

A beginner's guide (hopefully) to Old English metre (version 1.5, September 26th 2016)

Alaric Hall and Sheryl McDonald¹

1. Introduction

When referring to *poetic metre*, we are referring to the structure of a poem's rhythm. Metre has to do with things like the different degrees of emphasis (or stress) placed on the different words in a line of poetry, as well as the number of syllables that make up each poetic line. When we analyse the rhythm of poems in relation to their metre, we *scan* them: an analysis of poetic metre can also be referred to as *scansion*. You may already be familiar with the idea that much of Shakespeare's poetry is in a type of metre called *iambic pentameter*; Old English poetry is just in a different type of metre with different rules, all of which will be explained in more detail in the sections that follow.

Old English poetic metre is very different from most recent European traditions, and the details of how it works are still debated. The seminal research on Old English metre was undertaken by Eduard Sievers in the nineteenth century. Sievers made some great leaps and his ideas are still often repeated, but unfortunately they do not really explain how Old English poetry works. The present account is based on Thomas Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). More recently, Thomas A. Bredehoft, *Early English Metre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) has argued for a different way of viewing things which does not contradict Cable's system given here, but, he argues, does identify more fundamental rules for Old English metre. But Bredehoft's approach goes into more detail than is necessary for our purposes. Both books are accessibly written, so if you are interested, do go and read them for yourself.

In general, it is important to understand that Old English metre arises from the language and its grammar, rather than being an abstract system that was imposed on the language. This means that, like grammar, the principles of Old English metre have some loose ends. Grammar varies across time and space and even from one speaker to another, and the details of poetic metre vary in the same way, so that no rules are completely watertight: there are some exceptions from time to time to the rules set out below. Despite this, however, the following discussion should help you to identify some of the key principles that make Old English poetry what it is (and to understand scholarly debate about them).

This guide draws examples from a range of Old English poems, but makes particular reference to lines 210–28 of *Beowulf*, a celebrated passage describing the Geats' voyage to Denmark. Most of the examples come from these lines. You can read the whole passage, with a detailed beginners' glossary, [here](#), and listen to Alaric reading it out [here](#). The other Old English poems used as examples can be found in *The Cambridge Old English Reader* (see Bibliography).

To help people who are not familiar with Old English itself, the guide also draws examples from the poem 'King Sheave' by J. R. R. Tolkien. While not the most sophisticated of twentieth-century alliterative poems, it is eminently faithful to Old English poetic form, and conveniently similar to Old English poetry in content and style.² The examples below make particular reference to lines 122–34:

Halls and houses hewn of timber,
strong towers of stone steep and lofty,
golden-gabled, in his guarded city
they raised and roofed. In his royal dwelling
of wood well-carven the walls were wrought;
fair-hued figures filled with silver,
gold and scarlet, gleaming hung there,
stories boding of strange countries,
were one wise in wit the woven legends
to thread with thought. At his throne men found
counsel and comfort and care's healing,
justice in judgement. Generous-handed

¹ Sheryl's participation in this ongoing project was paid for by a Leeds University Teaching Fellowship awarded to Alaric in 2008–9.

² *The Lost Road and Other Writings: Language and Legend before 'The Lord of the Rings'*, ed. by Christopher Tolkien, *The History of Middle Earth*, V (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), pp. 87–98 (p. 90).

his gifts he gave. Glory was uplifted.

2. Stress

Stress, or the emphasis placed on a syllable, is fundamental to understanding how Old English poetry works, and its operation is quite subtle (and somewhat debated). Fortunately, the stress rules of Old English are more or less the same as those of normal modern English speech—you just have to learn to hear the patterns in your own language.

The root syllables of Old English words carry varying amounts of stress, and the amount of stress is usually defined by a word's grammatical category. Listing the most stressed first, we have four groups:

- 1. MOST STRESSED: Nouns, adjectives, participles, infinitives
- 2. LESS STRESSED: Finite verbs (i.e. verbs which are not infinitives), most adverbs
- 3. EVEN LESS STRESSED: Pronouns, some adverbs (those that are weakly stressed)
- 4. LEAST STRESSED: Prepositions, conjunctions, parts of the verb *to be*, weakly stressed pronouns, etc.

