

Topic Page: [Versification](#)

Definition: **versification** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n

- 1 the technique or art of versifying
- 2 the form or metrical composition of a poem
- 3 a metrical version of a prose text

Summary Article: **versification**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

principles of metrical practice in poetry. In different literatures poetic form is achieved in various ways; usually, however, a definite and predictable pattern is evident in the language. In ancient Greek poetry, the pattern was in the quantity of the syllables, i.e., the duration of the time required to express a syllable. Intricate metrical patterns were devised by the Greek poets and adapted by the Romans. Greek terminology is still used in the analysis of metrics.

In modern languages, stress has been substituted for quantity. The line or verse of poetry is a fundamental unit of meter and is divided somewhat arbitrarily into feet according to the major and minor stresses. In the stanza beginning, "Thirty days hath September," there are four stresses in the first line; there is no unstressed syllable between the second and third stressed ones. The types of feet retain the ancient Greek names: iambus $\sim \bar{\sim}$; trochee $\bar{\sim}$; spondee $\bar{\bar{\sim}}$; pyrrhic $\sim\sim$; anapest $\sim\sim\bar{\sim}$; and dactyl $\bar{\sim}\sim$ (each " $\bar{\sim}$ " representing a long syllable; each " \sim " representing a short syllable). Accordingly the number and type of feet determine the name of the meter, e.g., iambic pentameter, five iambic feet; iambic hexameter (see alexandrine), six iambic feet; and dactylic hexameter, six dactylic feet.

A patterned arrangement of lines into a group is called a stanza. Rhyme, which developed after the classical period, perhaps to reinforce rhythm when the old quantitative verse was no longer used, is an important element in stanzaic structure. Rhyme was developed to a high degree in Romance languages, especially in Provençal and French.

Germanic poetry, entirely unrelated to Greek origins, developed characteristics of its own, many of which are reflected in modern poetry. Anglo-Saxon and Icelandic poetry have strong accents or stresses, usually four to a line; a caesura or definite break in the middle of the line; and a pattern of alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds), usually of three of the stressed syllables of the line, or sometimes of only two. Much of Middle English poetry is alliterative verse, while the rest follows the French forms of rhyme and rhythm.

Chaucer is credited with inventing the first characteristically English stanza form, the rhyme royal. Later popular English forms were the ballad, the sonnet, and the stanza developed by Edmund Spenser, called Spenserian. Blank verse became the great dramatic line in the 16th cent., while the heroic couplet was the dominant form in 18th-century English verse. Modern poets, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, have recognized both the time and stress measures of verse and have experimented with assonance, alliteration, sprung rhythm, and free verse.

See Saintsbury, G. , *A History of English Prosody* (3 vol., 1906-10);
Mayor, J. B. , *Chapters on English Metre* (2d ed. 1968);
Wimsatt, W. K. , *Versification* (1972);
McAuley, J. , *Versification: A Short Introduction* (1983);
P. Kiparsky; G. Youmans, ed., *Rhythm and Meter* (1989).

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

versification. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/versification>



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018



The Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018

APA

versification. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/versification>

Chicago

"versification." In *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, by Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University. 8th ed. Columbia University Press, 2018. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/versification>

Harvard

versification. (2018). In P. Lagasse & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia*. (8th ed.). [Online]. New York: Columbia University Press. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/versification> [Accessed 12 November 2019].

MLA

"versification." *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, Paul Lagasse, and Columbia University, Columbia University Press, 8th edition, 2018. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/versification>. Accessed 12 Nov. 2019.