

an
introduction
to poetry

Speak Like Rain



ruth a. johnston

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Ruth A. Johnston



Grade level recommendation: This curriculum has a variety of information and activities designed to appeal to general readers as well as students of varying interest and ability. It is intended for grades 10-12 but could also be used with very motivated younger students.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

How To Use This Book.....	vii
Speak Like Rain!.....	9
One: Art with Words.....	10
1. Why do we make art?.....	10
2. Word sounds.....	12
3. Word images.....	14
4. Learning to understand art.....	14
Summary and Definitions.....	15
Exercises 1.....	15
Two: Word Stress.....	19
1. Word stress patterns.....	19
2. Scanning lines for word stress patterns.....	21
Summary and Definitions.....	23
Exercises 2.....	23
Three: Accentual Meter.....	26
1. Old English verse.....	26
2. Nursery rhymes.....	28
3. Romantic accentual verse.....	29
Summary and Definitions.....	30
Exercises 3.....	30
Four: Metrical Feet.....	38
1. English metrical patterns.....	38
2. Identifying the meter in a poem.....	39
3. Irregular metrical feet.....	41
Summary and Definitions.....	41
Exercises 4.....	42
Five: Line Lengths and Blank Verse.....	50
1. Naming metrical lines.....	50
2. Line endings.....	52
3. Blank Verse.....	54
Summary and Definitions.....	54
Exercises 5.....	54

Review 1.....	63
Six: Rhyme.....	66
1. Types of rhymes.....	66
2. Placing rhymes.....	68
Summary and Definitions.....	70
Exercises 6.....	70
Seven: Rhyme Schemes.....	80
1. Naming rhyming patterns.....	80
2. Couplets.....	82
3. Kinds of Stanzas.....	84
Summary and Definitions.....	88
Exercises 7.....	89
Eight: Sonnets.....	98
1. The Sonnet's history.....	98
2. The English Sonnet form.....	99
3. The Italian Sonnet form.....	100
4. Modern variations on the sonnet.....	102
Summary and Definitions.....	104
Exercises 8.....	105
Review 2.....	115
Nine: Repetition and Variation of Sound.....	118
1. Alliteration.....	118
2. Assonance and Consonance.....	119
3. Repetition of words and phrase structure.....	121
Summary and Definitions.....	123
Exercises 9.....	124
Ten: Repetition of Lines.....	132
1. Triolet, Rondeau, and Villanelle.....	133
2. Sestina.....	139
Summary and Definitions.....	141
Exercises 10.....	141
Eleven: Free Verse.....	151
1. The grand gesture of long lines.....	152
2. The cut gemstone of a haiku.....	154
3. Pictures on the Page: Using White Space.....	157
Exercises 11.....	162
Review 3.....	173
Twelve: Image in Description.....	176
1. Traditional descriptive poetry.....	176

2. Ekphrasis: Word art describing visual art.....	181
3. Imagist description.....	183
Summary and Definitions.....	185
Exercises 12.....	186
Thirteen: Image as Analogy.....	195
1. Simile: Keeping the images separate.....	195
2. Metaphor: blurring the boundaries.....	198
Summary and Definitions.....	202
Exercises 13.....	203
Fourteen: Image as Symbol.....	210
1. Real objects with meaning.....	210
2. Archetypes: universal symbols.....	213
3. Interpreting symbols in poetry.....	217
Exercises 14.....	220
Fifteen: Image as Myth.....	228
1. Myth as allusion, reference or symbol.....	229
2. Myth as dramatic situation.....	232
3. Poetry to create myths.....	236
Summary and Definitions.....	238
Exercises 15.....	238
Last Review.....	251
Sixteen: Image as Story.....	255
Summary and Definitions.....	261
Exercises 16.....	261
Seventeen: Voice as Image.....	280
1. Voice presented as the image.....	280
2. Spoken word art.....	285
After this book:	290
Answer Key.....	292
Index.....	325
About the Author.....	333

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Speak Like Rain is designed primarily for students in a formal program with homework and tests, so exercises and reviews are built in. But general readers should also enjoy the book, and they should read the homework questions thoughtfully, at least answering in their minds. Skipping them over entirely would mean missing the wonderful poems and some additional teaching insights. The book is intended to be used as a consumable workbook: please write in it and make your own notes!

For students, the homework is designed to suit a range of study modes. It is perfect for self-teaching, either as homeschool or in an individualized learning setting. Teachers should find plenty of material for classroom use and as a springboard for their own ideas.

If you find poetry difficult or unappealing, you might find the homework sets long. The first one is always some kind of activity; it's usually analytical but often light-hearted as well. When the questions turn to studying famous poems, they are intended to grow more challenging as the set moves on. Still, the questions aim to ask concrete, objective things that even a poetry-nonlover can observe and know. Students who find poetry difficult might aim to answer the first four, and then just read the last questions, using the answer key as a tutorial conversation instead of a "right or wrong?" check.

The book is also designed for students and other readers who *like* poetry. If some of the homework questions seem easy, none of them will waste your time, and the poems will always challenge you beyond the basic level presented here. The text is full of ideas that the homework may not demand you to master, but which will let you move ahead on your own. Every homework set closes with suggestions for further study.