If you say 'I went to the shops', the noun *shops* will be more heavily stressed than the finite verb *went*, *went* will be more heavily stressed than the pronoun *I*, and *I* may be more heavily stressed than the preposition *to* or the demonstrative *the*. (Of course, you could emphasise *I* by putting extra stress on it: '*I* went to the shops (but *you* didn't you lazy git)'. In this case *I* would be at least as heavily stressed as *shops*.)

Exercises

Which syllables are the most heavily stressed in these sentences? Answers to these and the other exercises will be found at the end. You may be able to work this out from hearing it in your head, or saying it out loud, or you may want to look at the grammatical categories of the words:

1. He went for a run
2. They're reading in the library

Old English sentences work the same. In the half-line *weorðmyndum þāh* 'prospered with honours', *weorðmyndum* is a noun and *þāh* is a finite verb, so the *weorð-* of *weorðmyndum* is more stressed. In the half-line *syððan ærest wearð* 'after first became' there are no nouns; *syððan* is a preposition; *ærest* is an adverb; and *wearð* is a verb. So the most stressed syllables are the *æ-* of the adverb *ærest*, and the verb *wearð*.

For each half-line, try to identify the most heavily stressed syllables. You may be able to do this by the sound, or by considering the grammatical function of the words

3. his limbs were white
4. the boy slumbered
5. doors were opened
6. dry and empty
7. since the earth was young
8. wlonc ond wīngāl 'proud and wine-flushed' (*The Ruin*, 34a)
9. drēames brūcan 'of joy to partake' (*The Dream of the Rood*, 144a)
10. under āctrēo 'under oak-tree' (*The Wife's Lament*, 28a)
11. under sceadu bregdan 'under shadow to move' (*Beowulf*, 707b)
12. þā wæs frōd cyning 'then was wise king' (*Beowulf*, 1306b)

3. Metre: Four Basic Rules

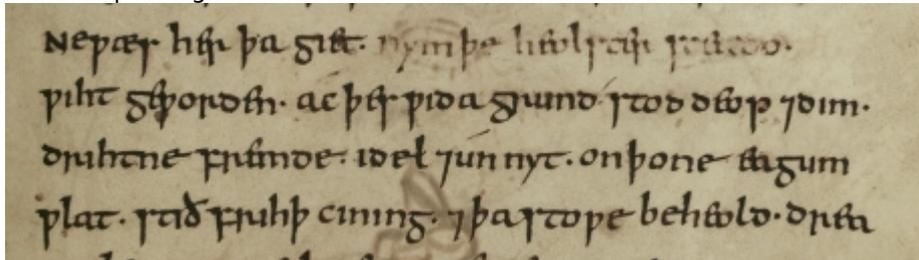
The metre of Old English poetry is defined by the following four rules: 1) two halves to a line; 2) four syllables to a half-line; 3) resolution; 4) expansion.

Rule 1. Each line falls into two halves, known as *half-lines* or *verses*

Fortunately for you, modern editors of Old English poetry divide poems up into lines. Anglo-Saxon scribes didn't: they just wrote poems out in the same way as prose. Modern editors also divide each line into two halves; the first half-line is known as the *a-verse* and the second half-line is known as the *b-verse*. In some Old English poetic manuscripts (like the manuscript of *Beowulf*)

there is no indication of half-line divisions either, but in two Old English poetic manuscripts (the Junius Manuscript and the Vercelli Book), the scribes marked half-lines with punctuation. Here is an example from part of the poem *Genesis A*, which comes from Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 11, p. 5:

Manuscript image:



Manuscript transcription:

Ne wæs her þa giet . nympe heolstersceado .
 wiht geworden . ac þer wida grund . stod deop & dim .
 drihtne fremde . idel & unnyt . on þone eāgum
 wlat . stiðfrihþ cining . & þa stowe beheold . [...]

