

# Speaking Shakespeare: Scansion and Meter



This activity can be used before viewing *Henry V* or at any point in the curriculum. The text in the activity is from Part Two of the film at pause point 00:30:25.

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Engage with and comprehend iambic pentameter and scansion
- Examine the impact of rhythmic variation
- Apply scansion to a scene
- Analyze Henry V's character and emotional state, as shown in his language

## MATERIALS

- Video: "What is Iambic Pentameter?" Royal Shakespeare Company
- Introduction to Scansion Handout (page 3)
- Scansion and Meter: Act Two, Scene Two Handout (page 4)
- Act Two, Scene Two Glossary (page 5)
- Whiteboard and markers

## INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare writes his plays with two primary rhythmic styles: verse and prose. Verse follows a set structure and rhythm — in the case of Shakespeare, iambic pentameter. Contrastingly, prose does not follow this same notion of set structure and rhythm. The word "iamb" is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a metrical foot consisting of one short syllable followed by one long syllable or of one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable." The prefix "penta-" indicates that there are five of something — that is to say, there are five iambs in iambic pentameter. Each regular line in Shakespearian verse then achieves a perfect 10 beats, which mimics the rhythm of the human heartbeat.

Scansion is the process of analyzing a line of poetry to determine its meter, or rhythmic structure, specifically by scanning for stressed and unstressed syllables. In the case of iambic pentameter, scansion helps identify the alternating pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables, revealing the natural flow of the verse.

## INSTRUCTIONS

**Step One:** Print out or project the Introduction to Scansion handout found below. Go over each example as a class, demonstrating how to scan the lines. It can be useful to have the students physicalize the scansion by clapping, tapping or stomping out the rhythm.

**Step Two:** Show the Royal Shakespeare Company’s video on iambic pentameter (link below), encouraging students to pay attention to how the rhythm relates to the characters’ emotions.

**Step Three:** Divide the class into small groups and provide them with the Scansion and Meter: Act Two, Scene Two handout. Each group should do the following:

- Read the passage aloud, paying attention to the rhythm. They may even want to clap out the rhythms as they read.
- Together, divide up the lines into syllables, then work together to scan the lines, marking the stressed (/) and unstressed (u) syllables.
- Identify any deviations from “perfect” meter and discuss what those deviations might suggest about the characters’ emotions or situations.

**Step Four:** Invite groups to share their findings, focusing on specific lines where they noticed the iambic pentameter was off, including any breaks in the meter. Use the questions below to discuss how these rhythms contribute to understanding the characters’ thoughts and feelings.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Where is the meter irregular?
- What can you deduce about Henry and his emotional state from the irregular meter?
- What can we learn from analyzing the rhythm of Henry’s speech?
- Why is the “heartbeat” of a story important?
- How might this exercise (called scansion) be a useful tool for an actor and director?

### OPTIONAL

Look at passages with characters from different statuses and ask the students to observe the differences they hear in the speech of the different groups. For instance, how is the speaking rhythm of the folks from Eastcheap in Act Two, Scene One (Part Two of the Guthrie production) different from the rhythm of the Archbishop in Act One, Scene One (Part One of the Guthrie production)? What can those rhythms tell the students about social standing and class?

### RESOURCES

“What is Iambic Pentameter?” Royal Shakespeare Company.  
Featuring Nia Lynn. 5 minutes.  
[youtube.com/watch?v=Ee\\_M1qUQ9nY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ee_M1qUQ9nY)



# Introduction to Scansion



## SPEAKING SHAKESPEARE: SCANSION AND METER

William Shakespeare wrote most of his plays in iambic pentameter, a specific poetic verse format that consists of 10 syllables per line. Each line contains five “feet,” with each foot comprising two syllables. The rhythm pattern typically follows an unstressed-stressed format, which can be represented as:

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

This rhythmic structure resembles a heartbeat, adding emotional depth to the text.

### SCANSION EXAMPLES

To help illustrate scansion, here are examples of both perfect meter and broken meter:

#### Original Text (Perfect Meter):

*If music be the food of love, play on;  
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,  
The appetite may sicken, and so die.*

#### Original Text (Broken Meter):

*To be, or not to be, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles.*

#### Scanned Text (Perfect Meter):

U / U / U / U / U /  
*If mu · sic be · the food · of love, · play on;*  
U / U / U / U / U /  
*Give me · excess · of it, · that, sur · feiting.*  
U / U / U / U / U /  
*The app · etite · may sick · en, and · so die.*

#### Scanned Text (Broken Meter):

U / U / U / U / U / U /  
*To be · or not · to be · that is · the que · stion:*  
/ U U / U / U / U / U /  
*Whether · 'tis nob · ler in · the mind · to su · ffer*  
U / U / U / U / U / U /  
*The slings · and arr · ows of · outrage · ous for · tune,*  
U / U / U / U / U / U /  
*Or to · take arms · against · a sea · of troub · les.*

### KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- **Iambic Pentameter:** A line of verse consisting of five iambs (unstressed-stressed syllable pairs).
- **Scansion:** The process of marking the stresses in a line of poetry to analyze its rhythm.
- **Emotional Insight:** The rhythmic pattern can provide clues to characters' emotions and the overall tone of the text.