The "Summary and Definitions" section is there to tell you which terms and ideas might be on a test. Teachers can use the section for that purpose, too. The four Reviews included in this book are not intended to be tests, but they can measure your retention and ability to integrate concepts. They're also meant to be interesting to read.

The Answer Key at the back of the book tries to provide short answers to most of the homework questions, but in some cases, the only answer is your own opinion. In those cases, the Key will share my opinions that you can use as conversations with your thoughts.

Inclusion of contemporary poems is a special problem for an independent publishing project, because copyright holders require licensing fees that add up fast. I've tried to solve this in three ways: first, most of the poems are in the public domain; second, in a few places I use short passages as "fair use" illustration or provide titles so the reader can locate the full poems; third, I have used my poems (which I own, of course) and the work of a few contemporary poets who gave me direct permission. There are many great poems written between 1930 and the present; I hope you will find them.

SPEAK LIKE RAIN!

Why “Speak Like Rain”?

In 1914, Danish-born Baroness Karen Blixen went to Kenya. She lived on a coffee farm near Nairobi until 1931. She learned local languages so that she could talk with her Kikuyu, Somali, and Masai neighbors. Later, after the farm failed and she returned to Denmark, she wrote about the people and events of those years in her memoir, *Out of Africa*.

Blixen hired many local people to work on her farm, sometimes working side by side with them. One evening they were harvesting maize, tossing the cobs into an ox-cart. To practice her Swahili vocabulary, she started making up nonsense rhymes, such as “The oxen like salt,” because *ngumbe* (oxen) rhymed with *chumbe* (salt). The teenage boys working with her were delighted. They paused in their work and stood around her in a ring, hearing the first words and then waiting to hear the rhyme.

Each time the rhyme came, they laughed. “The *Wakamba* eat snakes (*mamba*)!” They were not interested in helping complete the rhymes, preferring the role of surprised listeners. But they wanted to hear more:

As they had become used to the idea of poetry, they begged: “Speak like rain. Speak like rain.”

Why they should feel verse to be like rain I do not know. It must have been, however, an expression of applause, since in Africa rain is always longed for and welcome.

In an arid climate, the seasonal rain is never an annoyance. The air begins to feel different; the clouds on the horizon look different. A change in the wind, or an early rumble of thunder, may announce the coming rain. But there’s a waiting period until finally the first drops splash down, then more and more, until the ground is running over with water. The sound of those first drops is the most welcome thing in the world.

Sounds that are like rain, anticipated and then welcomed: that’s what poetry is made of. As you go through this book, I want you to hear how language sounds and ideas can work together to bring joy. Poetry began by being popular, not by being a high art that must be studied. Although we study it now, we can still hear it like rain.

ONE:

ART WITH WORDS

What is poetry?
Poetry is art made with words. The rest of this book is about what that means.

1. WHY DO WE MAKE ART?

Humans have a philosophical problem: our lives are relatively short, but our minds can perceive expanses of space, time, and ideas that are much larger. When we study the science of our world, we can't help being impressed by how small we are compared to the galaxy or how little we see and hear, compared to molecular realities. When we study history, we realize how short even a very long life is compared to the many lifetimes that make up even a short span of history. Looking out at the world, we see how small our parts are compared to the millions of other people whose lives are just as important to them, but completely unknown to us. We can understand connections between space and time, or between kinds of people. We may understand even larger connections about spiritual and divine realities.

Most people have days and moments when we suddenly feel connected to part of the larger reality. We may have an idea that could be put into words, or we might feel a wordless idea or an emotion. We *see* or *hear* something with spiritual perception. The insight often comes when experiencing some kind of extreme: like seeing an extremely large ocean or an extremely small particle; or feeling either extreme isolation or extreme crowdedness. But insights can also come in the little moments of daily life, when nobody watching us could tell that something has changed.

Almost everyone wants to mark our transcendent moments in some way. We may turn to someone and point to what we see, but it may come out only as, "how enormous the sun is on the horizon!" or "see that great flock of birds!" Later, we may find ourselves trying to explain an idea about truth or even what the feeling of connection was like. We want to hold onto it. It feels like we touched something permanent, and we want to put up a marker to remember it.

That impulse, to hold onto the moment of feeling or insight, is what prompts us to create art. The art we make often outlasts not just the moment or day, but also our individual lives. Some art lasts for centuries or millennia. Ancient people painted animals and spirits on cave walls, signing their drawings by a hand print. While other art made at the same time didn't last, the cave drawings did.

We don't understand what story, idea, or insight the cave artists were remembering, but seeing them in our own time, we experience a sense of connection to the distant past. We are amazed to see that not only were the drawings accurate enough for us to recognize the animals, but they clearly also convey the beauty of the animals. The rhinoceros's outline is graceful, probably more graceful than the actual animal was, because

the artist was showing us his feeling about it. The hand prints not only sign the work, they play with color and shape to represent human spirits, overlapping and reaching upward together.