Edited version of manuscript text:

Ne wæs hēr þā gīet nympe heolstersceado
 wiht geworden, ac þer wīda grund
 stōd dēop and dim, drihtne fremde,
 īdel and unnyt. On þone ēagum wlat
 stiðfrihþ cining and þā stōwe behēold,
 [...]

Modern English Translation:

Not a thing had come to be here yet except darkness-shadow, and a wide
 expanse stood there, deep and dark, estranged from the Lord.

Note that the b-verse is usually more regular than the a-verse, in order to ensure that the listener doesn't get confused about where the lines end.

Exercises

Try to divide each line of poetry into its two half-lines. Where does it seem like the a-verse ends and the b-verse begins? Why do you think there should be a break here? This may be difficult now, but try to think about line breaks before proceeding to Rule 2, which will help you to identify more easily the two half-lines.

13. words he taught them wise and lovely
 14. in days of yore out of deep Ocean

15. on flōdwegas feor gewītan 'on ocean-paths far sets out' (*The Seafarer*, 52)

16. lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost 'to men kindest and fame-eagerest' (*Beowulf*, 3182)

Rule 2: Each Half-Line Contains Four Syllables

A syllable is basically a vowel and any consonants attached to that vowel. Normally, syllables contain one and only one vowel-sound: so *gewāt* has two vowels and so must have two syllables. However, diphthongs, like the *-eo-* in *beornas*, are counted as a single vowel sound (so *beornas* has two syllables, not three).

Here are some of the many straightforward examples from the passage of 'King Sheave' quoted above, each syllable separated by |:

- halls | and | hou|ses (122a)
- hewn | of | tim|ber (122b)

- steep | and | lof|ty (123b)
- gol|den-|gab|led (124a)
- they | raised | and | roofed (125a)
- the | walls | were | wrought (126b)
- of | strange | coun|tries (129a)
- and | care's | hea|ling (132b)

And here are the straightforward examples from the *fyrst forþ gewāt* passage from *Beowulf*:

- Fyrst | forð | ge|wāt 'Time forth proceeded' (210a)
- Beor|nas | gear|we 'Men kitted out' (211b)
- on | stefn | sti|gon 'onto prow stepped' (212a)
- strēa|mas | wun|don 'streams wound' (212b)
- sund | wið | san|de 'sea against sand' (213a)
- sec|gas | bæ|ron 'men bore' (213b)
- on | bearm | na|can 'onto bosom of the ship' (214a)
- beorh|te | fræt|we 'bright treasures' (214b)
- wun|den|stef|na 'curved-prow' (220a)
- land | ge|sā|won 'land saw' (221b)
- beor|gas | stēa|pe 'cliffs high' (222b)
- on | wang | sti|gon 'onto ground stepped' (225b)
- gūð|ge|wæ|do 'battle-gear' (227a)
- ēa|ðe | wur|don 'easy became' (228b)

Exercises

Now that you know that the a-verse and b-verse of a line of poetry each contain four syllables, identify the syllables and divide these lines into their half-lines.

- sadhearted men swiftly hastened (24)
- his limbs were white, his locks raven (30)
- his sleeping head was soft pillowed (36)
- fear and wonder filled the watchmen (56)
- a song began, sweet, unearthly (70)
- on flōdwegas feor gewītan 'on ocean-paths far sets out' (*The Seafarer*, 52)
- lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost 'to men kindest and fame-eagerest' (*Beowulf*, 3182)
- wīdan wylme weal eall befēng 'wide water-sprays a wall all enclosed' (*The Ruin*, 39)
- on dōmdæge dryhten sylfa 'on judgement-day the lord himself' (*The Dream of the Rood*, 105)
- æfenspræce uplang āstōd 'evening-speech upright stood' (*Beowulf*, 759)

So far these examples have been relatively straightforward. But there are also another 26 half-lines in the *fyrst forþ gewāt* passage that do not really contain four syllables—they contain more. But there are a couple of metrical rules which means that for poetic purposes, they still count as having only four syllables. In order to be able to properly count the syllables in these less straightforward lines, you must understand that syllable-counting in Old English poetry is also affected by *resolution*, and *expansion*.

