

An Introduction to Stress and Meter:

Consider the sound of the underlined word in each passage. Speak the underlined word aloud:

- **Darth Vader decided to crush the rebel soldier.**
- **Luke Skywalker will rebel against his father's wishes.**

Hear the difference between the way rebel sounds in the first and second sentences? It is spelled the same. So what made the difference in sound?

That difference is a change in stress. As we speak English, we stress some syllables and leave other syllables "unstressed." Technically, from a linguistic standpoint, every syllable has at least some stress to it, or we wouldn't be able to hear it. It would be more accurate to say "long" and "short" stress, but even that is not completely accurate either, since some words may have degrees of intermediary (in-the-middle) stress. Regardless of this fact, it is common practice to refer to syllables with greater stress as "long," "strong," "heavy" or "stressed," and to refer to syllables with lesser stress as "short" or "light" or "unstressed."

In the first example, the pattern in the word rebel is "stressed," then "unstressed."

- **DARTH VAdEr deCIDed to CRUSH the REBel SOLDier.**

In the second example, the pattern in the word rebel is "unstressed, stressed."

- **LUKE SKYWALKer WILL reBEL aGAINST his FATHER's WISHes.**

To indicate the changes in meter, scholars put a diagonal line (/) or a macron (¯) over stressed

syllables. A small curving loop (~) or a small x (x) goes over the unstressed syllables.

- / / u u / u u / u / u / u
- **Darth Vader decided to crush the rebel soldier.**

- / / / u / u / u / u / u / u
- **Luke Skywalker will rebel against his father's wishes.**

Rhyme is only part of poetry. The main component of poetry is its meter (the regular pattern of strong and weak stress). When a poem has a recognizable but varying pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables, the poetry is written in verse. The sentences above don't have an established repetitive pattern. They are just spoken words.

Exercise: Identifying Patterns of Stress

Identify the Stress in the Following Words and Phrases:

- (1) How now brown cow?
- (2) Arnold Schwarzenegger
- (3) Oops! I did it again! I played with your heart.
- (4) Wild thing! You make my heart sing! You make everything . . . groovy.
- (5) I went to a party at the county jail. . . .
- (6) Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary
- (7) O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
- (8) Listen my children and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
- (9) Supercallifragilisticexpealadocious!
- (10) Perpendicular