

## Diagnosis: Free Verse

Most poets are accustomed to using scansion in relation to formal verse, but it can actually be very helpful in writing free verse, too. Personally, I use scansion as a way to make sure my lines have enough energy and don't sound overly academic or passive. As a general rule, I always want to have more stressed than unstressed syllables in a line. This gives a poem more power for the same reason that profanity has power—that is, stressed syllables tend to convey more emotional impact than unstressed, “passive” syllables. For example, look at this poem, *Woodwork Redemption* by James Valvis. There might be some disagreement over individual stresses, but notice any general patterns?

## Woodwork Redemption

By James Valvis

	/	U	Total		/	U	Total
I was eight years old	4	1	5	while I inched closer to him	5	2	7
and my father forced me	4	2	6	this man who drank rubbing alcohol	6	3	9
downstairs to his woodshop	5	1	6	spat obscenities across the room	4	5	9
when all I wanted to do	4	3	7	his fingers became fragile birds	5	3	8
was play baseball outside	3	3	6	that flew and darted and laughed	3	4	7
like my friends were doing	3	3	6	robins maybe they were or sparrows	5	4	9
and he backed me to a corner	4	4	8	those hands that gripped my throat	5	1	6
this man who whipped me	4	1	5	and pinned me against cold walls	5	2	7
with a brown leather strap	3	3	6	I drew even closer to him	5	3	8
that snapped against my skin	4	2	6	his elbows	2	1	3
leaving welt marks like asps	4	2	6	shifting back and forth	3	2	5
twirling around the twigs	3	3	6	in the dusty light of his shop	4	4	8
of my arms and legs	3	2	5	this man who woke me up at midnight	6	3	9
and he grabbed a sheet of pine	4	3	7	with Johnny Cash shaking the windows	4	5	9
looked at me and said,	3	2	5	as he cried over a bottle for his mama	6	6	12
"this can be anything..."	3	3	6	I was almost on top of him	4	4	8
and I cringed in my corner	4	3	7	when he pulled the pine away finished	6	3	9
as he turned on the electric saw	5	4	9	shut off the electric saw	4	3	7
that squealed like a trapped pup	3	3	6	and handed me a wooden squirrel	4	5	9
and he began to slowly chip away	5	5	10	"this is for you," he said	4	2	6
began to hold the wood and turn it	4	5	9	and we stood there together	4	3	7
his hands dancing along the grain	5	3	8	up to our shoelaces in sawdust	5	4	9
				the father who failed at almost everything	5	6	11
				the son who loved him	4	1	5
				the hum of the blade slowing to a stop.	4	6	10

Notice how most of the lines in *Woodwork Redemption* not only have a similar number of total syllables, but a similar number of stressed syllables as well? Valvis uses colloquial, highly stressed language to give his poem added tension and a subconscious sense of rhythm. For practice, let's scan this next sample poem, *Oranges* by Gary Soto, and look for similar patterns.

## Oranges

by Gary Soto

The first time I walked  
With a girl, I was twelve,  
Cold, and weighted down  
With two oranges in my jacket.  
December. Frost cracking  
Beneath my steps, my breath  
Before me, then gone,  
As I walked toward  
Her house, the one whose  
Porch light burned yellow  
Night and day, in any weather.  
A dog barked at me, until  
She came out pulling  
At her gloves, face bright  
With rouge. I smiled,  
Touched her shoulder, and led  
Her down the street, across  
A used car lot and a line  
Of newly planted trees,  
Until we were breathing  
Before a drugstore. We  
Entered, the tiny bell  
Bringing a saleslady  
Down a narrow aisle of goods.  
I turned to the candies  
Tiered like bleachers,  
And asked what she wanted -

Light in her eyes, a smile  
Starting at the corners  
Of her mouth. I fingered  
A nickel in my pocket,  
And when she lifted a chocolate  
That cost a dime,  
I didn't say anything.  
I took the nickel from  
My pocket, then an orange,  
And set them quietly on  
The counter. When I looked up,  
The lady's eyes met mine,  
And held them, knowing  
Very well what it was all  
About.

Outside,  
A few cars hissing past,  
Fog hanging like old  
Coats between the trees.  
I took my girl's hand  
In mine for two blocks,  
Then released it to let  
Her unwrap the chocolate.  
I peeled my orange  
That was so bright against  
The gray of December  
That, from some distance,  
Someone might have thought  
I was making a fire in my hands.

Obviously, as with any rule, there are exceptions. The work of e.e. cummings, for example, tends to gain tension less from the stress of the syllables and more from the creative use of syntax. Other times, poets will write more “academic” lines as a lead-up to a more tense line to follow—or, in these lines from *Litany* by Billy Collins, as the set up for a joke.

It might interest you to know,  
speaking of the plentiful imagery of the world,  
that I am the sound of rain on the roof.

In general, though, scansion is a good way to tell how much energy your lines have, if you’re breaking any kind of pattern established by previous lines, etc. From there, it’s just a cost/benefit analysis to decide whether—and how much—you should rewrite any given line.