

## Dr. Wheeler's Super-Secret System for Superior Scansion of Sonnets.

**STEP ONE:** Count how many syllables you think are in the line. If the line has ten syllables (the standard for a sonnet), breathe a sigh of relief and skip to step two.

- A. If the line seems to have only nine syllables at first glance, you will probably have (1) a renegade **ictus** or (2) an **acephalous** line. See if the poet has put any funny accent marks over normally silent letters (such as the *e* in “*banishéd*”). If not, see if the first syllable is stressed and thus can “count” as a foot by itself.
- B. If the line seems to be more than ten syllables, it’s going to get complicated. You will possibly have (1) elision (2), synaeresis, (3) syncope, or (4) hypercatalectic lines. Make a note to yourself that you will have to experiment with each possibility later.

**STEP TWO:** Scan the multisyllabic words and mark their stress. Usually, these words can only be pronounced and scanned a single way, and you’ll have to fill in the rest of the pattern around these words. If at a loss, check the stress in a dictionary’s pronunciation guide.

**STEP THREE:** For monosyllabic words, *tentatively* put strong stress marks on single-syllable nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns. *Tentatively* put weak stress on articles (*the/a/an*) and monosyllabic prepositions like *at, by, from, of*, etc. You may have to adjust this later in step five, but that’s the default tendency. Monosyllabic conjunctions might be stressed or unstressed.

**STEP FOUR:** Sonnet lines normally have five “feet,” each with two syllables. Faintly draw a line with pencil between where you think each foot starts and ends. Remember, if the line is acephalous, it will have a one-syllable foot by itself at the start of the line. **Very Important:** *Each foot by definition must have at least one stressed syllable!*

- A. If in step one, you only found nine syllables, you should be able to count the first stressed syllable by itself as a single foot. Alternatively, check for an **ictus**, an artificial stress mark the poet adds above a normally silent letter. For instance, if the sonnet reads “*Banishéd*,” the ictus indicates the word is actually three syllables with the normal stress moved to add a stress to the *-ed* ending.
- B. If in step one, you found more than ten syllables, the first possibility to check is **elision**. Are there places where one word ends in a vowel sound and the word immediately after it starts with a vowel sound? It’s possible that the two vowels blur together and become one. Try blurring those together and moving your faint pencil marks separating the feet until you can end up with five feet of two syllables each. (**Hint:** the article “*the*” is frequently elided with the next vowel.)
- C. If there is no possible elision, look for **synaeresis** and **syncope**. Could a three-syllable word be pronounced as only two syllables? Would that squeeze the syllable-count down to the normal ten? Synaeresis squeezes two side-by-side vowels in the middle of a word into a single vowel sound. Syncope drops out a vowel in the middle of two consonants, and it usually only happens with three-syllable (or longer) words.
- D. If none of that works, the last possibility is a **hypercatalectic** line. A hypercatalectic line adds one or more unstressed syllables before the first foot. Usually, that means the line begins with some extra articles, prepositions, or an unstressed conjunction before the real pattern starts.

**STEP FIVE:** Test-drive the iambic pentameter by filling in the remaining stress marks, keeping in mind you need *at least one stressed syllable* in each foot. The default position for each foot is a light stress followed by heavy stress. However, Renaissance poetry allows metrical substitution of a **trochée** (heavy stress followed by light) or a **spondee** (two heavy stresses in a row). If any remaining feet seem to have two unstressed syllables, you must artificially stress one of them; look at the surrounding meter and the previous line for contextual clues and follow the prevailing pattern.