**Blank verse** is a type of [poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poetry), distinguished by having a regular [meter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meter_(poetry)), but no [rhyme](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhyme). In English, the meter most commonly used with blank verse has been [iambic pentameter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iambic_pentameter) (as used in [Shakespearean](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shakespeare) plays).

Shakespeare developed this feature, and also the potential of blank verse for abrupt and irregular speech. For example, in this exchange from [King John](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Life_and_Death_of_King_John), one blank verse line is broken between two characters:

My lord?

A grave.

He shall not live.

Enough.

**Find an example of this from Measure for Measure and explain its intended effect**

During the sixteenth century, the form known as [blank verse](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/blank-verse) (described below) was introduced into English drama. This enabled playwrights to vary the kind of language spoken by their characters, and hence to allow the audience to hear different patterns of language for different purposes.

In addition, Shakespeare as a playwright did not simply use [prose](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/prose) – the usual style of writing and speech, in which, for example, this information (apart from quotations) is written – but also [rhyme](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhyme).

## Blank verse

This is usually defined as ‘unrhymed [iambic pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic-pentameter)’.

To understand this, it is necessary to realise that most English words of more than one [syllable](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/syllable) have a stressed syllable:

* When we say the word ‘messenger’ we slightly stress the first syllable
* In ‘occasion’ and ‘invisible’ we stress the second
* In ‘satisfaction’ the third.

If we choose words which have the same stressed syllable, a pattern emerges – for example the well-known chant from Macbeth:

‘Double, double, toil and trouble,

Fire burn and cauldron bubble’.

(Small words such as ‘and’ and ‘the’ are usually unstressed. ‘Fire’ was pronounced as two syllables in Shakespeare’s time.)

## Iambic rhythm

The commonest stress pattern in spoken English is where one unstressed, or weak, syllable is followed by a stressed, or strong, one – for example: ‘He knew he had to go to school today’ This is called [iambic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/iambic) [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm).

Playwrights realised that, by using this natural inclination in a more organised way, they could simultaneously suggest real speech and yet introduce a more formal, organised pattern to their language.

Of course, if the pattern was never varied from this weak/strong one it would sound dreadful – the sort of sing-song that Shakespeare parodies in A Midsummer Night’s Dream when Bottom thinks he is proclaiming great verse:

‘The raging rocks  
And shivering shocks  
Shall break the locks  
Of prison gates …’

However, an underlying iambic rhythm forms the basis of much Shakespearean speech:

‘I have a brother is condemn’d to die,  
I do beseech you let it be his fault  
And not my brother.’

## Trochaic rhythm

The opposite pattern (strong/weak rather than weak/strong) is known as a [trochaic](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/trochaic) [rhythm](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/rhythm) or [metre](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/metre).

More on trochaic rhythm: In the chant of the Weird Sisters from Macbeth, we can hear that Shakespeare uses a trochaic metre to distinguish these creatures from ordinary humans – just as he does with Puck in A Midsummer Night’s Dream when Puck chants:

‘If we shadows have offended,  
Think but this and all is mended …’

These chants also differ from most Shakespearean speeches in that:

* they have only eight syllables to the line, as opposed to ten
* they are in rhyme.

## Pentameter

Lines with ten syllables, in five groups of weak/strong beats, are known as [pentameter](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pentameter), from the Greek word for five.

So, lines written in iambic rhythm, with five groups of weak/strong beats - pentameter - but unrhymed, are called [blank verse](http://www.crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/blank-verse).