



**MTO 26.2 Examples: Adams, Harmonic, Syntactic, and Motivic Parameters of Phrase in Hip-Hop**

(Note: audio, video, and other interactive examples are only available online)  
<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.adams.html>

**Example 1a.** Kurtis Blow, “Basketball” (1984), verse 1, 0:25–0:35 (borrowed from [Adams 2009](#))

*Rhyme structure is 2+2; syntactical structure is 1 + 1 + 2:*

Basketball is my favorite sport.  
I like the way they dribble up and down the court.  
Just like I’m the king on the microphone,  
so is Doctor J and Moses Malone.

**Example 1b.** Eric B. and Rakim, “Paid in Full” (1987), 0:46–1:10

*Syntactical groupings override rhyme groupings (rhymes are in bold):*

I used to roll up: this is a hold up, ain’t nothin’ funny, stop smilin’.  
Be still, don’t nothin’ move but the money.  
But now I learn to earn ‘cause I’m **righteous**.  
I feel great, so maybe I **might just** search for a 9 to 5.  
If I strive, then maybe I’ll stay alive.  
So I walk up the street, whistlin’ this.  
Feelin’ out of place, ‘cause man do I miss a pen and a paper, a stereo a tape or...

**Example 3.** Danger Doom, "Sofa King" (from *The Mouse and the Mask*, 2005), 1:12–1:48  
(produced by Danger Mouse [Brian Burton])

The image displays a musical score for the track "Sofa King" by Danger Doom. The score is arranged in a system of staves, with each instrument's part clearly labeled on the left. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into three systems, with measures 1-4, 5-8, and 9-12 indicated by measure numbers at the beginning of each system. The instruments included are Violin, Bass, Drums, Vln. (Violin), D. S. (Double Bass), and Flute. The Violin and Vln. parts feature melodic lines with accents and slurs. The Bass and D. S. parts provide a rhythmic foundation with eighth and sixteenth notes. The Drums part shows a complex pattern of hits and rests. The Flute part enters in the third system with a melodic line. The score is presented in a clean, black-and-white format, typical of a professional music manuscript.

**Example 4.** Repetitive beat: De La Soul, “The Grind Date” (from *The Grind Date*, 2005), 0:28–0:49  
(produced by Dave West)

Musical score for Example 4, showing a repetitive beat in 4/4 time. The score consists of three staves: Treble clef, Bass clef, and a drum set. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef consists of eighth notes in a descending sequence: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The bass clef part consists of quarter notes: G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The drum set part shows a consistent pattern of eighth notes on the snare and bass drum.

**Example 5a.** Oscillating beat, alternating by second: A Tribe Called Quest, “Excursions”  
(from *The Low End Theory*, 1990), 0:28–0:52 (produced by Ali Shaheed Muhammad)

Musical score for Example 5a, showing an oscillating beat in 4/4 time. The score consists of two staves: Bass clef and a drum set. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The melody in the bass clef consists of eighth notes in a descending sequence: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The drum set part shows a consistent pattern of eighth notes on the snare and bass drum.

**Example 5b.** Oscillating beat, alternating by third: Aesop Rock (Ian Bavitz), “None Shall Pass”  
(from *None Shall Pass*, 2007), 0:15–0:34 (produced by Blockhead [Tony Simon])

Musical score for Example 5b, showing an oscillating beat in common time. The score consists of three staves: Treble clef, Bass clef, and a drum set. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The melody in the treble clef consists of quarter notes in a descending sequence: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The bass clef part consists of quarter notes: G2, F#2, E2, D2, C2, B1, A1, G1. The drum set part shows a consistent pattern of quarter notes on the snare and bass drum.

**Example 5c.** Oscillating beat, alternating by fourth: People under the Stairs, “Montego Slay” (from *O.S.T.*, 2002), 0:20–0:44 (produced by Thes One [Christopher Portugal])

The musical score for Example 5c is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of four staves: a treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, a second bass clef staff, and a drum set staff. The treble staff features a series of chords that alternate by a perfect fourth interval. The bass staff contains a simple melodic line. The second bass staff shows a more complex rhythmic pattern with eighth notes. The drum set staff illustrates the oscillating beat, with 'x' marks indicating hits on the snare and bass drum.

