It must be emphasized that there is no need to feel that you must try to remember all the technical terms I have been introducing here. The purpose has been to help you to become aware of the importance of rhythmic effects in poetry, and it can be just as effective to try to describe these in your own words. The thing to hang on to when writing about the rhythm of a poem is that, as Ezra Pound put it, ‘Rhythm MUST have meaning’: ‘It can’t be merely a careless dash off with no grip and no real hold to the words and sense, a tummy tumpty tum tum ta’ (quoted in Gray, 1990, p.56). There are occasions, of course, when a tum-ty-ty-tum rhythm may be appropriate, and ‘have meaning’. When Tennyson wrote ‘The Charge of the Light Brigade’, he recreated the sound, pace, and movement of horses thundering along with the emphatic dactyls of ‘Half a league, half a league, half a league onward / Into the valley of death rode the six hundred’. But for a very different example we might take a short two-line poem by Pound himself. This time there is no fixed metre: like much twentieth-century poetry, this poem is in ‘free verse’. Its title is ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (the Metro being the Paris underground railway), and it was written in 1916:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{x x x x x / / x x /} \\
&\text{The apparition of these faces in the crowd;} \\
&\text{/ x x / / /} \\
&\text{Petals on a wet, black bough.}
\end{align*}
\]

Here you can see that the rhythm plays a subtle part in conveying the meaning. The poem is comparing the faces of people in a crowded underground to petals that have fallen on to a wet bough. The rhythm not only highlights the key words in each line, but produces much of the emotional feeling of the poem by slowing down the middle words of the first line and the final three words of the second.

For our final example of rhythm I’ve chosen a passage from Alexander Pope’s An Essay on Criticism (1711). Read it aloud if you can. Listen to the rhythm, and identify why it is appropriate for the meaning:

Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
But when loud billows lash the sounding shore,
The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar.
When Ajax strives some rock’s vast weight to throw,
The line too labours, and the words move slow:
Not so, when swift Camilla scourc [sic] the plain,
Flies o’er the unbending corn, and skims along the main.

(Book II, l.366–73)

Pope here uses a basic structure of iambic pentameters with variations, so that the lines sound as if they have a different pace, faster or slower, depending on what is being described. It is not just rhythm that contributes to the effect here: rhyme and alliteration (successive words beginning with the same sound) recreate smooth, rough, slow and swift movement. Rhythm is entirely dependent on word choice, but is also influenced by other interdependent stylistic devices. Pope’s lines enact what they describe simply because of the care that has gone into choosing the right words. It doesn’t matter if you don’t recognize the classical allusions: from the descriptions it is clear that Ajax is a strong man and Camilla is quick and light. If you count the beats of each line, you’ll notice that, in spite of the variety of sound and effect, all have five stresses, except the last, which has six. Strangely enough it is the last and longest line that creates an impression of speed. **How is this achieved? Try to hear the lines by reading them again out loud.**

There is really only one way, and that is through the words chosen to represent movement: the repeated ‘s’ sounds associated with Camilla trip swiftly off the tip of the tongue, whereas Ajax’s lines demand real physical effort from mouth, lips, and tongue. You will get a much stronger sense of this if you form the words in this way, even if you are unable to say them out loud. In an exam, for instance, silent articulation of a poem will help you grasp many poetic techniques and effects that may otherwise be missed. ■