Poetic Structures

**Meter** – a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

Different languages measure meter in different ways. In French and many other Romance languages, meter is **syllabic** – determined by the number of syllables in a line. In older Germanic languages, including old English, meter is **accentual** – determined by the number of stressed syllables in a line. English poetry uses **accentual-syllabic** meter – a combination of the two. This is how we determine the **meter** of English poetry – by the recurring pattern of stresses on a recurring number of syllables.

**Scansion** – analysis of a poem’s meter. When you scan a poem, you identify the type of foot or feet used in each line; then you count them.

- ` = stressed
- ˘ = means unstressed

1. What type of feet does your line have? A **foot** is the basic unit of meter; it consists of one stressed and one or more unstressed syllables. Divide your line into syllables and mark them as stressed or unstressed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of foot</th>
<th>Stress</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Rising/Falling</th>
<th>Double/Triple</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iamb (iambic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘</td>
<td>Re-LIEF</td>
<td>Rising</td>
<td>Double</td>
<td>Regularity. This is the most common rhythm in the English language – anything else is a variety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trochee (trochaic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘</td>
<td>AP-ple</td>
<td>Falling</td>
<td>Double</td>
<td>Trochees are common at the beginning of lines or after a strong pause within a line.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anapest (anapestic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘ ˘</td>
<td>In-tro-DUCE</td>
<td>Rising</td>
<td>Triple</td>
<td>A burst of speed, something impulsive, a skip.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dactyl (dactylic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘ ˘</td>
<td>BROC-co-li</td>
<td>Falling</td>
<td>Triple</td>
<td>Anapests and dactyls (triple rhythms) are faster and busier than double ones. They are often found in lighter poetry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pyrrhee (pyrrhic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘</td>
<td>de-de</td>
<td></td>
<td>Double</td>
<td>Gives less than we expect. Linked to weakness or lessness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spondee (spondaic)</td>
<td>˘ ˘</td>
<td>KATH-LEEN</td>
<td></td>
<td>Double</td>
<td>Weightiness, slowness, emphasis, strength.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. How many feet does your line have?
   * Dimeter – 2 feet per line
   * Trimester – 3 feet per line
   * Tetrameter – 4 feet per line
   * Pentameter – 5 feet per line
   * Hexameter – 6 feet per line
   * Heptameter – 7 feet per line
   * Octameter – 8 feet per line

3. To describe a line, we name (a) the predominant foot and (b) the number of feet it contains. For example, if a line is composed of 5 feet each with a stressed and unstressed syllable, we call that **iambic pentameter**. Look for the “prevailing pulse” – there will always be variations.

**Practice:** Scan the following lines and identify the type of meter used in them.

1. Best of all, victory!
2. I bought a car today.
3. Look for hidden pitfalls.
4. In the cool of the night.

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**Italian/Petrarchan Sonnets**

**Francesco Petrarch (1304 – 1374)**

Petrarch was the greatest Italian poet of the fourteenth century. Born in Arezzo, Italy, he moved to Avignon, France, when he was eight. In 1320, he returned to Italy to study law but began to write poetry. Returning to Avignon in 1326, he first saw the famous Laura whom he celebrates in his love poetry.

**Example:** Read the following example of a Petrarchan sonnet and. Answer the questions below to help you understand the structure and content of a Petrarchan sonnet.
Sonnet 18
Ashamed sometimes thy beauties should remain
As yet unsung, sweet lady, in my rhyme;
When I first saw thee I recall the time.
Pleasing as none shall ever please again.
But no fit polish can my verse attain,
Not mine is strength to try to task sublime:
My genius, measuring its power to climb,
From such attempt doth prudently refrain.
Full oft I oped my lips to chant thy name;
Then in mid utterance the lay was lost:
But say was must can dare so bold a flight?
Full oft I strove in measure to indite;
But ah, the pen, the hand, the vein I boast
At once were vanquished by the might theme!

1. Scan the poem. Determine its meter.

2. Label the poem’s rhyme scheme.

3. What is the poem’s subject?

4. What is the situation in the poem’s first 8 lines (octave)?

5. What is the situation in the poem’s last 6 lines (sestet)?

Sir Thomas Wyatt
Sir Thomas Wyatt was a courtier of Henry VIII and spent much of his life traveling abroad as an ambassador for the king. The life of anyone who worked for the king could be dangerous as well as glamorous: twice Henry had Wyatt imprisoned on charges that were probably false, and twice Wyatt managed to regain the King’s favor. Besides being a diplomat, Wyatt was also a literary innovator who helped to change the nature of English poetry. Up to Wyatt’s time, poetry was still essentially medieval in matter and manner, subject and form. Wyatt greatly admired Italian poetry, and he brought a new kind of poem, the love sonnet, to England from Italy. His English sonnets are actually adaptations of Petrarch’s Italian sonnets.