Rule 3: Resolution

This is when the stressed syllable and the following unstressed syllable of a word are counted as only one syllable. This only happens with certain kinds of words under certain conditions. For two syllables to be resolved and so counted as a single stressed syllable:

rule	example of words affected	example of words not affected
the stressed syllable must have a short vowel or diphthong (i.e. no length-mark)	flota, geatolic, guman, weras, wudu	stréamas, bæron, gesáwon, stéape
the stressed syllable must be followed by only one consonant	flota, geatolic, guman, weras, wudu	beornas, gearwe, wundon, sande, secgas, beorhte
and then by an unstressed vowel that's part	flota, geatolic, guman,	panon up hraðe

of the same word	weras, wudu	
if the syllable before the word was heavily stressed, resolution does not take place		on stefn stigon on bearm nacan gúð searo geatolic guman út scufon brim clifu blícan Panon up hraðe

Check out these examples from the *fyrst forþ gewāt* passage, and check that the resolution allows you to count only four syllables:

- **guman** ūt scufon ‘men out pushed’ (215b)
- **weras** on wilsīð ‘men on desired-journey’ (216a)
- **wudu** bundenne ‘wood bound’ (216b)
- **flota** fāmīheals ‘boat foamy-necked’ (218a)
- **gewaden** hæfde ‘gone had’ (220b)
- **Wedera** lēode ‘people of the Geats’ (225a)
- syrcan **hrysedon** ‘mail-coats shook’ (226b)
- **Gode** þancedon ‘to God gave thanks’ (227b)

As Modern English speakers, we have to learn resolution as a set of abstract rules, because the structure of sounds in Modern English is very different from Old English. But it probably seemed completely natural to speakers of early Old English. With a bit of practice, you’ll get used to spotting resolution pretty quickly: it’s extremely common. Accordingly, the exercises here only use Old English.

However, Tolkien arguably did apply the concept of resolution when composing modern English alliterative verse, as in the following examples:

- as **ever** on earth (53)
- the woven **legends** (130)
- in golden **vessel** (33; although there are two ss in the spelling of this word, we don’t actually say ‘ves-sel’, just ‘ve-sel’)
 - over the hills of **heaven** (63a, also using metre rule 4, below)
 - in his guarded **city** (124b, also using metre rule 4, below)

Exercises

Spot the words with resolution in the following lines:

27. guman tō gūðe; god āna wāt ‘men to war; God alone knew’ (*The Battle of Maldon*, 94)
28. ides ellenrōf oðre sīðe ‘lady daring second time’ (*Judith*, 109)
29. dryncfæt dēore; duguð ellor scōc ‘drinking-vessel dear; nobles elsewhere shook’ (*Beowulf*, 2254)
30. nearo nihtwaco æt nacan stefnan ‘oppressive nightwatch at ship’s prow’ (*The Seafarer*, 7)

Some lines of Old English poetry, however, still seem to have too many syllables even when resolution has been taken into account. The final rule about metre (expansion) will help you to understand what to do with the extra syllables in such lines.

Rule 4: Expansion of the First Unstressed Syllable

When the poet gets to the first unstressed syllable in a half-line, he can add in up to four extra unstressed syllables without them counting towards the total of four syllables per half line. Again, we have examples of this both from ‘King Sheave’ and the *fyrst forþ gewāt* passage. Expanded unstressed syllables are in **bold**; syllables showing resolution are underlined incase they confuse you:

- generous-handed (133b)
- **were one** wise in wit (130a)
- strong **towers of** stone (123a)
- **at his** throne men found (131b)
- glory **was up**lifted (134b)

