METER

From = A Glossary of Literary Terms (Boston: Wadsworth, 2012) 218-19.

It is possible to distinguish a number of degrees of syllabic stress in English speech, but the most common and generally useful fashion of analyzing and classifying the standard English meters is "binary." That is, we distinguish only two categories—strong stress and weak stress—and group the syllables into metric feet according to the patterning of these two degrees. A **foot** is the combination of a strong stress and the associated weak stress or stresses which make up the recurrent metric unit of a line. The relatively stronger-stressed syllable is called, for short, "stressed"; the relatively weaker-stressed syllables are called "light," or most commonly, "unstressed."

The four standard feet distinguished in English are:

1. **Iambic** (the noun is "iamb"): an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

   Thĕ cúr | fĕw tólls | thĕ knéll | ŏf pár | tĭng dáy. |

   (Thomas Gray, "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard")

2. **Anapestic** (the noun is "anapest"): two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable.

   Thĕ Ăs sýr | ĭăn cămе dówn | lĭke ă wólf | ŏn thĕ fóld. |

   (Lord Byron, "The Destruction of Sennacherib")

3. **Trochaic** (the noun is "trochee"): a stressed followed by an unstressed syllable.

   Thére thĕy | áre, mў | fíf tў | mén ănd | wó mĕn. |

   (Robert Browning, "One Word More")

   Most trochaic lines lack the final unstressed syllable—in the technical term, such lines, or any verse lines that lack the final syllable, are **catalectic**. So in Blake's "The Tiger":

   Tí gĕr! | tí.gĕr! | bŭrn ĭng | brĭght |
   Ín thĕ | fó rĕst | óf thĕ | níght. |

4. **Dactylic** (the noun is "dactyl"): a stressed syllable followed by two unstressed syllables.

   Éve, wĭth hĕr | bás kĕt, wăs |
   Déep ĭn thĕ | bélls ănd grăss. |

   (Ralph Hodgson, "Eve")

Iambs and anapests, since the strong stress is at the end, are called "rising meter"; trochees and dactyls, with the strong stress at the beginning, are called "falling meter." Iambs and trochees, having two syllables, are called "duple meter"; anapests and dactyls, having three syllables, are called "triple meter." It should be noted that the iamb is by far the commonest English foot; some metric theorists treat other types of stress patterns as variants of the iamb. (For the development of the iambic line in English, see John Thompson, *The Founding of English Metre*, 1961.)

Two other feet are often distinguished by special names, although they occur in English meter only as occasional variants from standard feet:

Spondaic (the noun is "spondee"): two successive syllables with approximately equal strong stresses, as in each of the first two feet of this line:

Góod stróng | thíck stú | pĕ fў | ĭng ín | cĕnse smóke. |

(Browning, "The Bishop Orders His Tomb")

Pyrrhic (the noun is also "pyrrhic"): a foot composed of two successive syllables with approximately equal light stresses, as in the second and fourth feet in this line:

Mý wăy | ĭs tŏ | bĕ gín | wĭth thĕ | bĕ gín nĭng |

(Byron, *Don Juan*)

This latter term is used only infrequently. Some traditional metrists deny the existence of a true pyrrhic, on the grounds that the prevailing metrical accent—in the above instance, iambic—always imposes a slightly stronger stress on one of the two syllables.

A metric line is named according to the number of feet composing it:

monometer:	one foot
dimeter:	two feet
trimeter:	three feet
tetrameter:	four feet
pentameter:	five feet
hexameter:	six feet (an **Alexandrine** is a line of six iambic feet)