

## RHYTHM METHOD:

Rhythm is not meter. It's another layer of sound. The phrases "A gladiolus" and "a soft and sweet flush" have an equal number of syllables, and almost the same stress pattern - but quite different rhythms, speed, effect. The length of words, the length of vowels, the length of gaps, the syntax, clusterings of consonants, the grouping of ideas, the tone and tone shifts in the prosody can all affect the rhythm. It is how the semantics, the meaning and the sounds interact. 2 sections address: word stress vs. meaning stress

### 1. Pace Setters: the sound and the pause

**A. Breaking against the sentence:** Words that land on the end of line and use the pause of line or stanza break, as in Gwendolyn Brooks' *We Real Cool* where the default clustering of ideas into sentences isn't used. This changes the emphasis, rhythm of the phrases and pauses.

Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We

jazz June. We  
die soon.

**B. Coming up short:** Words on a line by themselves or very short line amid long lines force pause and emphasis (from *Barbed Lyres: Canada's Venomous Verses*, 1990, John Fraser's of. p. 42). What happens to the word at the line's end compared to if it were all on one line?

The grave-diggers of Canada seem  
Nice Enough

Like music, a long run and then short run can change the tension. Take for example in *The Martyrology, Book 4* of bpNichol (from *The Alphabet Game: A bpNichol Reader* p. 78) What happens to the breath thru this:

momentum carries us  
on in our arc around the sun  
& the lines become as long as the tongue can  
/carry without breathing in

images shift  
blue sky turning back to grey.

**C. Marked emphasis:** Content words take stress by default. Function words (articles, helper verbs) don't. Emphasized words for the particular meaning can shift this:

Elvis is not a king. He's *the* King

**D. Slow & Steady feels more concrete.** One syllable content words set the pace, such as in B.B. King's "How Blue Can You Get"). Bolding marks the stressed syllables.

"I gave you a **brand new Ford**  
You said "I want a **Cadillac**"

E. **Skipping Fast:** Syllables that are stressed (such as in Steve Venright’s spoof of B.B. King’s song in *Spiral Agitator*)

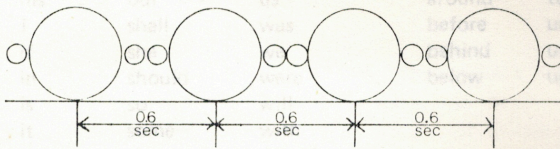
I gave you a 1972 Neo-Modernist elliptic hyperboloid  
 French watertower of reinforced concrete with panoptic  
 stained-glass lapis lazuli windows, and all you wanted was a new dress,

The effect of the B.B. King one is slow and the second is faster. Plain common nouns are concrete and have a certain class ring to them of the common man. Venright’s uses more unstressed vowels that are swallowed. The percentage of schwa is higher. About 30 per cent of the sounds we make when we speak English are the lax vowel sound schwa: 'a', as in about, 'e', as in taken, 'i', as in pencil, 'o', as in eloquent, 'u', as in supply. Strong syllables sentences take the same time whether or not function words are there. By default what isn’t key content is rushed past.

1. Folks eat scones.
2. Folks eat the scones.
3. The folks will eat the scones.
4. The folks will have eaten the scones.

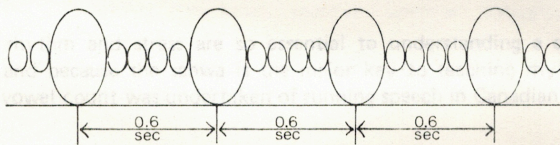
**English is a Stress-Timed Language**

English, typically, has a predetermined rhythm, and the syllables seem to scramble to accommodate this beat. The rhythm requires a major stressed syllable every 0.6 seconds approximately, and there are normally one or two unstressed syllables near each major syllable:



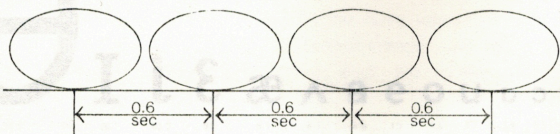
The rhythm of a typical English sentence

The rhythm is maintained by the stressed syllables. If there are several unstressed syllables around the stressed syllable, its duration is shortened, and the unstressed syllables must be glided over very rapidly:



The rhythm with several unstressed syllables

If there are no unstressed syllables nearby, the stressed syllables are naturally lengthened in order to fill the spaces of 0.6 second intervals:



The rhythm with no unstressed syllables

Derek Attridge says in *Poetic Rhythm: An Introduction* people unconsciously choose a *stress unstress pattern* over back-to-back stress. We would say “**black and sparkling eyes**” more than “**sparkling and black eyes.**”

In sentences like (p. 40 of Attridge’s text) where the last word is stressed:

1. Dan is no fool.
2. Dan is no buffoon.

The *no* in the second is the middle of 3 unstressed syllables and we stress the *no* more than in the first sentence.

