

Common Meter



DEFINITION

What is common meter? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Common meter is a specific type of [meter](#) that is often used in lyric poetry. Common meter has two key traits: it alternates between lines of eight syllables and lines of six syllables, and it always follows an [iambic](#) stress pattern in which each [unstressed](#) syllable is followed by one [stressed](#) syllable. The hymn "Amazing Grace" is an example of common meter: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound / That saved a wretch like me."

Some additional key details about common meter:

- Common meter has been used for centuries for a range of purposes—from Christian hymns, to the Romantic poems of Wordsworth, to television theme songs. Its called "common meter," in fact, precisely because it is used so commonly.
- Common meter is also sometimes called "ballad meter" because it's used in so many [ballads](#).
- Poems that use common meter don't have to use [rhyme](#). However, they almost always do, and generally follow a rhyme scheme of ABAB or ABCB.
- Poems in common meter are generally broken into four-line [stanzas](#).

Common Meter Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce common meter: **com-un mee-tur**

Common Meter in Depth

In order to understand common meter in more depth, it's helpful to have a grasp of a few other literary terms related to poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding common meter easier.

- **Poetry:** Also referred to as "verse," poetry is a genre of literature that consists of writing that is arranged into lines that often follow a pattern of rhythm, [rhyme](#), or both. The three main types of poetry are:
 - **Formal verse:** Poetry with a strict meter (rhythmic pattern) and [rhyme scheme](#) (pattern of rhyming).
 - **Blank verse:** Poetry with a strict meter but no rhyme scheme.
 - **Free verse:** Poetry without any strict meter or rhyme scheme.
- **Stress:** In poetry, the term stress refers to the emphasis placed on certain syllables in words. For instance, in the word "happily" the emphasis is on the first syllable ("hap"), so "hap" is the first

"stressed" syllable and the other two syllables ("pi" and "ly") are "unstressed."

- **Foot:** In poetry, a "foot" refers to the rhythmic units that make up lines of [meter](#). The [iamb](#) is the type of foot that is the basis of common meter.
- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of lines of poetry. Poetic [meters](#) are named for the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

Common Meter Alternates Iambic Tetrameter and Iambic Trimeter

The basic unit of common meter is the iamb, a metrical foot made up of one unstressed and one stressed syllable. Common meter alternates lines of eight syllables and six syllables, meaning that it alternates lines of *iambic tetrameter* (a line that contains four iambs) and a line of *iambic trimeter* (a line that contains three iambs). Here's an example of common meter in a poem by Emily Dickinson, who wrote many of her poems according to this metrical pattern. We've marked the [unstressed](#) and [stressed](#) syllables that make up each iamb:

I've heard it in the chilliest land -
And on the strangest Sea -
Yet - never - in Extremity,
It asked a crumb - of me.

As you can see, the first and third lines each contain four iambs making up eight syllables ("da-dum, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum"), and the second and fourth lines each contain three iambs making up six syllables ("da-dum, da-dum, da-dum").

Notice how, because the poem is written using the same metrical pattern as "Amazing Grace," it can actually be sung to the same tune. This is a handy trick to remember when you're trying to quickly figure out if a poem is written in common meter: just try singing the words to the tune of "Amazing Grace."

Metric Variations Within Common Meter

Although some poems written in common meter do alternate lines of *exactly* four iambs and three iambs throughout the entire poem, it's also normal for a poem written in common meter to contain slight variations on this metrical pattern. For instance, a poem written in common meter may suddenly substitute an [iamb](#) with a different foot—for example, a [trochee](#), the iamb's stressed-unstressed opposite—to create a pause, accommodate a certain word, or vary the poem's rhythm. This kind of substitution does not change the overall categorization of the poem's meter. In other words, meter is flexible—a poem written in common meter with occasional trochees

interspersed is still said to be in common meter, since that is the poem's predominant meter.

Rhyme Scheme in Common Meter

Common meter may or may not rhyme. When it does rhyme, it usually follows a particular pattern or [rhyme scheme](#). The two most common rhyme schemes used with common meter are ABAB and ABCB. The poem below, "To Anthea, who may Command him Anything" by Robert Herrick, is in common meter and uses an ABAB rhyme scheme.