Art creates connections between people by representing both what is shared, and what is unique or even isolating. We may commemorate a community experience like worship or hunting, and it seems that much early art served this shared purpose. But even in ancient times, and more in modern times, art also tried to preserve the deeply individual moment that could not be shared directly. Making art that speaks to an isolated moment is a way of bridging over the gap between us. Even if a feeling or experience is unique to me, you can experience some of it by hearing my song, seeing my painting, or reading my story.

The next step (the hard part!) is making the actual art. There's a new mandate at this stage: the art must be beautiful, even if the truth or insight it represents may have been painful or ugly. The artistic beauty can be conventional and easily seen by all, or it may be unconventional, valued only by trained eyes. Still, it must be there in some way. Beauty matters, because to our senses, it is a kind of absolute goodness. It's how we declare that all truth and insights are good, *even* when they're painful. It's beautiful to know truth about something ugly.

Art can be made with sound, movement, line, color, shape, and words: giving us music, dance, drawing, painting, sculpture, and poetry. Artists need some talent and training, so usually they work in only one medium.

Everyone has tried to draw a picture, so visual art is the one we understand most readily. We know that a good artist needs a steady hand, experience with materials, and good judgment. It's hard to get the colors mixed or chosen accurately, and even harder to reflect dimensional depth, such as shadows, or the change in color across wide spaces. Anyone who has studied either drawing or art history is also aware that shapes and colors are arranged according to principles of balance and beauty.

We make art with sound any time we perform or participate in music. Only original composers make musical art from scratch, and that process is mysterious to most of us. But since sound lasts only a brief moment, every time we sing or play a song or sonata, the art is re-created in a personal way. Both composers and performers are active in the musical art. Dance, art made with movement, is usually tied to music. Ballet gives us color, movement, and sound all in one package.

Visual and musical art usually connect easily with viewers and hearers. Even when we don't understand the insight or feeling that inspired a painting, we can still appreciate what we see (we like pictures!). As for music, everyone has a favorite song. It's only when visual and musical art are very abstract that it's a problem to appreciate them. Even then, as long as they have beautiful colors, lines, chords, and tones many people who aren't trained specialists can enjoy seeing and listening.

At first it's harder to see how words can be used for art, since we use them in daily speech. Words aren't special the way the elements of music, dance, and painting are. We can hear how music is different from daily sounds (thuds, bangs, dings, chimes and shouts); we can understand how dance movement is different from tying shoes or climbing into a truck. But there is no special set of words used only for art.

Additionally, we can define poetry as not only "art made with words," but art made with *nothing but* words. Song lyrics are *like* poems, but they aren't the same, because if you just read them without the melody, they lose half their artistry. Words that are placed into a mural or painting are part of the visual decoration. A true poem stands alone, separate from the paper or stone it was written on. You can recopy it, or you can give it to different people to read, and it still accomplishes its purpose.

2. WORD SOUNDS

Art made with words breaks into two parts: its sounds and its images. We use both sounds and images in daily speech, when we aren't trying to create art. They can have other purposes: grabbing attention, making us laugh, or helping us remember.

We start teaching young children about rhyming words because we want them to hear the sounds so they'll be ready to learn to read. All children's songs rhyme; I can't think of any exceptions. In the past, and sometimes still in our time, children also learned traditional rhymed poems, like, "*Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool? Yes sir, yes sir, three bags full.*" In my 1960s nursery school, the teachers placed an unlit candle on the floor and each child had a turn jumping over it, while the class chanted, "Jack be nimble, Jack be quick, Jack jump over the candlestick!" We also teach children to remember the lengths of months with a rhyme coined so many years ago that it still preserves an outdated verb form: "Thirty days hath September, April, June, and November." At a little older age, children learn that "In fourteen hundred ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue."

Everyone likes the rhyming sound effect. Our minds feel pleasure in the cycle of setting up a sound for special notice, waiting to hear how the sound will be repeated, then getting the answering chime of the second rhyme. That's probably why the African boys thought rhyming was "like rain." When it's going to rain, we see lightning and wait to hear the thunder, or we hear thunder, feel the wind shift, and wait for the patter of water on our faces. We anticipate, then we get an answer. Like the African boys, we often laugh at rhymes. Children nearly always laugh, and adults, too, making up rhyming phrases as jokes (sometimes adding, "I'm a *poet* and don't *know it!*").

In mid-19th century London, Cockney dialect started using rhyming as a deliberately confusing slang. The phrase "apples and pears" rhymed with "stairs," so they would leave off the rhyming part ("pears") and say only "up the apples" to mean "upstairs." The listener had to complete the rhyme in his head to get the joke or know its meaning. The American use of "bread" to mean money probably came from Cockney "bread and honey" to rhyme with "money;" we also picked up their term "raspberry," originally "raspberry tart" to rhyme with "fart."

In the century since Londoners started using rhymes to create word substitutes, the pool of slang words kept changing. They came up with elaborate combinations of previous rhymes, puns, and names of current celebrities, always looking for a new, clever rhyme. While rhyming slang isn't as popular as it once was, you can still hear it. "Tony Blairs" rhymes with "flares" (wide-leg pants), and "Britney Spears" could stand for "beers." The rhyming part is always left for the listener to figure out. Someone could say, "He tossed back a few more Britneys than was good for him, put on his Tonys, and walked out on the frog." ("Frog," an old rhyming slang, stood for "frog and toad," to rhyme with "the main road.")