Making a poem slower are these emphasized words, short lines, short thoughts, monosyllables, breaking within the sentences, and white space use. Making it syncopated is the *we* at the line’s end.

Some aspects to a word add time, like consonant clusters as in *fifths* compared to *bite*.

You get more content per line when you have more unstressed syllables.

(illustrations from p. 4 & 5, *Rhythm & Unstress*, a Public Service Commission workbook)

**F. Regular guy:** Use a meter to create unconscious order, authority, or an oppressive control. It can be set in contrast to chaotic content or back up an orderly world view.

Back to Old English the poet have written accentually, counting a line length not by how many feet but how many strong beats per line. For example Coleridge in Christabel matches an 8 syllable line and an 11 syllable line that to the eye and phonemes are different but to the ear and length of time match.

There is **not wind enough to twirl** [...] On the **top-most twig** that looks **up** at the sky.

Hopkins called this sprung rhythm. The effect with a lot of stressed syllables and iambic metered rhythm is to be more sombre, authoritative, and emphatic. Which is fine is that is your intent. **Does your sound use underscore your meaning or undercut it?**

The speed is partly made by word or phrase stress, pace, onward pressure, pause and closure of patterns of sound and of closure/completion of ideas. Phrasal movement is about syntax and meaning, not the syllable level.

**LONG AND SHORT SENTENCES  
MAY REQUIRE EQUAL TIME**

Let us look at two sentences which will demonstrate the rhythm and stress timed features of the English language.

*The cat is interested in protecting her kittens.*

*Large cars waste gas.*

An anglophone will rush over the unstressed syllables in the first sentence so as to gain time for the full pronunciation of the stressed syllables thereby maintaining the rhythm. Liaison is in full swing whenever we find several unstressed syllables.

In pronouncing the second sentence, an anglophone will prolong and stretch out the stressed syllables and produce less liaison in order to compensate for the lack of unstressed syllables thus filling the time gaps and maintaining the rhythm.

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## 2. Pause against Density and Rush of Sound

Tempo can be of ideas, density of words on page, regularity or irregularity of emotion, or intensity. How does the sound and meaning interact to have a pace that fits the tone, intent? Does it invite the reader/listener to pause, ponder, be challenged, or set up tension to be resolved/revealed? Does it present as intoned authority or partner?

In the examples, I have added bold and square brackets to highlight how the line breaks and rhythms compare to the syntax.

Compare examples for effect:

(from *XXXV* in *Midsummer* by Derek Walcott)

[ **Once,** ] [ in the **drizzle,** ] [ a **crouched,** ] [ **clay-covered ghost** ]  
[ **rose** in his **pivot,** ] [ and the **turning disk** ] [ of the **fields** ]  
[ with their **ploughed stanzas** ] [ of **freshness lost.** ]

vs. (from Adeena Karasicks' *The Arugula Fugues V* in *The House That Hijack Built*)

[ **Flounced** ] [ with a **fleecy Fraulein** ]  
[ **frilly frolic freilach freitag** ] / [ **jacked** ]  
[ with **dangling angles** ] [ (*l'anglaise*) ]  
[ like **mingled singlets** ]

vs. (from *Agony* by Steven Zultanski, p. 106-107) which is an excerpt of long poem book in prose form.

1.

[ The **gross floor space** ] [ of **Tapei 101** ] [ is **about 1,000,000 cubic meters.** ] [ The **volume** ]  
[ of ] [ the **Black Sea** ] [ is **131,200 cubic meters.** ] [ So the **volume** ] [ of the **Tapei 101** ] [ is **.315%** ]  
[ of the **volume** ] [ of the **Black Sea,** ] [ **meaning that splash** ] [ resulting from [ **dropping the one** ] ]  
[ **into the other** ] [ **will be large** ] [ on a **human scale,** ] [ but **relatively small** ] [ on the **scale** ] [ of the ]  
[ **inhuman,** ] [ that of **seas and buildings.** ] [ Unless dropped [ from a **great height.** ] ]  
[ The **Sikorksy CH-54 Tarhe** ] [ is a **twin-engine heavy lift-helicopter** ] [ designed ]

vs. (from *Unbidden* by Rae Armantrout in *The Fiddlehead, Summer Poetry, 2014*) in entirety reads:

