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The Iambic Pentameter Guide, 2026

If you are studying Shakespeare or writing your own verse, this guide shows the da-DUM beat, the three classic forms, how to scan a line and the variations poets use. The last page has room to scan your own lines.

The beat

One iamb is an unstressed syllable, then a stressed one: da-DUM. Five iambs make a line of ten syllables:

da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM

The stresses land on syllables 2, 4, 6, 8 and 10: shall I com-PARE thee TO a SUM-mer's DAY.

The three forms

Form	Lines	Rhyme	Known for
Shakespearean sonnet	14	ABAB CDCD EFEF GG	Shakespeare's 154 sonnets
Heroic couplets	Pairs	AA BB CC	Dryden, Pope, Johnson
Blank verse	Any	None	Shakespeare's plays, Paradise Lost

How to scan a line

1. Read the line aloud at a normal speed.
2. Split it into syllables and count them. Ten is the goal.
3. Mark the syllables you stress naturally in capitals.
4. Check that the capitals fall on the even syllables.

Common variations

- **Feminine ending:** an extra unstressed syllable at the end of the line.
- **Trochaic start:** DUM-da in the first foot, for a strong opening.
- **Pyrrhic and spondee:** two weak beats, then two strong ones.

Scan your own lines

#	Your line, syllables split, stresses in capitals	Syllables
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		

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