POETRY--Rhythm and Meter

Before trying to find the rhythm or meter in a poem, read it several times aloud; you'll hear the pattern better that way.

RHYTHM

"The recurrence of stresses and pauses." Like in music, the poem's rhythm is the beat in which you read the poem. Some poems have a more pronounced rhythm than others.

the terms

stress: accent, provides emphasis
meter: created by patterns of stresses
scansion: scanning lines and stanzas for the pattern, meter
caesura: a break in the middle of the line of poetry, meant to make the reader pause.
example: "Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary"

enjambment: a line running over onto the next line, continuing the thought from one line to the next (if there is no punctuation at the end of the line, do not pause there when reading).
example: "Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love . . . ."

METER

The meter determines the rhythm. Most poems vary their meter at least slightly, so don't be alarmed. Meter can also help you realize the structure of the poem and can give you insight into the meaning or tone (if the meter suddenly changes drastically, maybe the poet is trying to call your attention to an action by calling attention to the meter).

A foot is the single unit of a meter, broken up by syllables (an iambic foot is / \, called an iamb; a trochaic foot is / /, a trochee).

FALLING METER

with falling meter, the accent comes on the first syllable while the last syllable(s) are unstressed.
trochaic: one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed. Marked this way: / -
example: dou bly

dactylic: one stressed syllable, two unstressed. Marked this way: / - -
example: ten der ly

RISING METER

the first syllable(s) are unstressed while the last in the foot is stressed.
iambic: one unstressed syllable followed by one stressed. Marked this way: \ /
example: to day

anapestic: two unstressed, one stressed. Marked this way: \ / -
example: up a bove

OTHER

monosyllabic foot: either one stressed or one unstressed syllable
example: go

spondee: two accented syllables, no unstressed syllables
example: base ball

LINE LENGTHS AND METER

A line of one foot is a monometer, of two feet is dimeter, of three feet is trimeter. Of four feet is tetrameter, of five feet is pentameter, of six feet is hexameter, of seven feet is heptameter, of eight feet is octameter, etc. To find the line length, combine the number of metric feet per line and the type of meter. For instance, a line with five iambic feet is called iambic pentameter.
example: the qui ly of mer ey is not straited - iambic
\ \ \ \ -pentameter
Why so pale and wan, fond Lover?
   Prithee why so pale?
Will, when looking well can’t move her,
   Looking ill prevail?
   Prithee why so pale?

Why so dull and mute, young Sinner?
   Prithee why so mute?
Will, when speaking well can’t win her,
   Saying nothing do I?
   Prithee why so mute

Quit, quit, for shame, this will not move,
   This cannot take her;
If of her self she will not love,
   Nothing can make her,
   The Devil take her.

The poet sets up the meter of this poem as trochaic tetrameter and trimeter in the first and second lines. Any changes in the meter thereafter are merely variations.

FOR YOU TO TRY

The Passionate Shepherd to His Love by C. Marlowe

Come live with me and be my love,
   A gown made of the finest wool
And we will all the pleasures prove
   Which from our pretty lambs we pull;
That valleys, groves, hills, and fields,
   Fair laced slippers for the cold,
Woods, or steepy mountains yield.
   With buckles of the purest gold;

And we will sit upon the rocks,
   A belt of straw and ivy buds,
Seeing the shepherds feed their flocks,
   With coral clasps and amber studs:
By shallow rivers to whose falls
   And if these pleasures may thee move,
Melodious birds sing madrigals.
   Come live with me, and be my love.

And I will make thee beds of roses
   The shepherd swains shall dance and sing
And a thousand fragrant posies,
   For thy delight each May morning:
A cap of flowers, and a kirtle
   If these delights thy mind may move,
Embroidered all with leaves of myrtle.
   Then live with me and be my love.

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reference: Hunter, The Norton Introduction to Poetry