[ Did the palo verde ]  
[ **blush yellow** ]  
[ all at once? ]

[ Today's edges ]  
[ are so **sharp** ]

[ they might **cut** ]  
[ anything that **moved** ]

vs. @pentametrwhich trawls Twitter for anything written in iambic pentameter, and retweets it in pairs of rhymed lines from different sources.

[ What **channel** ] [ is the **alabama game** ]  
[ **Cold embers** ] [ from an even **colder flame** ]  
[ I see the **karma** ] [ **coming thru** ] [ the **storm** ]  
[ You're like a **Monday** ] [ but in **human form** ]

(from @BrockPressley 4m)  
(from @xBlackyChan 47m)  
(from @UncleLeff 6h)  
(from @iamshielalala 7h)

vs. (from *Wintergreen Ridge* in *North Central* by Lorine Niedecker, 1960s) Optional: add the syntax brackets

“a **good** to the **heart**”  
    It **all comes down**  
        to the **family**

“We have a **lovely**  
    **finite parentage**  
        **mineral**

vegetable  
    **animal**”  
        Nearby the **dark wood**—

I **suddenly heard**  
    the **cry**  
        my **mother’s**

**where the light**  
    **pissed past**  
        the **pistillate cone**

how she **loved**  
    **closed gentians**  
        **she herself**

so **closed**  
    and in **this** to us **peace**  
        **stabbed**

vs. (from *Message* in *Dark Archive* by Laura Mullen p. 98)

a message that seemed to begin and end with its **postage**; the **rest** an **eerie muted rush** of **sheer** (**hear**) (**here**) **verbiage**. Or **alternatively action** (*breakage, spillage*), if the too **tricky** lyrics, like a **higher dosage**, **fail** to **assuage**. **Ass wage**. If **expected sense** takes **hearing hostage**, **sabotage** betrays a **cleavage**, **where** to **make one’s way** **though** is also to **adhere to**. **Spoils shared** among the **entourage** (**personage**, **ash-bleached** visage, **personage**, **hooded suspect led** back to a **cage**): **spoilage**. The **return** on a long-ago **tutelage** just “**because**,” like an **afterimage**, the **reappearing shadow**

vs. How much is unstressed? (from *Winter Morning* in *Bird Tracks on Hard Snow* by Nelson Ball)

Slight  
light

grey  
sky



## Exercises

- Take a poem of your choice. Copy and paste it double or triple spaced. Using different words and story but the same rhythm make a poem that uses the same music — same syntax, word stress, pauses, question points.
- Building towards or away from: Write an eight-line poem that starts with short sentence and slows the pace by extending them. Start with a short phrase and balloon it like, I **said Tuesday**, I **said** it on **Tuesday**. I had **described** it to him on **Tuesday**. Change subject and start with long sentences with prepositional phrases and unstressed syllables, and accelerates the pace with a pile up of more one syllable words.
- Turn aside: Insert a turn with an inflected phrase such as but the poor dude/but kiddo, / and a reversal of the poem's direction
- Measured words: Start with a country song title (such as *If You Don't Leave Me Alone, I'll Go and Find Someone Else Who Will*, or *I Don't Know Whether to Kill Myself or Go Bowling* or *She Made Toothpicks out of the Timber of My Heart*). After you have something, play the words to iambic (dsDUMdaDUM) or dactyl (OOM-pa-pa OOM-pa-pa).
- Start with a song you know and replace the words, keeping the syllable stress. It doesn't have to make sense. Blow that apart further by replacing the words with polysyllabic substitutes like Venright's.
- Take a poem if you have one on you, or one of the ones above. See what happens you make its lines sprung rhythm (for example, 4 stressed syllables per line or 2).
- If you're a musician you can think of punctuation, line breaks and stanzas breaks as 'rests' of varying lengths. Dramatic pauses can build mystery to hook forward. See line breaks shaping meaning thru the example of Geoffrey Brock's "Homeland Security" and Richard Siken's "Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out." <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/learning/article/248630> Relate a poem's events backwards to create suspense using each line or segments ending, ", but that comes later." or an equivalent phrase.