

Dactyl



DEFINITION

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

A dactyl is a three-syllable metrical pattern in poetry in which a stressed syllable is followed by two unstressed syllables. The word "poetry" itself is a great example of a dactyl, with the stressed syllable falling on the "Po," followed by the unstressed syllables "e" and "try": **Po**-e-try.

Some additional key details about dactyls:

- Metrical patterns in poetry are called feet. A dactyl, then, is a type of foot. The other feet are: [iamb](#)s, [trochee](#)s, [anapest](#)s, and [spondee](#)s.
- Dactyls were used to compose Greek epic poetry such as the [Iliad](#) or [Odyssey](#).
- The Latin word for dactyl is *dactylus*, which itself has the stress pattern of a dactyl: **dac**-tyl-us.
- The opposite of a dactyl is an [anapest](#), a metrical foot consisting of two unstressed syllables followed by a stressed syllable (such as in the word "un-der-**stand**").

Dactyl Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce dactyl: **dak**-til

Dactyls in Depth

In order to understand dactyls in more depth, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of a few other literary terms about poetry. We cover each of these in depth on their own respective pages, but below is a quick overview to help make understanding dactyls 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.
 - **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](#). A dactyl is one type of foot.
- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of lines of poetry. Poetic [meters](#) are named for both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *dactylic pentameter* is a type of meter that contains five dactyls per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

Accentual vs Quantitative Verse and Dactyls

The term dactyl takes on a different meaning depending on the type of verse in which it's used: accentual verse or quantitative verse.

- **Dactyls in accentual verse:** Accentual verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the stress, or emphasis, placed on certain syllables. Metered verse in English is almost *always* accentual verse. Dactyls in accentual verse consist of the stressed-unstressed-unstressed metrical pattern described so far.
- **Dactyls in quantitative verse:** Quantitative verse is poetry in which the meter derives from the *length* of syllables, not from stress. Here "length" refers to the time it takes to pronounce each syllable. Dactyls in quantitative verse consist of three syllables in which the first is pronounced for a longer duration than the latter two. Quantitative verse occurs most often in classical Greek and Latin poetry and is almost impossible to write in English.

A Trick for Remembering What Dactyl Means

A secondary meaning of dactyl is "finger" or "toe," and the word itself derives from the Greek and Latin terms for the three joints that make up the finger. Just as a finger is composed of a long joint that extends from the base of your hand followed by two smaller joints, dactyls in poetic meter consist of a "long" (stressed) syllable followed by two "short" (unstressed) syllables. So if you ever forget what dactyl means, let your fingers point you in the right direction.





EXAMPLES

The clunky rhythm of dactylic meter is sometimes compared to that of a horse galloping. It's not surprising then that perhaps the most famous example of a poem written in dactylic meter is about a battle charge by soldiers on horseback: Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade." Here are examples from that poem and a few others that use dactylic meter. In each example, we've highlighted the stressed syllables in red and the unstressed syllables in green.

Dactyls in Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade"

In this excerpt—the first stanza of Tennyson's famous poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade"—you can clearly see the stressed-unstressed-unstressed metrical pattern throughout.

Half a league, half a league,
 Half a league onward,
 All in the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.
 "Forward, the Light Brigade!
 Charge for the guns!" he said.
 Into the valley of Death
 Rode the six hundred.

Notice, though, that the dactylic pattern is not followed strictly. Lines 3 and 7 consist of two dactyls but end with the "extra" one-syllable word "Death." In addition, lines 4 and 8 end with the two-syllable word "hundred," which lacks a third stressed syllable, making it not a dactyl but rather a [trochee](#) (a foot with two syllables, stressed-unstressed). Many poems written in a specific meter include deviations from the main metrical pattern for stylistic reasons—here Tennyson's lines ending abruptly in "Death" evoke the sudden death that the soldiers faced.

Dactyls in Longfellow's *Evangeline*

The first two lines of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *Evangeline* are among the most famous lines of poetry in dactylic meter.

This is the forest primeval. The murmuring pines and the
 hemlocks,
 Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the
 twilight...

Note that both lines end in [trochees](#), not a dactyls (hem-lock; twilight). This is another example of a poem that deviates from its main meter.

Dactyls in Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd"

Walt Whitman is best known for writing [free verse](#), but he often injected [metered](#) lines into his free verse sporadically. Here he uses a near-perfect line of dactylic hexameter seemingly out of the blue—the lines before and after this example are not dactylic at all.

I fled forth to the hiding receiving night that talks not,
 Down to the shores of the water, the path by the swamp in
 the dimness,
 To the solemn shadowy cedars and ghostly pines so still.

Another classic example, though not as perfectly dactylic as the line above, is the title (and opening line) of Whitman's poem "[Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking](#)."



WHY WRITERS USE IT

You won't find many lighthearted poems written with dactyls, or really any popular lyric poems written with dactyls, and for good reason: the dactyl's stressed-unstressed-unstressed (**dum-da-da dum-da-da**) pattern sounds inherently heavy and grandiose, and lends itself especially well to serious poems about war, conquest, and loss. In two of the most famous poems written in dactylic meter—Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" and Longfellow's "Evangeline"—the poets match the weighty rhythm of the dactyl with their similarly grave subject matter: a fight to the death (Tennyson), and a search for a long-lost love (Longfellow).

Poets of ancient Greece and Rome also found in the dactyl a meter perfectly suited to their intense subject matter. Dactylic hexameter (six dactyls in a row per line) is by far the most common dactyl-based meter and is considered the defining metrical pattern of epic poems. Homer's [Iliad](#) and [Odyssey](#), and Virgil's [Aeneid](#), perhaps the three most famous epic poems ever written, all use dactylic hexameter. Poets like Homer and Virgil chose dactylic meter not just because of its inherent formality and gravity, but also because of how it sounded when recited. Though these days we think of epic poems as book-length written masterpieces, they were typically spoken aloud in group settings, often with some form of musical accompaniment that apparently worked well with dactylic meter. English translations of these epic poems are typically not written in dactylic hexameter, however, simply because it's so difficult to do in English.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Dactyl](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Dactyl](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of dactyl (spoiler: it's derived from the Greek and Latin for finger, specifically the three joints of the finger).

- Dactyls on YouTube
 - This [reading](#) of Tennyson's "The Charge of the Light Brigade" will give you a sense of how dactylic hexameter sounds when read aloud.
 - An original [song written entirely in dactyls](#) by "performance poet" Allan Wolf.

HOW TO CITE

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