We also arrange words by their beginning sounds. This effect, too, is often comic. Family nicknames for children sometimes use repeated first sounds, like Silly Sammy or Pretty Patty. To make fun of someone, we may come up with a word that repeats the first sound of their name, like the old rhyme about Simple Simon (who met a pieman). Repeated sounds are memorable, so businesses like to use them: Bob's Big Boy, Ramblin' Roses, or Connie's Cards and Clutter. Some preachers use a sermon style organized around points that start with the same letter: Purpose, Prepare, Practice, Paradise!

Words have natural rhythm, too. We barely think about their rhythm until someone speaks a word in the wrong pattern. The error stands out clearly and may trip up listeners in their comprehension. American and British speakers of English use some different word stress patterns that sound very strange at first. Americans say "LAB'ratory," while the British say, "laBORat'ry. When I listen to audiobooks read by British narrators, I notice that where I would say "PRINcess, DUchess, AUthoress," the narrator consistently talks about the "prinCESS, duCHESS, and authoRESS."

We can use the rhythm built into phrases to coordinate people's movement. Soldiers on long marches need to walk at the same pace, close together, and keep their feet moving left and right like the others. Rhythmic chants called cadences make the effort less conscious, and therefore easier. Cheerleaders at football and basketball games also use rhythmic chants to coordinate their voices and encourage the crowd to join in. The rhythm has to be predictable and repeated so that people can join with confidence.

When people gather for a political protest, they pay a lot of attention to the rhythm of words. They want their many voices to sound like one very loud voice, so they need to chant the same words at the same time. Rhythm helps. The most common protest chant has a very simple outline: "hey HEY! (pause) ho HO! (pause) This bad thing has GOT to GO!" Chants of this kind have to be even simpler than army cadences or cheerleader slogans, because they can't depend on protesters having any previous practice. They have four strong beats and a very simple, obvious rhyme to close the phrase. Being clever gets no points at a protest; it only matters to keep it simple and loud.

At dance clubs in the 1980s, DJs talked a rhythmic patter between songs. With introductory drum measures playing in the background, they timed their words to go with, then against, the beat. Crowds loved it, and this style became rap music, or hip-hop. Both rhyme and rhythm matter tremendously in hip-hop style, since the melody of a traditional song is usually left out. Starting with the natural spoken rhythm of words and phrases, the rapper's "flow," or chanting style, can also manipulate phrases into unnatural patterns that are spoken too fast or use the strong beat on words that we don't expect. Clever words and unexpected rhymes win points, since the rapper wants to stand out, not blend into a group the way chanting protesters do.

Rhythm and rhyme both help when we have to memorize things. Before the spread of papermaking technology in the late Middle Ages, stories and information had to be memorized. Singers learned long story-songs that always used rhyme, first-sound repetition, or a set rhythm to prompt the memory. Students learned rhymes with information, such as the one about "Thirty days hath September."

One of the most colorful examples of rhyme used for memory comes from the Mongol hordes of Genghis Khan, in the 1200s. The armies were very large, and they had many non-Mongol men who had only recently joined up. Everyone was assigned to a group of 10, 100, and 1000; those units used marching cadences to teach the laws of the Mongol empire. They also learned rhymed chants to remember phrases that were likely to be used in messages. When a man was pulled out of the ranks and told to take a message to another unit some miles away, he received it as a rhyme using these familiar phrases. He only had to remember the new information that was mixed in; the rest came to him like song lyrics.

3. WORD IMAGES

The sound of words (rhyme, alliteration, and rhythm) fills the first half of poetry's artistic tool box. The other side of the box is filled with images that can be used in various ways. Here too, we can raise our awareness of images in everyday speech, where they are used for explanations or dramatic effect. Poetry uses them in distinctive ways, but like all words, images have practical uses.

We use simple images in some figures of speech. "I'm sorry to burst your bubble" brings the vivid image of bubbles made of gum or soap, pricked and suddenly vanishing. We can also say, "I'm sorry to rain on your parade," and anyone who has participated in a local parade can feel how dismal it is when the float gets soaked and most watchers have been driven indoors. Some of the sayings use *like* or *as*, for example, "busy as a bee," or "working like a dog." When the comparison is unexpected but created with a well-known experience, the impression is stronger.

When we need to explain an unusual experience, we go for this stronger impression. If you live through a natural disaster, you may not have a standard set of descriptions to lean on. How do you explain a tornado to people who live outside twister zones? Tornadoes are often compared to the loud, ongoing noise of a train passing close by, on the assumption that most places still have trains. When a tornado approaches, the air pressure suddenly drops, leading some people to describe popping eardrums "like when you're in an airplane taking off." Other images are needed to describe the flying debris, bizarre destructive patterns afterward, and especially the serious fear that the tornado provokes. "It was like..." we say, reaching for any image that can lend part of an idea.

