



talk like Shakespeare!

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Chicago Shakespeare Theater

Shakespeare's Beat

Shakespeare often writes in “iambic pentameter”—10 syllables to a line of text, and (like the “de-dum” of our heartbeat) alternating the stress with every other syllable starting with the second and ending on the tenth. And though actors in performance never emphasize the rhythm enough that we hear it (though they may as they learn their lines), iambic pentameter has a different impact, much like a piece of music does, because it is so like the rhythm of our heart and breath.

Reading Shakespeare can be easier (and a lot more fun) if you get into the rhythm! As an example, read the Prologue at the opening of *Romeo and Juliet* silently to yourself. Count the number of syllables in each line—there may be one that isn't “a perfect 10.” Now, as a class, get up and form a circle, walk as you read the lines out loud. Let the rhythm of the writing set the pace. You shouldn't think too hard about this; just read the passage and walk in the circle. Allow the rhythm of the writing to affect the pace of your steps. You're walking in iambic pentameter! When you get to the end, just pick right up at the beginning again. (To the teacher: this is an excellent activity to build fluency.)

(Illinois English Language Arts Goals 3c, 4ab)

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffick of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.