Aside from his sonnets, Wyatt wrote many delightful lyrics modeled on English dance songs, but he never had any of his works published or
Wyatt had no ambition to be known as a “clerk,” or a learned man of letters, the sort of person who published books. As a courtier, he was expected to compose songs and verses, just as he was expected to do battle for his king, joust in tournaments, dance, and carry on intrigues with the ladies. And so Wyatt circulated his poems privately among his friends, in handwritten copies. Not until fifteen years after Wyatt’s death did most of his poems appear in print.

Example: Read the following example of one of Wyatt’s sonnets and. Answer the questions below.

Whoso List to Hunt

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind
But as for me, alas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I, by no means, my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore,
Painting I follow. I leave off therefore,
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.

Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I, may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about,
“Noli me tangere, for Ceaser’s I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.”

1. Scan the poem. Determine it’s meter.

2. Label the poem’s rhyme scheme.

3. What is the poem’s subject?

4. What is the situation in the poem’s first 8 lines (octave)?

5. What is the situation in the poem’s last 6 lines (sestet)?
6. According to traditional gossip, Wyatt wrote this poem about Anne Boleyn, a beautiful young woman at court. When he noticed that no less a person than King Henry was also interested in Anne, he gave up the pursuit to whoever else wanted to “hunt” her. Given this background, who is the hind in this poem and who is Ceasar?

7. What warning does the speaker give potential hunters of the woman?

8. What image does the speaker use to show he’s finally decided the chase is hopeless?

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**English/Shakespearean Sonnets**

**William Shakespeare**

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets. Their speaker is male and their subject is love. Beyond these three points, however, there is little agreement. Shakespeare’s sonnets leave us with many questions that remain unanswered today.

* Is the sonnets’ speaker a dramatic character invented by Shakespeare, like Romeo, MacBeth or Hamlet, or is he the poet himself? The speaker does call himself Will a few times, and he does make puns on his name, but is there any evidence that Will is the speaker in all the sonnets?

* If the sonnets are about the real man Shakespeare, then who are the real people behind the characters the sonnets mention: the rival poet, the beloved young man who may be the subject of many of the first 126 sonnets, or the beautiful and exciting dark complexioned woman of some later sonnets?

* Is the order in which the sonnets were published (probably without Shakespeare’s consent) the correct or intended order? Could or should they be arranged to tell a more coherent story?

**Example:** Read the following example of a Shakespearean sonnet and answer the questions below to help you understand the structure and content of a Shakespearean sonnet.
Sonnet 18

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate.
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer’s lease hath all too short a date.

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance, or nature’s changing course untrimmed.

But they eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest,
Nor shall Death brag though wander’st in his shade
When in eternal lines to time thou grow’st.

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Practice
1. Scan the poem. Determine its meter.

2. Label the poem’s rhyme scheme.

3. How is a Shakespearean sonnet divided?

4. What is the poem’s subject?

5. What is the situation is introduced at the beginning of the poem?

6. Where does a shift occur in the poem?

7. What is the poem’s situation after this shift?

8. What does this Shakespearean sonnet have in common with the Petrarchan sonnet we looked at earlier?
9. How is this Shakespearean sonnet different from the Petrarchan sonnet we looked at earlier?

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**Spenserian Sonnets**

**Edmund Spenser**

Spenser – unlike such gentlemanly writers as Wyatt, Surrey, Sidney and Raleigh – regarded himself primarily as a poet. Upon graduating from Cambridge University, he served as personal secretary to the earl of Leicester, then the favorite of Queen Elizabeth. In Leicester’s household, Spenser became acquainted with several other poets and wrote his first book, *The Shepheardes Calender* (1579), a set of twelve pastoral poems, one for each month. Literary historians recognize 1579 as the date when the great age of Elizabethan literature began.

In 1580, Spenser and his new wife went to Ireland in the service of the English government. Except for two or three visits to England, he was to spend the rest of his life in that war-torn country. English troops had invaded and conquered Ireland, but the Irish did not regard themselves as conquered. They particularly resented people like Spenser, who was given an Irish castle and a cast estate in County Cork. Thirty miles away, Sir Walter Raleigh was the proprietor of an even vaster estate than Spenser’s. When Raleigh was in Ireland, the two poets met and discussed their works in progress: Raleigh’s *The Ocean to Cynthia* and Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*. Raleigh was so impressed with the latter that he persuaded Spenser to accompany him to London in 1598, and there in the following year Books 1-3 of *The Faerie Queen* were published.