Advertisers use images to tell us how to feel about their products. They borrow how we already think or feel about, for example, a large boulder: we know that it's likely to be in the same place for many years, unchanged, because stone isn't easily broken down. We feel that a boulder is a reliable landmark, so the idea is more comforting than threatening. For many years, Chevrolet ran an ad campaign that constantly reminded people that Chevy trucks and cars were "like a rock." They chose their words carefully, not saying "our trucks are *like rocks*," since we don't have a positive feeling about "rocks" (they break lawnmower blades, hit windshields, and make us stumble). All of the trucks together are *like a rock*: like a big boulder that is reliably always the same.

Product names are also carefully chosen for the images (and feelings) they give us. "Galaxy" is a good name for a computerized cell phone, because it gives you a sense of reaching across distances. "Android," another phone product name, evokes the character of a robot that's so good it seems human. Cars and trucks may have the most carefully chosen names. Mountain ranges are good for trucks: Tahoe, Tacoma, Sierra, Denali. Other geographical words are good, if they suggest speed, size or strength: Frontier, Avalanche, Tundra, Canyon, Ridgeline. Some use a fierce but fast animal: Ram, Charger. Heroic human figures also work: Raider, Titan, Ranger. For every product that gets named, there are dozens of words that are considered and then discarded, because some aspect of that image isn't going to be positive.

4. LEARNING TO UNDERSTAND ART

Every kind of art has techniques and terms. Music has major and minor, arpeggios and crescendos, riffs and bridges. Painting has positive and negative space, chiaroscuro and diptychs, pastels and oils. Dance has pointe and par terre, swing and tango, lifts and drops. Anyone who learns an art, either to do it or to understand it, has to learn the terms so they can talk about the individual pieces and techniques of the art.

Poetry has its own set of words to describe all of the ways that art can be made from words. The first is the core word, "poem." It is a shortened, Anglicized form of Greek *poiema*, "the result of making." With most words, we just say things, but when we arrange them as art, we have *made* something: a poem.

Studying poetry means learning to see each feature of artistry and know its special term. Additionally, it means understanding how the artistic features of sound and image work together. In every art, its separate features and techniques don't mean much on their own, but rather the artist uses these tools to craft something out of the whole. When you can understand how the whole piece of art is made (even if you aren't able to make it yourself), you understand the art.

There are people whose emotion about art makes them reluctant to study it, since analysis may destroy naive but precious first impressions. But most of the time, we like art better after studying it. The art form for which I have the least natural feeling is dance, especially classical ballet. However, I watched a YouTube tutorial on how some dance motions are pantomime for words. These motions aren't as clear and grammatical as Sign Language, but they're similar. In the tutorial, two dancers explained the signs as they are traditionally used in the ballet "Swan Lake." Once I saw that apparently random arm movements were actually a sign language conversation, I could watch a short performance with a lot more interest and appreciation. I think every art has features like this, hidden until we're trained to see or hear them.

This book starts with the sound features of word art, then talks about images. In some of the lessons, I use my poems as illustrations (and in a few special cases, poems by other contemporary poets). Sometimes students feel concerned that literature textbooks are putting thoughts into the writers' heads that may not have been there, but with a living writer, this isn't a problem. I always find it very interesting to know what was in an artist's mind, and why he chose this technique instead of another one, and how he thinks it works to commemorate and illustrate his original idea. This is not to say that the meaning of art is restricted to what the maker had in mind, but it's a place to start.

SUMMARY AND DEFINITIONS

Poetry is art made only with words.

To create art, poetry uses sound effects, like rhyme and rhythm, and images.

We understand and even like a form of art more when we understand its techniques and terms. This is why we study poetry.

EXERCISES 1

1. Have you had some experience that made you wish you could commemorate it in a picture, song, or piece of writing?
2. For each poem, note four things:
 - a) What is your impression of the insight that prompted someone to create this piece of word art? Even if you don't feel you fully understand the poem, say what you can, not overlooking the obvious. ("La Figlia Chè Piange" means "The Girl Who Weeps.")
 - b) In what ways are the words used as art? Look for *sound* effects: words beginning with the same sound; rhymes; rhythm patterns. Also consider any other ways the words call attention to themselves: repetition, unusual word choice, odd spelling, and arrangement in lines. Try circling or underlining the sound elements so you can see them at a glance.
 - c) What visual *images* does each poem portray?
 - d) When you read the poem again, after noticing the sounds and images, does it change your impression of the poem as art?

A POISON TREE

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright;
And my foe beheld it shine,
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole
When the night had veiled the pole:
In the morning glad I see
My foe outstretched beneath the tree.

William Blake, 1757-1827

THE EAGLE

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls:
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Alfred Lord Tennyson, 1809-1892

LA FIGLIA CHE PIANGE

Stand on the highest pavement of the stair—
Lean on a garden urn—
Weave, weave the sunlight in your hair—
Clasp your flowers to you with a pained surprise—
Fling them to the ground and turn
With a fugitive resentment in your eyes:
But weave, weave the sunlight in your hair.

So I would have had him leave,
So I would have had her stand and grieve,
So he would have left
As the soul leaves the body torn and bruised,
As the mind deserts the body it has used.
I should find
Some way incomparably light and deft,
Some way we both should understand,
Simple and faithless as a smile and shake of the hand.

