

Martha Brockenbrough's Shakespeare or Dishwasher Manual?

Rhythm and Resonance

We sometimes think of meter as something only poets use. But this is not the case! Good writing is inherently rhythmic.

Think about these famous lines. They're memorable as much for how they sound as what they say:

"Call me Ishmael."

—*Moby Dick*

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

—*A Tale of Two Cities*

"We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness."

—*1984*

"She had waited all her life for something, and it had killed her when it found her."

—*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same."

—*Wuthering Heights*

Rhythm gives language a musicality that can enhance the emotional experience of the reader. You can make your writing more lyrical by paying attention to the rhythm of the words you choose and the order you arrange them.

Poets use something called **scansion** to mark the stressed and unstressed syllables in their lines, and to count how many there are in each line to set up whatever sort of rhythm they intend.

There are two kinds of syllables, stressed and unstressed.

They can be arranged into a variety of rhythms:

- Da-DUM (iamb): hello, who's there?
- DUM-da (trochee): sugar, scary, triumph (the Jaws theme song)
DUM-da-da (dactyl): buttonhole, sauerkraut, galloping
- da-da-DUM (anapest): to the left, understand, contradict
- DUM-DUM (trochee): dead end; hey, girl; up yours

If there's a spot in your manuscript you want the reader to feel particular emotional resonance, consider studying the meter and making adjustments. You can also analyze the writing in books you particularly admire and scan the meter. Is there something there you can adapt to serve your work in progress?

Marthabrockenbrough.com