Bid me to weep, and I will weep
 While I have eyes to see
 And having none, yet I will keep
 A heart to weep for thee



EXAMPLES

Common meter is found in poetry ranging from folk ballads to the work of Emily Dickinson. While it's less common in contemporary poetry, it is regularly found in television show theme songs.

Common Meter in Dickinson's "Because I could not stop for Death"

This poem by Emily Dickinson is written in common verse—as were the majority of Dickinson's poems. This poem addresses the subject of time by telling the story of taking a ride on Death's horse-drawn carriage, a somber subject matter—and one that the iamb's heartbeat-like rhythm is well-suited to. The rhyme scheme in this poem is ABCB.

Because I could not stop for Death –
 He kindly stopped for me –
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
 And Immortality.

Common Meter in "Tam Lin"

Here's the first stanza of a famous Irish folk ballad entitled "Tam Lin" that's in common meter and exemplifies the traditional ABCB rhyme scheme of [ballads](#).

O I forbid you, maidens all,
 That wear gold in your hair,
 To come or go by Carterhaugh,
 For young Tam Lin is there.

Common Meter in Robert Hayden's "The Ballad of Nat Turner"

Here's a stanza from a more modern (and therefore rarer) example of a common verse poem. The poem slips in and out of strict common

meter, but generally adheres to the 8-syllable 6-syllable rule. The poem doesn't use rhyme.

And came at length to livid trees
 where Ibo warriors
 hung shadowless, turning in wind
 that moaned like Africa,

Notice that in the third line, a [trochee](#) (that is, a foot with a "stressed-unstressed" pattern) is substituted for an iamb to accommodate the word "turning."

Common Meter in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's long lyrical ballad "[The Rime of the Ancient Mariner](#)" employs many different types of meter, but the poem frequently uses common meter, as in the stanzas below. Notice, though, that in the first stanza, the first and third lines are short one syllable: both lines begin in the middle of an iamb, so to speak. This doesn't mean that the stanzas aren't good examples of common meter, it just means they contain metric variations.

Water, water, every where,
 And all the boards did shrink;
 Water, water, every where,
 Nor any drop to drink.
 The very deep did rot – Oh Christ!
 That ever this should be.
 Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs,
 Upon the slimy sea.

Common Meter in Wordsworth's "She Dwelt among the Untrodden Ways"

Wordsworth wrote many of his poems in common meter, including this one, from a series called the Lucy poems. The poem uses an ABAB rhyme scheme, though "one" and "stone" are what's called an eye rhyme: they are spelled the same, so they look like they rhyme, but the words don't actually have the same sound.

A violet by a mossy stone
 Half hidden from the eye!
 —Fair as a star, when only one
 Is shining in the sky.

Common Meter in the Pokémon Theme Song

The popular cartoon TV show Pokémon's original theme song also uses common meter.

I wanna be the very best
 Like no one ever was

To catch them is my re-al test
To train them is my cause

Notice that the word "real" in the third line has to be broken up into two syllables (pronounced something like "ree-ull") in order for the meter to remain consistent. This type of variation is especially common in songwriting, when words can easily be drawn out over more syllables than they would usually have to better suit the phrasing of the song's melody.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Only one form of poetry actually *requires* the use of common meter, and that's the [ballad](#). For all other writers who choose to use common meter, they might select it for one of these reasons:

- Its singsongy rhythm makes verse easy to listen to and easy to remember—a fact which is only amplified by the use of rhyme.
- The form lends itself especially well to writing long poems such as ballads because iambic meter has a rhythm that mimics the natural cadence of speech, and it's therefore quite easy to listen to for extended periods of time without fatiguing the listener.
- The different lengths of the lines also contribute to the fact that common meter is easy to listen to: rather than just droning on, there's variation in the rhythm from line to line—much like there is in natural speech.

All in all, these qualities make common meter an appealing choice for songs, ditties, ballads—or any other lighthearted poem, and especially one that might be recited aloud. Common meter is not, by

contrast, particularly well-suited to very serious or heavy subject matters, since the singsongy cadence doesn't sound very somber.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Common Meter](#): A basic overview with some helpful examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Common Meter](#): A simple and straightforward definition.
- [Common Verse on YouTube](#): Here's the [Pokémon theme song](#), and a video of President Obama singing [Amazing Grace](#). Try singing any poem to the melody of one of these songs—it's a good way of testing whether the poem is in common verse.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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