole):**Chiasmus is a "crossing" or reversal of two elements; antimetabole, a form of chiasmus, is the reversal of the same words in a grammatical structure. Example: Ask not what your country can do for you; ask wyat you can do for your country. Example: You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man.

**Common meter or hymn measure** (Emily Dickinson): iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter. Other example: "Amazing Grace" by John Newton[http://www.constitution.org/col/amazing\_grace.htm](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/Common%20meter%20or%20hymn%20measure%20%28Emily%20Dickinson%29%3A%20iambic%20tetrameter%20alternating%20with%20iambic%20trimeter.%20Other%20example%3A)

**Consonance**is the counterpart of assonance; the partial or total identity of consonants in words whose main vowels differ. Example: shadow meadow; pressed, passed; sipped, supped. Owen uses this "impure rhyme" to convey the anguish of war and death.

**Couplet:**two successive rhyming lines. Couplets end the pattern of a Shakespearean sonnet.

**Diction:** Diction is usually used to describe the level of formality that a speaker uses.

* Diction (formal or high): Proper, elevated, elaborate, and often polysyllabic language. This type of language used to be thought the only type suitable for poetry
* Neutral or middle diction: Correct language characterized by directness and simplicity.
* Diction (informal or low): Relaxed, conversational and familiar language.

**Dramatic monologue:** A type of poem, derived from the theater, in which a speaker addresses an internal listener or the reader.  In some dramatic monologues, especially those by Robert Browning, the speaker may reveal his personality in unexpected and unflattering ways.

**End-stopped line:**A line ending in a full pause, usually indicated with a period or semicolon.

**Enjambment (or enjambement):**A line having no end punctuation but running over to the next line.

**Explication**: A complete and detailed analysis of a work of literature, often word-by-word and line-by-line.

**Foot (prosody):** A measured combination of heavy and light stresses. The numbers of feet are given below. monometer (1 foot) dimeter (2 feet) trimeter (3 feet) tetrameter (4 feet) pentameter (5 feet) hexameter (6 feet) heptameter or septenary (7 feet)

**Heroic couplet:** two successive rhyming lines of iambic pentameter; the second line is usually end-stopped.

**Hymn meter or common measure**: quatrains of iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter rhyming a b a b.

**Hyperbole (overstatement)** and litotes (understatement): Hyperbole is exaggeration for effect; litotes is understatement for effect, often used for irony.

**Iambic pentameter:** Iamb (iambic): an unstressed stressed foot.The most natural and common kind of meter in English; it elevates speech to poetry.

**Image:** Images are references that trigger the mind to fuse together memories of sight (visual), sounds (auditory), tastes (gustatory), smells (olfactory), and sensations of touch (tactile). Imagery refers to images throughout a work or throughout the works of a writer or group of writers.

**Internal rhyme**: An exact rhyme (rather than rhyming vowel sounds, as with assonance) within a line of poetry: "Once upon a midnight**dreary**, while I pondered, weak and **weary**."

**Metaphor:** A comparison between two unlike things, this describes one thing as if it were something else. Does not use "like" or "as" for the comparison (see **simile**).

**Metaphysical conceit**: An elaborate and extended metaphor or simile that links two apparently unrelated fields or subjects in an unusual and surprising conjunction of ideas. The term is commonly applied to the metaphorical language of a number of early seventeenth-century poets, particularly John Donne. Example: stiff twin compasses//the joining together of lovers like legs of a compass. See "To His Coy Mistress"

**Meter**: The number of feet within a line of traditional verse. Example: iambic pentameter.

**Octave:** The first eight lines of an Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, unified by rhythm, rhyme, and topic.

**Onomatopoeia**. A blending of consonant and vowel sounds designed to imitate or suggest the activity being described. Example: buzz, slurp.

**Paradox:** A rhetorical figure embodying a seeming contradiction that is nonetheless true.

**Personification:** Attributing human characteristics to nonhuman things or abstractions.

**Petrarchan sonnet:** A sonnet (14 lines of rhyming iambic pentameter) that divides into an octave (8) and sestet (6). There is a "volta," or "turning" of the subject matter between the octave and sestet.

**Pyrrhic foot (prosody)**: two unstressed feet (an "empty" foot) Quatrain: a four-line stanza or poetic unit. In an English or Shakespearean sonnet, a group of four lines united by rhyme.

**Refrain:** repeated word or series of words in response or counterpoint to the main verse, as in a ballad.

**Rhyme:** The repetition of identical concluding syllables in different words, most often at the ends of lines. Example: June--moon.

* **Double rhyme or trochaic rhyme**: rhyming words of two syllables in which the first syllable is accented (flower, shower)
* **Triple rhyme or dactylic rhyme:** Rhyming words of three or more syllables in which any syllable but the last is accented. Example: Macavity/gravity/depravity
* **Eye rhyme:** Words that seem to rhyme because they are spelled identically but pronounced differently. Example: bear/fear, dough/cough/through/bough
* **Slant rhyme:** A near rhyme in which the concluding consonant sounds are identical but not the vowels. Example: sun/noon, should/food, slim/ham.
* Rhyme scheme: The pattern of rhyme, usually indicated by assigning a letter of the alphabet to each rhyme at the end of a line of poetry.

**Rhyme royal:**Stanza form used by Chaucer, usually in iambic pentameter, with the rhyme scheme ababbcc. Example: Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence"

**Scan (scansion):** the process of marking beats in a poem to establish the prevailing metrical pattern. Prosody, the pronunciation of a song or poem, is necessary for scansion. (Go to the["Introduction to Prosody"](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/prosody.htm) page or try the [scansion quiz.](http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/quiz/prosquiz.htm)).

* **Anapest: unstressed unstressed stressed**. Also called "galloping meter." Example: 'Twas the night before Christmas, and all through the house/ Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse."
* **Dactyl (dactylic) stressed unstressed unstressed.** This pattern is more common (as dactylic hexameter) in Latin poetry than in English poetry. Example: Grand go the years in the Crescent above them/Worlds scoop their arcs/ and firmaments row (Emily Dickinson)
* **Spondee:** stressed stressed. A two-syllable foot with two stressed accents. The opposite of a pyrrhic foot, this foot is used for effect.
* **Trochee (trochaic): stressed unstressed. Example: "Tyger! Tyger! Burning bright"**

**Sestet:**A six-line stanza or unit of poetry.

**Shakespearean sonnet:** A fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, composed of three quatrains and a couplet rhyming abab cdcd efef gg.

**Simile**. A direct comparison between two dissimilar things; uses "like" or "as" to state the terms of the comparison.

**Sonnet**: A closed form consisting of fourteen lines of rhyming iambic pentameter.

Shakespearean or English sonnet: 3 quatrains and a couplet, often with three arguments or images in the quatrains being resolved in the couplet. Rhyme scheme: abab cdcd efef gg

Petrarchan or Italian sonnet: 8 lines (the "octave") and 6 lines (the "sestet") of rhyming iambic pentameter, with a turning or "volta" at about the 8th line. Rhyme scheme: abba abba cdcdcd (or cde cde)

**Stanza:**A group of poetic lines corresponding to paragraphs in prose; the meters and rhymes are usually repeating or systematic.

**Synaesthesia:**A rhetorical figure that describes one sensory impression in terms of a different sense, or one perception in terms of a totally different or even opposite feeling.  Example: "darkness visible" "green thought"

**Syntax:** Word order and sentence structure.

**Volta**: The "turning" point of a Petrarchan sonnet, usually occurring between the octave and the sestet.