PART 1: Metrical Feet and Metrical Lines

Assume that each of the following is the first line of a different poem written in dactylic meter. For each line, 1) read the line aloud; 2) mark the dactyls (/uu/); 3) use slashes to divide the line into metrical feet; 4) determine the name of the metrical line (e.g., dactylic tetrameter).

Poetry challenges us to be perfectly metrical.

Piggleton Pinkerson likes to eat tuna and mayonnaise sandwiches.

Bully for you! You’re the best Spanish matador.

Fabulous window shades may make your living room livable.

Wonderful mysteries wait for us all in the city of Indianapolis.

PART 1a

Print out at least two verses of Tennyson’s poem “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” The first two verses are below, but you can do any verse. 1) Mark the dactyls. 2) Note which lines are truncated (catalectic). 3) What is the dominant metrical line?

Half a league, half a league,
Half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.
“Forward, the Light Brigade!
Charge for the guns!” he said.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

“Forward, the Light Brigade!”
Was there a man dismayed?
Not though the soldier knew
Someone had blundered.
Theirs not to make reply,
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.
Into the valley of Death
Rode the six hundred.

—Alfred, Lord Tennyson
PART 2: Writing

It's your turn! Write a poem in dactylic meter and/or try your hand at a double dactyl. Today’s poetry topic is whatever you like! Consider the rhythm that dactyls create and use that to enhance the topic of your poem. Use the examples here and in the lesson as models for your work. The number of metrical feet is up to you.

Please share your poem in the class Facebook group, or stop by to ask questions and get feedback.

Just for Fun

Here are the rules for the double dactyl, if you choose to take that challenge!

The Double Dactyl

There are two stanzas of four lines each.
All lines except Lines 4 and 8 are two dactylic metrical feet in length.
Line 1 is a rhyming dactylic nonsense phrase such as Higgledy piggledy.
Line 2 usually introduces the topic of the poem, either a person or place. Note that the topic needs to be a dactyl, like the name Hans Christian Anderson.
Line 6 should be a six-syllable, double-dactyl word.
Lines 4 and 8 consist of one dactyl plus a stressed syllable.
Lines 4 and 8 rhyme. None of the other lines need to rhyme.

AFTER THE ARABESQUE

Skippitov tippitov
Mikhail Baryshnikov
kept all his dancing stars
high on their toes.

Playing on beauty, he
characteristically
roused all his primas to
rip off their clothes.

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List of double dactyl words

More double dactyls

Double dactyl names