

## Applying Scansion

**Scansion** is the dividing of verse (lines of poetry) into **feet** by indicating accents and counting syllables to determine the **meter** of a poem. It is a means of studying the mechanical elements by which the poet has established his rhythmical effects. The meter, once the scanning has been performed, is named according to the type and number of feet employed in a verse.

Following are the major types of meter (the *adjective form* is in parenthesis). The **—** indicates an unstressed syllable; the **/** indicates a stressed one.

<b>Iambus</b> (iambic)	<b>—/</b>
<b>Trochee</b> (trochaic)	<b>/—</b>
<b>Anapest</b> (anapestic)	<b>— — /</b>
<b>Dactyl</b> (dactylic)	<b>/ — —</b>
<b>Spondee</b> (spondaic)	<b>//</b>
<b>Pyrrhus</b> (pyrrhic)	<b>— —</b>

A verse of one foot (of any type) is called **monometer**; of two feet, **dimeter**; of three feet, **trimeter**; of four feet, **tetrameter**; of five feet, **pentameter**; of six feet, **hexameter**; of seven feet, **heptameter**; of eight feet, **octameter**. Thus a verse consisting of two trochaic feet is called trochaic dimeter; of five iambic feet, iambic pentameter, and so on.

Let's take a look at the opening line of Shakespeare's sonnet 147 to see how scansion works:

**— / — / — / — / — /**  
My love is as a fever, longing still,

The line follows a pattern of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed. That makes it iambic. If we break the line into iambic feet (the number of iambs), we see that there are five. Thus, following the naming convention mentioned above, it is **iambic pentameter**.

*Scanning a line in this way helps to understand its structure; however, even the best of verse sometimes only approximates the pattern.*

Scansion is often considered to include **rhyme scheme** as well as verse analysis. To determine the rhyme scheme, assign a letter to the last word of each line. For example, consider the first quatrain of Shakespeare's sonnet 147:

My love is as a fever, longing still **a**  
For that which longer nurseth the disease, **b**  
Feeding on that which doth preserve the ill, **a**  
Th' uncertain sickly appetite to please. **b**

The first line ends with "still," so we assign the value **a** to it. Because the second line does not rhyme with the first one, we assign it a value of **b**. Line three rhymes with line one, so it has the same value of **a**. The fourth line rhymes with the second, so it gets a **b**.