- **Flota wæs on** yðum 'Boat was on waves' (210b)
- **bāt under** beorge 'boat under cliff' (211a)
- **gūðsearo** geatolic 'war-gear splendid' (215a)
- **Gewāt pā ofer** wægholm 'Proceeded then over sea-wave' (217a)
- **winde gefýsed** 'by wind driven' (217b)
- **fugle gelīcost** 'to a bird most alike' (218b)
- **oðpæt ymb** āntīd 'until around due time' (219a)
- **pæt ðā** līðende 'so that those voyagers' (221a)
- **brimclifu** blīcan 'sea-cliffs to gleam' (222a)
- **pā wæs** sund liden 'then was sea crossed' (223b)
- **ēolēt æt** ende 'water-stream at end' (224a)
- **Panon** up hraðe 'From there up swiftly' (224b)
- **sæwudu** sældon 'sea-wood tied up' (226a)
- **pæs þe him** yþlāde 'because to them sea-ways' (228a)

Exercises

With the rule of expansion in mind, divide each line of poetry into its half-lines, identifying the extra unstressed syllables that can be accounted for by expansion.

31. the boat they hauled and on the beach moored it (40)
32. high above the houses was a hall standing (46)
33. of the dark islands in the deeps of time (14)
34. high above the breakers; then with hands lifted (41)
35. to the hill they thronged, and their heads lifting (88)

36. Blīþe gebæro, ful oft wit bēotedan 'With happy demeanour, full often we-two vowed' (*The Wife's Lament*, 21)
37. lifdon lāðlicost, ond mec longade 'have lived most wretchedly, and I pined' (*The Wife's Lament*, 14)
38. wēman mid wynnum. Wāt sē þē cunnað 'entice with pleasures. Knows he who tries' (*The Wanderer*, 29)
39. Fæst is þæt ēglond, fenne biworpen 'Secure is that island, by fens surrounded' (*Wulf and Eadwacer*, 5)

Anacrusis: Not Quite a Rule, But Still Worth Mentioning Here

Anacrusis is the process of adding in one or two extra unstressed syllables at the beginning of a line. These extra syllables again do not count towards the total of four per half-line. This process is very rare in Old English poetry, so you should only identify anacrusis if other rules do not explain the line. There are no examples in the *fyrst forþ gewāt* passage, but here some examples from other Old English poems (from Bredehoft, p. 45), with the extra syllables in bold:

- **on** trēowes telgum 'on tree's branch' (*Genesis A*, 892a)
- **Sē** eorl wæs æðele 'the earl was noble' (*Genesis A*, 1182a)
- **Gē** æt hām gē on herge 'Both at home and in harrying' (*Beowulf*, 1248a)
- **Swā** wæter bebūguð 'As water surrounds' (*Beowulf*, 93b)

Anacrusis is more widely used in some other alliterative poetry: it is common in Old Saxon, and is used quite often in 'King Sheave', as in

- **of** wood well-carven (126a)
- **no** king nor counsel (79a)
- **forlorn** and empty (47a)
- **but by** bed forsaken (59a)
- **then** amazed halted (55b)

And an Exception...

As we said at the beginning, Old English poetic metre is like any other aspect of grammar: it has rules, but the rules tend to get messy once you look at them closely. This guide is based on Cable's 'four metrical syllables' view of Old English metre. So we ought to admit that there is one type of

half-line which doesn't fit Cable's model, known in traditional Old English metrics as 'D* type' verses like

- *sīde sǣnæssas* 'broad sea-headlands' (223a)
- *mære mǣðþumsweord* 'splendid treasure-sword' (1023a)

These have five syllables, and neither the resolution, expansion or anacrusis rules will change that. Cable has to get out of this by arguing that resolution also applies to the first two syllables of these verses, even though the first syllable is long.³ Oh well. You can't win them all. If you're intrigued by the debate, see the bibliography!

4. Alliteration

Alliteration is when you repeat the sounds at the beginning of a syllable ('Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers' alliterates on the [p] sound, for example). Alliteration in Old English poetry is ornamental, in the sense that it would be possible to write poetry in Old English without alliteration, and such poetry would still have proper metre, just as Shakespeare's blank verse is still in iambic pentameters even though it has no rhyme. But in practice, all our Old English poetry has alliteration.