**Example 5d.** Oscillating beat, sequential: Cunninlynguists, “Lynguistics” (from *Will Rap for Food*, 2001), 0:18–0:46 (produced by Kno [Ryan Wisler])

The musical score for Example 5d is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of four staves: a treble clef staff, a second treble clef staff, a bass clef staff, and a drum set staff. The first treble staff features a complex melodic line with many sixteenth notes. The second treble staff shows a rhythmic pattern with eighth notes and rests. The bass staff contains a simple melodic line. The drum set staff illustrates the sequential oscillating beat, with 'x' marks indicating hits on the snare and bass drum.

**Example 5e.** Oscillating beat, uneven: Migos, “Bad and Boujee,” (from *Culture*, 2017), 0:15–0:30 (produced by DY and Tre Pounds [Dwan Avery and Jeffrey LaCroix])

The musical score for Example 5e is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff features a series of chords that alternate by a perfect fourth interval. The bass staff contains a simple melodic line.

**Example 6a.** Expansional beat, I → iv: Atmosphere, “The Best Day” (from *To All My Friends, Blood Makes the Blade Holy: The Atmosphere EP’s* [sic], 2010), 2:17–2:41 (produced by Ant [Anthony Davis])

Musical score for Example 6a, featuring Piano, Guitar, Bass, and Drums in 4/4 time. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The Piano part consists of a complex chordal texture in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The right hand features dense block chords, while the left hand has a more rhythmic pattern with some rests. The Guitar part starts with a single note (G#) and then has a rest, followed by a melodic line in the second measure. The Bass part has a simple, rhythmic line. The Drums part features a consistent pattern of quarter notes and eighth notes.

**Example 6b.** Expansional beat, i → v: The Pharcyde, “Passin’ Me By” (from *Bizarre Ride II the Pharcyde*, 1993), 0:23–0:39 (produced by J-Swift [Juan Martinez])

Musical score for Example 6b, featuring Piano and Drum Set in 4/4 time. The score is written in a key signature of two sharps (D, G). The Piano part consists of a simple, rhythmic line in the right hand and a more complex line in the left hand. The right hand has a steady pattern of quarter notes, while the left hand has a more intricate pattern with some rests. The Drum Set part features a consistent pattern of quarter notes and eighth notes.

Example 6c. Expansional beat, complete progression (i → iv → II<sup>7</sup> → V): Danger Doom, "Sofa King"

The musical score for Example 6c is written in 4/4 time and consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in bass clef, and the bottom in guitar clef. The key signature has four flats (B-flat major/C minor). The progression is i → iv → II<sup>7</sup> → V. The guitar part features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with 'x' marks above them, indicating muted notes.

Example 6d. Expansional beat, closed: Atmosphere, "Godlovesugly" (from *God Loves Ugly*, 2002), 0:39–0:50 (produced by Ant [Anthony Davis])

The musical score for Example 6d is written in common time (C) and consists of two piano staves. The key signature has two flats (B-flat major/D minor). The progression is i → iv → II<sup>7</sup> → V. The score shows a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand, with some chromatic movement and a final cadence.

Example 7a. The Chicharones, "Blessing in Disguise" (from *Boss Hogs*, 2007), 1:30–1:43  
(produced by Josh Martinez [Matthew Kimber])

Musical score for Example 7a, featuring piano and bass. The score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The piano part consists of a right-hand melody with eighth and sixteenth notes and a left-hand accompaniment of eighth notes. The bass part features a simple eighth-note accompaniment. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Example 7b. Bahamadia, "Spontaneity" (from *Kollage*, 1996), 0:21–0:46, (produced by "Da Beatminerz")

Musical score for Example 7b, featuring piano and drum set. The score is in 4/4 time and D major. The piano part has a right-hand melody with eighth notes and accents, and a left-hand accompaniment of eighth notes. The drum set part includes a bass drum line and a snare line with a consistent rhythmic pattern. The piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots.

**Example 8.** Jurassic 5, “Jurass Finish First” (from *Quality Control*, 2000), 0:18–0:39 (produced by DJ Nu-Mark [Mark Potsic])

The musical score for Example 8 consists of three staves. The top staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in 4/4 time, featuring piano accompaniment with chords and single notes. The middle staff is a bass line in 4/4 time, starting with a '(2x only)' marking above the first measure. The bottom staff is a drum set part in 4/4 time, showing a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests.

**Example 9a.** Change from open to closed expansional beat: Jemini, “Medieval” (from *Ghetto Pop Life*, 2003), 0:42–1:15

- First part of beat = open (i → V)

The musical score for the first part of the beat in Example 9a is shown in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in 4/4 time. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The piano part features a sequence of chords, with the first measure containing a sustained chord. The bass line consists of a series of eighth notes.