IMAGE: COURTESY OF AUDIO SHAKESPEARE PRONUNCIATION APP

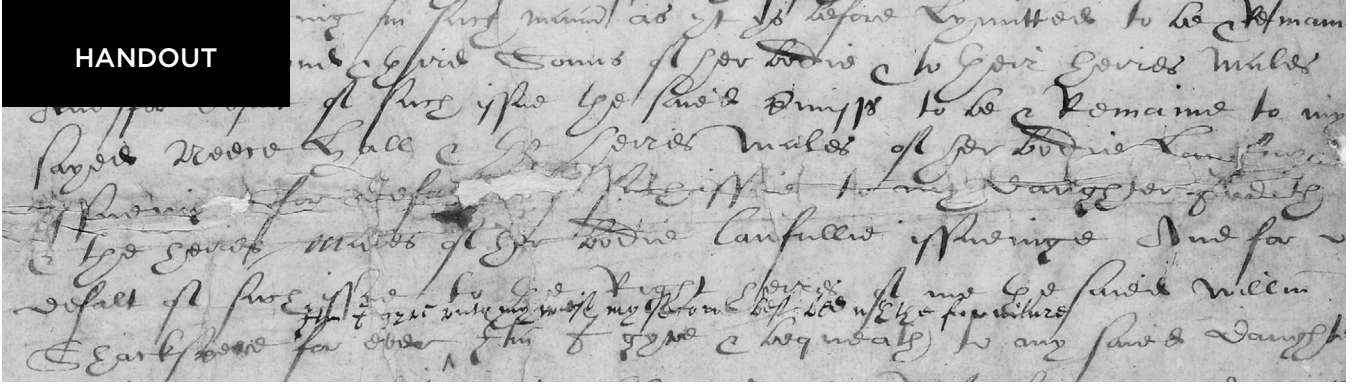


IMAGE: COURTESY OF WIKIPEDIA

# Scansion and Meter: Act Two, Scene Two



## SPEAKING SHAKESPEARE: SCANSION AND METER

Use this handout to deepen your understanding of scansion and iambic pentameter in Shakespeare's works! Practice scanning lines of your own and see how rhythm shapes the meaning.

### ACT TWO, SCENE TWO

#### King Henry V

God quit you in His mercy. Hear your sentence.  
 You have conspired against our royal person,  
 Joined with an enemy proclaimed, and from his coffers  
 Received the golden earnest of our death;  
 Wherein you would have sold your king to slaughter,  
 His princes and his peers to servitude,  
 His subjects to oppression and contempt,  
 And his whole kingdom into desolation.  
 Touching our person seek we no revenge,  
 But we our kingdom's safety must so tender,  
 Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws  
 We do deliver you. Get you therefore hence,  
 Poor miserable wretches, to your death,  
 The taste whereof God of His mercy give  
 You patience to endure, and true repentance  
 Of all your dear offences. Bear them hence.

# Act Two, Scene Two Glossary

SPEAKING SHAKESPEARE: SCANSION AND METER



Terms are listed in the order they appear in the text and read from top to bottom by column.

## Quit

Deliver; free

## Sentence

Judgment

## Conspired

Plotted

## Royal person

The king (himself)

## Joined

Allied

## Enemy proclaimed

Publicly declared adversary

## Coffers

Treasuries

## Golden earnest

Money paid as a pledge or bribe

## Sold

Betrayed

## Slaughter

Massacre

## Princes

Noblemen

## Peers

Equals in rank

## Servitude

Condition of being a servant

## Subjects

Citizens under the king's rule

## Oppression

Cruel treatment

## Contempt

Disdain

## Desolation

Devastation; depopulation; waste

## Touching

Concerning

## Tender

Regard or consider

## Ruin

Destruction

## Her laws

The laws of the kingdom

## Deliver

Hand over

## Get you hence

Leave

## Wretches

A term of contempt for miserable people

## Taste

Experience

## True repentance

Genuine remorse

## Dear

Serious

## Offences

Wrongdoings

## Bear them hence

Take them away