She turned away, but with the autumn weather
Compelled my imagination many days,
Many days and many hours:
Her hair over her arms and her arms full of flowers.
And I wonder how they should have been together!
I should have lost a gesture and a pose.
Sometimes these cogitations still amaze
The troubled midnight and the noon's repose.

T. S. Eliot, 1888-1965

MORNING LYRIC

The soul wakes in a clean white shift
and blinks in generic sunshine.
It could be any of a million days.

At arm's reach, wrinkled, is today:
the recollected schedule, leg by leg,
belted with a string of have-to's—

Attitudes de rigueur slipped
over the head, pulled smooth—
a quick brush through vanity—

Habits laced against sudden
shocks, cushioned in self-pity:
Ready to go out, two inches shorter.

Ruth Johnston

The last poem is from my own collection, so I can explain directly the insight that prompted it. I was thinking about how there are usually a few minutes of waking up when we are still lying in bed and sleepy, while we collect our thoughts for the day. In the state of waking up, we feel like a simple, eternal soul who could be the same being in any place or time. But after we've remembered what today is with its schedule, the worries from yesterday, the anxieties of later today, the jealousies and fears we carry about in the daytime, we seem much less simple and eternal. I chose to make phrases about attitudes with the language of getting dressed, so that both ideas are present in each line. Today = clothing, obligations = belt, vanity = hair, habits = shoes, self-pity = socks. When we are all "dressed," the poem says, ready to compete with other people and protect our egos, we have shrunk to something smaller than the natural, simple heart we had on waking.

Two: WORD STRESS

When we speak English, we shift from louder to softer tones within each sentence and word. For all words with two or more syllables, one of the syllables must be said a little bit louder and more clearly than the others. This feature of English is called word stress; the louder, clearer syllable is *stressed*.

We rarely think about the fact that we're altering our voices to be louder and softer many times within a second. Perhaps it's most obvious if we're angry: "You **AL**ways ex**AG**gerate!" People who never stop to think about syllables still know exactly which one to say louder when they're angry. If someone says the wrong part louder, the word doesn't sound right: "You **alWAYS** exagger**ATE**!" Nobody would say that. So while we rarely think about it while speaking, we actually know these patterns very well. The only hard part is learning to think about how we speak.

Making art with words means thinking *very* carefully about how we speak; every sound becomes a tool. Word stress is always, always part of poetry. Other artistic sounds like rhyme may be skipped, but English words can't just "skip" word stress, so it's always there. Most poetry uses the stress to make patterns that please our ears. But even when a poem doesn't use stress in a patterned way, we need to keep listening and hearing it. It's like listening to the bass line of a song; anyone with ears trained for music can't stop hearing it, even when it's very low or quiet.

1. WORD STRESS PATTERNS

In English words, syllables can be spelled in a lot of different ways; it's not easy to see them in writing, and we may handle the syllables differently at times. Dictionary entries always break each word into syllables and provide a guide to word stress. The most common stress pattern is shown first, and if there is an acceptable alternative, it's also given. Dictionary entries and many poetry books show the stressed syllable marked with a little slash mark pointing at it, or just before it (poetry book: blánket; dictionary: 'blaŋ kət). However, in this text, it's easier to see stressed syllables if I spell them in all capital letters: BLANKet.

In general, every time your mouth opens, dropping the chin, you're saying a syllable. The word "syllable" itself has three syllables, each one centered around a sound that could be sustained like a musical note, if we had to: y, a, and l. Officially, vowels are the sounds that can be sustained: aaaah, eeee, ooo, and so on. But R, L, M, and N can also be sustained, forming the heft of a syllable (L forms the main sound of the third syllable of "syllable").

In words of two syllables, one of them carries the stress, while the other is de-emphasized. However, sometimes we stress both syllables, usually because it's a compound word and we feel that both parts are important. Here are all three cases (be sure to read these examples out loud):

BLANKet
WONder

withOUT
reSENT

GALL-STONE
SNOW-MAN

In three-syllable words, usually just one syllable is stressed, and it's normally one of the first two. We see stress at the end mostly in words borrowed from French. These three patterns are shown below:

ELephant	apPROAches	personNEL
WONderful	reSENTful	majorETTE

Three-syllable words sometimes have a secondary stress. If I say “restaurant” and I’m careful to say all three syllables, I put some stress on the “rant” part. I could write it as REStauRANT, using boldface letters to show where the main stress goes. Foreign words often go into this pattern: SMORgasBORD, FAHRenHEIT. Words we don’t use very often may also go like this, because it’s important to hear every syllable clearly: PERiGEE, PINaFORE, ANoDYNE. Some final syllables matter because they define a profession or type: AUCTIONEER, REFErEE, MUSketEER, SlameSE, TANGerINE. Some two-stress words are compound, so that the last syllable feels a bit like its own word: APpleSAUCE, WINterGREEN, BUTtonHOLE. And there are just some three-syllable words that need a second stress: ATtiTUDE, ENveLOPE, TELePORT.

If we had to simplify these words to show just one stressed syllable, we’d choose the heavier stress, on the first syllable. Some dictionaries will show you both stresses, some just one. When you see words like this used in poetry, in the following chapters, sometimes the second word stress will matter, while other times it won’t. (Choosing when to make something matter is part of making art.)

