**What is Iambic Pentameter?**

Shakespeare often wrote in a rhythm called “iambic pentameter”. This name may sound complicated, but it’s actually quite simple to understand when you break down the words:

- The word **penta** in “iambic pentameter” comes from the Greek word meaning “five”, which means that for any poem written in iambic pentameter each line will have five pairs of the iambic meter (think of beats in a measure in music).

- The word **meter** in “iambic pentameter” refers to a beat or rhythm, just like in music (for example, da-DUM or DA-dum).

- The word **iambic** tells us what kind of meter is being used. An **iamb** has the rhythm da-DUM, which means that every first syllable (the “da” part) is not emphasized and every second syllable (the “DUM” part) is emphasized.

Thus for every line of iambic pentameter you will hear the rhythm:

**da-DUM (iambic meter) 5 times (penta)**

Here is one of the most famous examples from Shakespeare’s *Sonnet 18*. Each syllable in bold type is emphasized, and the dash marks show that there are five iambs (da-DUMs) in each line:

Shall I / **compare** / thee to / a sum / mer’s day?
Thou **art** / more love / ly and / more tem/ perate.
Rough winds /do shake / the dar / ling buds / of May,
And sum / mer’s lease / hath all / too short / a date.

That’s all you need! As long as the poem follows this da-DUM meter, it is perfect iambic pentameter.
But What About the Rhyming Words??

Shakespeare wrote many kinds of iambic pentameter. Some of it rhymed and some of it did not. He often played with rhythms and the sounds of words because he loved how rich and beautiful the English language was. He chose the pattern to fit the mood and meaning of the idea he was trying to communicate.

In Shakespeare’s plays there are two common patterns of iambic pentameter: blank verse and heroic couplets. Here is a famous example of blank verse from *Romeo and Juliet*:

> But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the East and Juliet is the sun!
> Arise fair sun and kill the envious moon,
> Who is already sick and pale with grief

These lines are still in iambic pentameter because they have five pairs of iambs (da-DUMs). But the ending words of each line do not rhyme, which makes them “blank verse”.

*Iambic pentameter that does not rhyme is called blank verse.*

Shakespeare often used blank verse to show that the person speaking (Romeo in the verses above) has something passionate or thoughtful to say but is doing it on the spur of the moment. When a character teaches a moral lesson or makes more philosophical statements, Shakespeare often used a form of iambic pentameter called a “heroic couplet”. Here is a famous example from *Macbeth*:

> Hear it not Duncan; for it is a knell
> That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

In these lines, the last two words rhyme, but they do not rhyme with their previous verses in Macbeth’s speech.

*When two consecutive lines of iambic pentameter rhyme, they are called heroic couplets.*

Of course, Shakespeare used other rhyming patterns, and not all of his verse was in iambic pentameter (for example, songs were not). He also used prose—what we call natural speech, because it’s how we usually talk. But in every scheme, Shakespeare helps us hear the beauty of the English language, and more importantly how beautiful language communicates beautiful ideas.