Lesson Plan - Shakespeare's rhythms

Blank verse: Exploring Shakespearean Rhythm and Rap

- Shakespeare often wrote in ‘blank verse’ which is sometimes called iambic pentameter. The concept is very simple. It means that each line should have ten beats. Technically, it becomes important which beat is stressed and which is unstressed – but for KS2 children it will be fun to simply explore ten beat lines. It’s very easy to write ten beat lines because it mirrors the way that we talk to each other on a day to day basis. E.g.

  I’d like to have another cup of tea

  I wonder if my friends will play football

  What time is it? I hope it’s dinner time!

- All the above examples have ten syllables per line. See if children can make up their own ten beat lines. It helps to teach children that the rhythm is like a heartbeat

  De- DUM, De –DUM,  De- DUM, De- DUM, De-DUM

- It is also possible to canter around the room to the rhythm as it is rather like the clip-clop of a horse’s footfall.
- Try it with a few Shakespeare lines

  - If music be the food of love, play on
  - A horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse
  - Once more unto the breach dear friends, once more
• All the above lines are perfectly iambic and children can beat them on their chests like a heartbeat or canter around the room to them
• The prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* is written in iambic pentameter
• Hand out the Prologue resource sheet (part 2): Prologue strips. (Note – you will need to cut these up and divide them amongst the class before you begin. You will also need to print off enough copies so that every child has a strip)
• Ask each pupil to stand in a space with their line
• Count the syllables. Are there 10?
• Try to say your line under your breath, muttering it with the rhythm De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM
• Now try to gallop it around the room
• Now, on a given signal, partner with someone else in the room and read your line in your best De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM, De-DUM rhythm
• Agree with your partner whether the line is iambic
• Swap lines and canter around the room again
• On a given signal, partner up and repeat
• Note – this is beyond the scope of the scheme, but some pupils may notice that some of the lines are not strictly iambic. They fit a ten-syllable pattern, but the stress is sometimes reversed to DE-DUM rather than De-DUM. There is no need to dig deeper, but if some pupils notice this you might want to direct them to do further research on the rhythm patterns in Shakespeare’s work as an extension activity

**Teaching and Learning Activity 2 – Iambic descriptions of Verona life**

• Now that pupils have a sense of how iambic pentameter lines, they can now write their own iambic pentameter poetry based on the life of *Romeo and Juliet*’s Verona
• An excellent book for this is *Where’s Will: Find Shakespeare Hidden in His Plays* by Tilly and Anna Claybourne. Copyright © 2015 Quarto Publishing PLC. This is a ‘Where’s Wally’ style book focussing on several Shakespeare plays. The double page illustrations are full of incredible detail.
• A *Romeo and Juliet* illustration is included in the resource pack by kind permission of the authors and publisher.
• The detail produces some lovely writing and is well suited to creating collaborative iambic pentameter poems.
• The full book, which is an excellent and fun classroom guide to the characters and stories of several Shakespeare plays, can be purchased [here](#).
Pupils might generate iambic pentameter lines such as:

- A gondolier rowing down the stream
- An angry merchant pointing at a thief
- A body lying slain amongst the skulls

These lines have iambic rhythms (10 syllables) and the detail all appears in the illustration if you look carefully!

There is so much detail in the illustration that the iambic possibilities are almost endless

Pupils could create poems individually or collaboratively, for a class display alongside the original resource illustration.