Half-lines are joined to one another by the alliteration of heavily stressed syllables. The first heavily stressed syllable in the first half-line alliterates with the first heavily stressed syllable of the second half-line. Thus:

Halls and **h**ouses **h**ewn of timber,
strong towers of **s**tone **s**teep and lofty,
golden-gabled, in his **g**uarded city
they **r**aised and **r**oofed. In his **r**oyal dwelling
of **w**ood well-carven the **w**alls were wrought;
fair-hued **f**igures **f**illed with silver,
gold and **s**carlet, **g**leaming hung there

Fyrst forð gewāt. **F**lota wæs on **ȳ**ðum,
bāt under **b**eorge. **B**eornas gearwe
on **s**tefn **s**tigon; **s**trēamas wundon,
sund wið **s**ande; **s**ecgas **b**æron
on **b**earm nacan **b**eorhte frætwe,
gūðsearo **g**eatolic; **g**uman ūt scufon,
weras on **w**ilsīð, **w**udu bundenne.

As these examples show, other stressed syllables in the a-verse often also alliterate, but only the first stressed syllable in the b-verse can alliterate:

Halls and **h**ouses **h**ewn of timber,
strong towers of **s**tone **s**teep and lofty,
golden-gabled, in his **g**uarded city
they **r**aised and **r**oofed. In his **r**oyal dwelling
of **w**ood well-carven the **w**alls were wrought;
fair-hued **f**igures **f**illed with silver,
gold and **s**carlet, **g**leaming hung there

Fyrst forð gewāt. **F**lota wæs on **ȳ**ðum,
bāt under **b**eorge. **B**eornas gearwe
on **s**tefn **s**tigon; **s**trēamas wundon,
sund wið **s**ande; **s**ecgas **b**æron
on **b**earm nacan **b**eorhte frætwe,
gūðsearo **g**eatolic; **g**uman ūt scufon,
weras on **w**ilsīð, **w**udu bundenne.

Finally, in most Old English poetry, *st* only alliterates with *st*, *sp* with *sp* and *sc* with *sc*, and vowels alliterate with any other vowels. So you get the lines *eotenas ond ylfe* | *ond orcneas* 'giants and

³ Originally in 'Metrical Simplicity and Sievers' Five Types', *Studies in Philology*, 69 (1972), 280–88, accessed from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4173766>.

elves | and orcs' (whatever it is that *orcneas* actually refers to), and *Scyldes eafra* | *Scedelandum* in 'the sons of Scyld | in the lands of Skåne'.

Exercises

Separate each line into half-lines and identify the alliteration that links the a-verse to the b-verse.

40. to the Longobards in the land dwelling
41. the sun behind it sinking westwards
42. to eastern Earth omen bearing
43. the ship came shining to the shore driven
44. that haunted the hills and the hoar forest

45. Hēr Æþelstān cyning eorla dryhten 'Here King Æthelstan lord of earls' (*The Battle of Brunanburh*, 1)
46. Grāp þā tōgēanes, gūðrinc gefēng 'Grabbed then towards, battle-warrior seized' (*Beowulf*, 1501)
47. Assīria ðretmæcgas 'of Assyria the warriors' (*Judith*, 232)
48. Beadohilde ne wæs hyre brōþra dēaþ 'Beadohild not was for her brother's death' (*Deor*, 8)

5. Glossary

A-Verse: The first half of a poetic line, also called a half-line

Alliteration: When a sound is repeated at the beginning of two or more words in close succession (i.e. **P**eter **P**iper **p**icked a **p**eck of **p**ickled **p**eppers)

Anacrusis: When extra, unstressed syllables are added, without being counted towards the total of 4 per half-line, to the front of a line; a very rare process

B-Verse: The second half of a poetic line, also called a half-line

Diphthong: A vowel sound comprised of two vowel sounds blended together (seen in the -eo- of *Beowulf*); diphthongs are counted as one syllable

Expansion: When the poet adds up to four extra unstressed syllables without them counting towards the total of four syllables per half line, upon arriving at the first unstressed syllable in a half-line