Four-syllable words usually break into two’s, following the pattern of two shorter words like “HURry FASter,” *DUM da DUM da*.

DICTIONARy
SUPERVISor

They can also follow a pattern like the phrase “an ELEphant,” *da DUM da da*.

spectACular
inSENSitive

Sometimes, four syllables are handled differently in American and British dialects. Americans are comfortable with one word having two stresses, but British speech tends to avoid this. Four-syllable words may be pressed into three-syllable patterns. Here is how Americans and British would stress a word like “dormitory.”

DORmiTORy (American)
DORmit’ry (British)

“Laboratory” has five syllables, but it gets reduced to four by both Americans and British. They don’t do it the same, though:

LAB’raTORy (American)
laBORat’ry (British)

Longer words usually fall into patterns of alternating stress and non-stress, breaking the word into smaller sets of two and three syllables:

UniVERsity
 inCENdiARy
 susCEPTiBLity
 DIFFerENTIAtion

What about words with just one syllable? On their own, they have no pattern; when we read them in a list, we usually give each one a strong stress: RED, BLACK, LOSS, GAIN, ME, YOU, NOW, THEN, A, THE, AND. But when these short words occur in clusters, only some of them are stressed. The nouns, verbs and adjectives are usually stressed (loss, gain, red, black). However, it's normal not to put any emphasis on an article unless we really want to single out its meaning. Normally, we stress the noun:

the END
 a TREE
 the CAR

We also don't usually stress conjunctions or prepositions:

CARS and TRUCKS
 but NOW
 for ONCE
 by ME

Most prepositional phrases turn into clusters of three or four syllables:

in the END
 up on TOP
 by the SEA
 aROUND the BEND
 inSIDE my HEAD

However, there's a lot of interpretive leeway in these matters. We could say "in the end" with a second stress on the preposition: "IN the END." And in many of these phrases, we could use unusual word stress if we really wanted a meaning to stand out. "I said to come stand BY me, not beHIND me." The variations that we use for shades of meaning play into the language's musicality, so they are part of the artist's tool kit, like shades of color.

2. SCANNING LINES FOR WORD STRESS PATTERNS

Here are three sentences with very similar meaning, but noticeably different word stress patterns:

The CAR is in the STREET.
 The RED CAR is at the END of the STREET.
 My NEW red CAR is PARKED outSIDE your HOUSE.

The first two are ordinary things anyone might say. So is the third sentence, but it falls into a pattern: *da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM*. I could push the first sentence into this kind of one two, one two

pattern, but it would sound a little strained, “the CAR is IN the STREET.” It would sound like either I wanted to say it wasn’t *next to* the street, or else like I was pushing the words into a regular pattern, like poetry.

When we notice and mark a regular pattern in a line, it is called *scanning* the line. The study of stress patterns in speech is called *scansion* or *prosody*, but I will not be emphasizing these terms.

When we scan a line of words by hand, we mark the stressed words and syllables with a little slash or accent: The *cár* is in the *stréet*. Written by hand, the accent marks are usually bigger and easier to see. Additionally, there’s a symbol for unstressed syllables and words, a little *˘* like the marking for a short vowel. *da DUM* would be marked: *˘ ˘* In the text, I will continue to use ALL CAPS to show stressed syllables, but working with a pencil, you should expect to show stresses with the accent mark.

Going back to the lines about the new red car parked in the street, I can change the words a little and form a new pattern. Now I want the pattern to run *DUM da DUM da* (not *da DUM da DUM*). By taking out the color word “red,” I remove one syllable and shift stress to “my.” The whole pattern changes:

MY new CAR is PARKED outSIDE your HOUSE.

I can change one more word and get a perfect pattern of five “*DUM da*” pairs:

MY new CAR is PARKED outSIDE your CABin.

If you compare the two lines, you’ll see that their word stress patterns are exactly reversed:

My NEW red CAR is PARKED outSIDE your HOUSE.

MY new CAR is PARKED outSIDE your CABin.

Those are the two patterns that English falls into naturally; both are made of pairs. Sometimes, words fall into patterns of threes. They’re either *da da DUM*, or *DUM da da*. Here is one of each, and both still sound like natural sentences from daily life.

In the END, what you BOUGHT is a CAR.

CARS like this GO just too FAST for me.

I’ve been forming these patterned sentences with very short words, to keep them very clear. But of course, longer words fall into the same patterns: The LAB’raTORY’s DOOR was LOCKED.

(I can use the British way of pronouncing “laboratory,” but I must organize words around it in a very different way: then i SAW my laBORat’ry’s DOOR was unHINGED.)

There’s one more twist on word stress. A small set of words can have the stress on the first or the second syllable, but the meaning changes in each case. There are about 25 variable words; most form a noun/verb pair. They include address, combine, construct, contrast, increase, decrease, import, export, insult, object, perfect, project, and record. One variable-stress word that does not form a noun-verb pair is “content.” When its stress is on CON, it is a noun, but when the stress falls on TENT, it’s an adjective.

