**Act 1: Scene 1 - Language**

**Shakespeare's verse**

For this topic, refer to the Prince's speech:

**PRINCE** Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,

 Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel -

 Will they not hear? - What ho! You men, you beasts, 70

 That quench the fire of your pernicious rage

 With purple fountains issuing from your veins,

 On pain of torture, from those bloody hands

 Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground,

 And hear the sentence of your moved Prince. 75

 Three civil brawls bred of an airy word,

 By thee old Capulet, and Montague,

 Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets,

 And made Verona's ancient citizens

 Cast by their grave beseeming ornaments, 80

 To wield old partisans, in hands as old,

 Cankered with peace, to part your cankered hate.

 If ever you disturb our streets again,

 Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.

 For this time all the rest depart away. 85

 You Capulet, shall go along with me.

 And Montague, come you this afternoon,

 To know our further pleasure in this case,

 To old Freetown, our common judgement-place.

 Once more, on pain of death, all men depart. 90

**Blank verse**

*Romeo and Juliet* is written mostly in blank verse. This means a basic line length of ten syllables, usually five beats, and no rhyme. Not all lines have exactly ten syllables, because the pronunciation of English is not always regular.

For example: is *different* two syllables, or three? How many syllables in interesting? Here is the first line of the speech:

**Rebellious subjects, enemies to peace,**

This is strictly speaking eleven syllables, but the end of *rebellious* is said so quickly that it sounds like one rather than two syllables.

The next line:

**Profaners of this neighbour-stained steel -**

is apparently only nine syllables; this is why the -ed ending is often pronounced as a separate syllable.

Should *moved*, in line 75, be pronounced as one or two syllables?

**Stressed?**

There are normally five stressed syllables within each line. An *iamb* is a unit of verse with one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed syllable, as in *de-****part***, or *de****dum***. There are five of these units to a line. The metre, or rhythm, of the verse is called **iambic pentameter**, *pent-* meaning five. In other words, there are five *de****dums*** per line.

However, if you try to say this speech with a stress on every other syllable, you find that often it does not work. The language loses its natural rhythm and its meaning.

* Read lines 83-5. Which of these three lines fits the iambic, *de****dum*** pattern most neatly? Is there a reason why that particular line should be stressed in this way?

There is no one 'correct' way to decide on which words or syllables to stress. It is an area where an actor can interpret a role anew each time the play is performed.

For example:

**Three civil brawls bred of an airy word,**

**By thee old Capulet, and Montague,**

**Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets,**

* Read this aloud with the underlined stresses: see how the sense is sometimes mangled!
* Now try it with a less mechanical approach to the stresses. For example, the Prince may wish to stress Three, the unacceptable number of disorders in the streets; perhaps old in the next line could be said with some scorn, as if they ought to know better; our in the third line could be stressed to emphasise the outrage felt by ordinary citizens that their town should be turned into a battlefield.
* Now go back to lines 83-90 (*lf ever ... all men depart*), and mark those syllables which you think should be stressed to bring out the **sense**. You should usually have five stressed syllables per line. Read the lines aloud, and compare with a partner.

**Rhyme**

Blank verse is the commonest line in Shakespeare, but there are also a lot of rhyming couplets in this play.

Find the one example in this speech. They are often used to round off a speech with finality. Sometimes a whole speech, or even a scene, is in couplets.

**Prose**

Some sections of the play are in prose, not verse. As you read the play, does any pattern emerge? Do some characters seem to speak more in prose than verse? Is there a distinct mood to the prose passages?

Find examples of prose in this scene. Would you know which sections were prose if you *heard* them rather than saw them on the page? Try this with a partner, using extracts chosen at random from later in the play.