Half-Line: Either the first or second part (or half) of a poetic line; also called a- or b-verse

Infinitive: A verb that has not been conjugated (i.e. *to go*, *to be*, *to do*)

Line: A unit of poetry, also called a verse; in Old English poetry, each line is comprised of two half-lines

Metre: A poem's rhythm and basic structure—how it works—having to do with things like word stress and the number of syllables comprising each line

Normalisation: When a text has been modified from the original form in which it survives in a manuscript, to make it easier for printing in a modern edition and for studying; practically all Old English you come across in modern editions is normalised

Resolution: When the stressed syllable and the following unstressed syllable of a word are counted as only one syllable

Rhythm: The measured flow of words, speech, and poetry

Scansion: An analysis of poetic metre

Stress: The emphasis placed on a syllable in spoken language; stressed syllables are louder, have higher pitch, and have a wider range of vowel sounds than unstressed syllables in English

Syllable: A segment of speech

Transcription: A literal rendering of a text as it is found in a manuscript, usually without being normalised in any way

Verse: A line of poetry, comprised of two half-lines (the a-verse and b-verse)

Vowel Length: Long vowels (with a length mark) take longer to produce than short vowels (no length mark); short vowels can be resolved, whereas long vowels cannot

6. Bibliography

- Cable, Thomas, *The English Alliterative Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991). Cable's principles have been used throughout this tutorial, but he goes into more detail than here, so if you want more information about metre after this, go to Cable first, as it is comprehensive without being too complex.
- Bredehoft, Thomas A., *Early English Metre* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005). Nearly as accessible as Cable, though it analyses Old English metre in a slightly more complex way, and re-evaluates some of the long-standing traditional approaches to metre (for example, Bredehoft uses his model to show that verses traditionally thought to have anacrusis can be analysed in a different way so that resorting to anacrusis need not be necessary).
- Jefferson, Judith and Ad Putter, eds, *Approaches to the Metres of Alliterative Verse*, Leeds Texts and Monographs, 17 (Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds, 2009). Mostly about Middle English, with some quite technical chapters; but with a very helpful introductory chapter.
- McCully, C. B. and J. J. Anderson, eds, *English Historical Metrics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). A collection of articles about metre from Old English to Renaissance verse; chapters 2-6 focus strictly on Old English, and chapter 8 compares *Beowulf's* verse to that of the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The articles can be quite technical at times, but can be useful if you already have a good grasp of Old English metre.
- Russom, Geoffrey, *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Looks at the development of Germanic poetry, with *Beowulf* as the focus, though also comparing Old English with Old Saxon and Old Norse *fornyrðislag* metre. Good if you feel confident in your understanding of Old English metre and are curious about how it compares to metre in other medieval Germanic languages.
- Russom, Geoffrey, *Old English Metre and Linguistic Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A rather technical and complex work, but it provides a slightly different view of Old English metre than does Cable, and includes a concise summary of the author's proposed rules for Old English metre (although most of the examples are taken from *Beowulf*, making the focus narrower than the title *Old English Metre* suggests).
- Scragg, Donald G., 'The Nature of Old English Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, ed. by Malcolm Godden and Michael Lapidge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 55-70. Gives an introduction to metre, in more detail but still comprehensibly, while also introducing other aspects of Old English poetry apart from metre, which have not been dealt with here; very useful.

7. Answers

Which syllables are the most heavily stressed in these sentences?

1. He went for a **run**
2. They're **reading** in the **library**

For each half-line, try to identify the most heavily stressed syllables.

3. his **limbs** were **white**
4. the **boy** **slumbered**
5. **doors** were **opened**
6. **dry** and **empty**
7. since the **earth** was **young**
8. **wlonc** ond **wīngāl** 'proud and wine-flushed' (*The Ruin*, 34a)
9. **drēames** **brūcan** 'of joy to partake' (*The Dream of the Rood*, 144a)

10. under **āctrēo** 'under oak-tree' (*The Wife's Lament*, 28a)
 11. under **sceadu bregdan** 'under shadow to move' (*Beowulf*, 707b)
 12. **pā wæs frōd cyning** 'then was wise king' (*Beowulf*, 1306b)

Try to divide each line of poetry into its two half-lines.

