

CHASE

Consortium for the Humanities and the Arts South-East England

Old English Language Training: Alliteration

- 1) Every regular line of Old English poetry has 4 stressed positions, two in each half of the line:

1	2	3	4
HALLS	and HOUSes	HEWN	of TIMBer
1	2	3	4
STRONG	towers of STONE	STEEP	and LOFTy

- 2) The third stress determines the alliteration for the line. One OR both of the stressed syllables in the first half of the line have to alliterate with that third stressed syllable. This means that there are three possible patterns (the third is the least common):

a a a x (a = alliterates, x = doesn't alliterate)
a x a x
x a a x

Here are examples of each of the three patterns:

a	a	a	x
gold	and garnet	gleaming	hung there
a	x	a	x
gold	and scarlet	gleaming	hung there
x	a	a	x
silk	and garnet	gleaming	hung there

In every case, the alliteration links the first and second halves of the line.

- 3) There are a few special rules for alliteration in Old English. They are:
- Any vowel can alliterate with any other vowel at the start of a syllable.
 - Certain consonant clusters can only alliterate with that exact cluster. (sc, st, hr, hw)
 - Alliteration is on the first STRESSED syllable, not the first syllable—you can ignore unstressed prefixes. (ge- a- for- on- be-)