
OLD ENGLISH ALLITERATIVE VERSE

Unlike later verse forms, Old English verse lines have no set number of syllables per line nor do the lines rhyme. Instead, each line of verse contains four strongly stressed syllables (*beats*) and a variable number of unstressed syllables. The first pair of beats is separated from the second pair by a metrical pause (*caesura*).

The beats are also linked by alliteration — by the repetition of their initial consonant sounds. (In the rules of Old English verse, all vowel sounds alliterate too.) Typically, the third beat alliterates with one or both of the first two beats, and the fourth beat does not alliterate at all.

Here is a passage written in Old English alliterative meter:

Thus Arthur in arms eastward journeyed,
and war awoke in the wild regions.
Halls and temples of the heathen kings
his might assailed marching in conquest
from the mouths of the Rhine o'er many kingdoms. (39–43)

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fall of Arthur*

Below I have marked the beats (/) and the caesuras (||) and bold-faced the alliterating sounds:

Thus **A**rthur in **a**rms || **e**astward journeyed,
and **w**ar **a**woke || in the **w**ild regions.
Halls and temples || of the **h**eathen kings
his **m**ight assailed || **m**arching in conquest
from the **m**ouths of the Rhine || o'er **m**any kingdoms.