13. words he taught them wise and lovely
 14. in days of yore out of deep Ocean

15. on flōdwegas feor gewītan 'on ocean-paths far sets out' (*The Seafarer*, 52)
 16. lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost 'to men kindest and fame-eagerest' (*Beowulf*, 3182)

Now that you know that the a-verse and b-verse of a line of poetry each contain four syllables, identify the syllables and divide these lines into their half-lines.

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 17. sadhearted men swiftly hastened (24)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 18. his limbs were white, his locks raven (30)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 19. his sleeping head was soft pillowed (36)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 20. fear and wonder filled the watchmen (56)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 21. a song began, sweet, unearthly (70)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 22. on flōdwegas feor gewītan 'on ocean-paths far sets out' (*The Seafarer*, 52)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 23. lēodum līðost ond lofgeornost 'to men kindest and fame-eagerest' (*Beowulf*, 3182)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 24. wīdan wylme weal eall befēng 'wide water-sprays a wall all enclosed' (*The Ruin*, 39)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 25. on dōmdæge dryhten sylfa 'on judgement-day the lord himself' (*The Dream of the Rood*, 105)

1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4
 26. æfenspræce uplang āstōd 'evening-speech upright stood' (*Beowulf*, 759)

Spot the words with resolution in the following lines:

27. **guman** tō gūðe; god āna wāt 'men to war; God alone knew' (*The Battle of Maldon*, 94)
 28. **ides** ellenrōf oðre sīðe 'lady daring second time' (*Judith*, 109)
 29. dryncfæt dēore; **duguð** ellor scōc 'drinking-vessel dear; nobles elsewhere shook' (*Beowulf*, 2254)
 30. **nearo** nihtwaco æt **nacan** stefnan 'oppressive nightwatch at ship's prow' (*The Seafarer*, 7)

With the rule of expansion in mind, divide each line of poetry into its half-lines, identifying the extra unstressed syllables that can be accounted for by expansion.

31. the boat they hauled **and on the** beach moored it (40)

32. high **above the** houses **was a** hall standing (46)
 33. **of the** dark islands **in the** deeps of time (14)
 34. high **above the** breakers; **then with** hands lifted (41)
 35. **to the** hill they thronged, **and their** heads lifting (88)
36. Blīþe gebæro, **ful oft wit** bēotedan 'With happy demeanour, full often we-two vowed' (*The Wife's Lament*, 21)
 37. lifdon lāðlicost, **ond mec** longade 'have lived most wretchedly, and I pined' (*The Wife's Lament*, 14)
 38. wēman **mid** wynnum. Wāt **sē þē** cunnað 'entice with pleasures. Knows he who tries' (*The Wanderer*, 29)
 39. Fæst **is þæt** ēglond, **fenne bi**worpen 'Secure is that island, by fens surrounded' (*Wulf and Eadwacer*, 5)

Separate each line into half-lines and Identify the alliteration that links the a-verse to the b-verse.

40. to the **L**ongobards in the **l**and dwelling
 41. the **s**un behind it **s**inking westwards
 42. to **e**astern Earth **o**men bearing
 43. the **s**hip came shining to the **s**hore driven
 44. that **h** haunted the hills and the **h**oar forest
45. Hēr **Æ**pelstān cyning **e**orla dryhten 'Here King Æthelstan lord of earls' (*The Battle of Brunanburh*, 1)
 46. **G**rāp þā tōgēanes, **g**ūðrinc gefēng 'Grabbed then towards, battle-warrior seized' (*Beowulf*, 1501)
 47. **A**ssīria **ō**retmæcgas 'of Assyria the warriors' (*Judith*, 232)
 48. **B**eadohilde ne wæs hyre **b**rōþra dēaþ 'Beadohild not was for her brother's death' (*Deor*, 8)