In 1591, Spenser returned to Ireland, where conditions remained very unsettled and dangerous, but he managed to continue work on *The Faerie Queen* and other poems. When his first wife died, Spenser married Elizabeth Boyle, an Anglo-Irish woman living in Cork. Spenser’s sonnet sequence *Amoretti* and his marriage hymn *Epithalamion* (both 1595) can be read autobiographically as records of his intense devotion to his wife. In 1596, Books 4-6 of *The Faerie Queen* appeared, along with another marriage song called *Prothalamion*. As the century drew to a close, the Irish intensified their efforts to expel the English from their land. During one of their raids, Spenser’s castle was burned and his infant son killed. Spenser himself escaped to London where he died suddenly in 1599. He was given a splendid funeral and burial in the part of Westminster Abbey that has become known as the Poets’ Corner. He lies near Chaucer, a poet who provided much of his inspiration.

Example: Read the following example of a Spenserian sonnet and. Answer the questions below to help you understand the structure and content of a Spenserian sonnet.
Sonnet 30

My love is like to ice, and I to fire;
How comes it then that this her cold so great
Is not dissolved through my so hot desire,
But harder grows the more I her entreat?
Or how comes it that my exceeding heat
Is not delayed by her heart frozen cold,
But that I burn much more in boiling sweat,
And feel my flames augmented manifold?
What more miraculous thing may be told
That fire which all things melts, should harden ice,
And ice which is congealed with senseless cold,
Should kindle fire by wonderful device?
Such is the power of love in gentle mind,
That it can alter all the course of kind.

1. Scan the poem. Determine its meter.

2. Label the poem’s rhyme scheme.

3. How is a Spenserian sonnet divided? Is it more similar to a Petrarchan sonnet or a Shakespearean sonnet?

4. What is the poem’s subject?

5. What is the situation introduced at the beginning of the poem?

6. Where does a shift occur in the poem?

7. What is the poem’s situation after this shift?

8. How is this Spenserian sonnet different from a Shakespearean sonnet?
TP-CASTT is one method suggested in *A Guide for Advanced Placement: English Vertical Teams* and *Building Success: Strategies to Prepare Students for College Prep and Advanced Placement Courses in English and History*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TP-CASTT</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td>Ponder the title before reading the poem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Paraphrase</strong></td>
<td>Translate the poem into your own words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Connotation</strong></td>
<td>Contemplate the poem for meaning beyond the literal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitude</strong></td>
<td>Observe both the speaker’s and the poet’s attitude (tone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shifts</strong></td>
<td>Note shifts in speaker and in attitudes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Title</strong></td>
<td>Examine the title again, this time on an interpretive level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theme</strong></td>
<td>Determine what the poet is saying.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apply the TP-CASTT strategy to the sonnet below. Complete this work on a separate piece of paper.

**Sonnet 75**

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,  
But came the waves and washed it away;  
Again I wrote it with a second hand,  
But came the tide, and made my pains his prey.  
“Vain man,” said she, “that doest in vain essay,  
A mortal thing so to immortalize,  
For I myself shall like to this decay,  
And eke my name be wiped out likewise.”  
“Not so,” quod I, let baser things devise  
To die in dust, but you shall live by fame:  
My verse your virtues rare shall eternize,  
And in the heavens write your glorious name.  
Where whenas death shall all the world subdue,  
Our love shall live, and later life renew.

Which author introduced in this packet wrote this sonnet? Explain,
SOAPS is another method suggested by *A Guide for Advanced Placement: English Vertical Teams* and *Building Success: Strategies to Prepare Students for College Prep and Advanced Placement Courses in English and History.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOAPS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the subject?</strong></td>
<td>State the general topic, content and ideas contained in the text in a few words or a short phrase.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the occasion?</strong></td>
<td>State the time and place of the piece; the current situation and the context that encouraged the poem to happen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who is the audience?</strong></td>
<td>The group of readers to whom the piece is directed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What is the purpose?</strong></td>
<td>The reason behind the text. Understanding the reason behind the text is essential to examining its argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who is the speaker?</strong></td>
<td>The voice that tells the story. Keep in mind the author is not necessarily the speaker.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Apply the SOAPS strategy to the sonnet below. Complete this work on a separate piece of paper.

Sonnet 130 *(Shakespeare)*

My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,  
Coral is far more red than her lips’ red.  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun,  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks.  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks,  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound.  
I grant I never saw a goddess go,  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by Heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

Which author introduced in this packet wrote this sonnet? Explain.