Variable words can be fitted into patterns, but we have to be sure we’re using the form we want. If the line’s stress pattern forces the reader toward reading “conTENT” when you intended the meaning of “CONtent,” you may have a problem. Either that, or you’re playing a trick on your reader by importing both meanings, one through stress pattern and the other through context.

In the next lessons, we'll look at the ways word stress patterns create art in poetry. For this lesson, we focus only on being able to hear and mark word stress patterns. Early childhood knowledge of nursery rhymes and songs usually helps, but lots of exposure to hiphop music may make it harder for a student to hear normal word stress. Hiphop uses word stress, but often it deliberately *changes* normal stress, distorting the words. Whether or not this is the cause, it seems that students who grew up during the hiphop era have a lot of trouble marking word stress.

If you find scanning lines difficult, know at least that you're not alone. With practice, you'll get it. Everyone who speaks English actually does know, and therefore at some level can *hear*, word stress. The only challenge is making it into conscious knowledge.

SUMMARY AND DEFINITIONS

Every English word has one syllable that receives a strong stress, pronounced a little bit louder and more distinctly. One-syllable words can be stressed or unstressed, depending on the phrase they appear in. In words of two or more syllables, native English speakers know the correct stress pattern; the dictionary also provides it. American and British habits may be different.

Word stress is one of the main artistic tools used to create poetry, because it forms patterns. When we mark these patterns, we scan the line.

EXERCISES 2

Review:

- a) What is poetry?
 - b) Why do we study arts like dance and music, if we can't do them?
1. Match the words in each group that have the same word-stress patterns. (Words with variable stress are matched only to other variable-stress words.)

tiger	believe	fortunate	Italian
giraffe	impressive	oppose	balcony
banana	hurry	cathedral	garage
record	project	majorette	address
license	balloon	object	personnel
approach	football	thankless	saddle
fantastic	elephant	simplify	exercise
simple	menu	approval	lingerie
triangle	appalling	musketeer	ballistic

2. Using a pencil or pen, scan these words and phrases (that is, mark ' for stressed syllables).

Fortunate	garbanzo	referee	somber	delighted	refer
Delight	appreciate	in the dark	theater	balloon	September
A bird	the house	this and that	this one	you see?	who's there?

3. Choose the word or phrase that will continue the same word-stress pattern begun by the first words. The phrases won't make sense or rhyme. Just listen to the sounds of the word stress.

Fortunate, exercise,	a. triangle	giraffe, my car	a. the tree
	b. muffler		b. balcony
	c. in the house		c. dump truck

Somber, this one,	a. degree	Who's there? It's me	a. Italian
	b. lion		b. tiger
	c. multiply		c. a dog

garbanzo, approval,	a. graduate	referee, in the rain,	a. around the bend
	b. window		b. daredevil
	c. Norwegian		c. balconette

4. In these sentences, words and phrases have been arranged to form a consistent pattern. Scan the patterns, using 'marks. There may be some words, like "is" or "in," that would not be stressed if they were in isolation, but they do get stress to make the pattern right. Underline these words, for example:

I took my question to the seer: i TOOK my QUEStion TO the SEER (in isolation: to the SEER)

- a) But soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
- b) A little learning is a dangerous thing.
- c) The sea is calm tonight. The moon shines full.
- d) Can you come over here to eat tonight?
- e) Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

6. Scan these sets of words and mark the one whose stress pattern doesn't match the other two. (Remember that words over three syllables have a secondary stress.) If English isn't your native language, or if you're struggling, try checking what a dictionary can tell you about each word's stress.

Teleport	alphabetize	electricity	absolutely	incarcerate	determination
Appreciate	incinerate	arbitrary	community	collaborate	counterfactual
Bombardier	meridian	university	alligator	sentimental	impermissible

7. Challenge Question. Some phrases can be used to answer different questions, but we vary the word stress in each case. Mark the word that gets the stress for each answer, and think of a word with the same pattern.

Ex. What should I do? GIVE me one. (like STRAWberry)

How many do you want? Give me one. like _____

Okay, I gave one to him, now what? Give me one. like _____

Where are you? I'm right here. like _____

Is my sister right here? I'm right here. like _____

Do you agree? I do. like _____

Who says it's so? I do. like _____

Is this your cat? This is my dog. like _____ (finding a word may be tough)

Is he the policeman's dog? This is my dog. like _____

Which one is your dog? This is my dog. like _____

8. For further reading: T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) wrote a short book of poems about cats, called *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. It became the basis for the lyrics of the Broadway musical CATS. Whether or not you like the musical, find the *Book of Practical Cats* online or in the library, and read three of the poems out loud. While Eliot is best known for writing very formal, modern free verse, his cat poems use word stress patterns that are informal, strong, and easy to hear. "Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat" has a special pattern that imitates the sound of the train for some of the stanzas. (A stanza is the visual and metrical grouping of some lines, usually with blank lines to separate them from other stanzas.) Several of the poems allow the stress patterns to shift (in an effect that's similar to how some songs change key), including "The Old Gumbie Cat," "The Rum Tum Tugger," and "Skimbleshanks." Be sure to include at least one of these poems with shifting meter. Also, notice that the last poem, "The Ad-dressing of Cats," makes a point of using a variable-stress word, "address;" the pattern tells you clearly which variation to use.