- Second part of beat = closed (i → i)

The musical score for the second part of the beat in Example 9a is shown in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) in 4/4 time. The piano part features a sequence of chords, with the first measure containing a sustained chord. The bass line consists of a series of eighth notes.



**Example 9b.** Expansional beat, closed (a a' b a"): Noname, "Self" (from *Room 25*, 2018), 0:22–1:03 (produced by Phoelix)

The musical score for Example 9b is presented in two systems. Both systems are in 4/4 time and use a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system contains four measures of music. The second system also contains four measures, with the final measure marked with a double bar line and repeat dots. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. The music features a mix of quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, with some notes beamed together and others held across measures.

**Example 10.** Syntactical alignment: N.W.A., "Express Yourself" (from *Straight Outta Compton*, 1988), 0:10–0:31 (rapper: Dr. Dre [Andre Young])

The musical score for Example 10 is presented in two systems. Both systems are in 4/4 time and use a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system consists of two measures of music with the following lyrics: "I'm ex-press-in' with my full ca - pa - bi - li - ties and now I'm li - vin' - in cor - rec - tion - al fa - ci - li - ties". The second system also consists of two measures of music with the following lyrics: "'cause some don't a - gree\_ with how I do this I get straight and me - di - tate fikc a Budd - hist". The notation includes a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp, and a 4/4 time signature. The music features a consistent eighth-note rhythmic pattern across all measures.

**Example 11.** Syntactical misalignment: Andre Nickatina + Equipto, “Lost Hawks” (from *The Gift*, 2005), 0:58–1:20 (rapper: Andre Nickatina [Andre L. Adams])

(grammatical units and accented syllables are misaligned with measures)

**Example 12.** Rhythmic/melodic motive aligned with rhyme: Cunninlynguists, “616 Rewind,” (From *Will Rap for Food*, 2000), 0:27–1:05 (rapper: Tone Deff [Pedro Rojas])

Motive: cseg <2 3 1 0>

Lyrics (*motivic phrase italicized*):

<p>First I sprinkle the verse          By addin' words, rhymes          Flippin 'em in a verse with lines          Then I'mma hit 'em disperse rhyme          Venom and then I'mma split 'em in half          Feelin' my wrath          Venturin' through parts of the South so dirty          You'll want to be given a bath          It's livin' a pathological lie to deny that I'm nice          And the truth hurts          Wearin' a blue shirt the Best Buy for the price          To get six guys this live and nice on the mic          So don't diss us because we're fly          It's a good try but it's like</p>	<p>I'm liable to slice at these emcee bastards          Leaving their knees fractured          Needin' every piece of their teeth re-crafted          So don't front cause I see past it          You're harmless like Wolverine's adamantium claws          When they're retracted          If the scene's backlit  <i>Or seems static / we'll wreak havoc /</i>  <i>We'll beat batter / to keep rappin' /</i>  <i>A leech battle / a dream shattered /</i>  <i>For three nano/seconds [damn]</i>          Count your paces, one step to Tone Deff          You're Gone in Sixty Seconds like Nicolas Cage is</p>
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**Example 13.** Motive reinforced by pitch contour: Cardi B, “Bronx Season” (from *Gangsta Bitch Music Vol. 2*, 2017): 0:46–1:02

and don't be talk - in all that sor - ry shit don't flip the script I see the lights I hear the hype I hit the mic

I kill the show I get my dough I catch a flight I see a hat - er I'm run - nin' down it's on \_\_\_ sight

I throw my hands I hit 'em left I hit 'em right they sleep - in on me just be - cause I used to strip but it's

**Example 14.** Verse subdivided by the use of two contrasting motives: Run the Jewels, “Oh My Darling Don’t Cry” (from *Run the Jewels 2*, 2015): 1:29–1:42 (rapper: Killer Mike [Michael Render])

I fuck and rap, \_\_\_ I tote the strap, I smoke the kush, I beat the puss, I

read the books did the math don't need a preach - er preach - in on my be - half, \_\_\_ No

teach - er can teach my arr - o - gant ass \_\_\_ I'm blow - in on <sup>6</sup>crip - py while read - in in <sup>6</sup>scrip - tions that's

writ by E - <sup>6</sup>gyp - tians and sip - pin on <sup>6</sup>whis - key hey ba - by you <sup>6</sup>with me?

**Example 15.** The Chicharones, “Blessing in Disguise” (2007), 2:43–3:23 (rapper: Josh Martinez [Matthew Kimber])

The musical score is presented in three staves: piano (top), bass (middle), and drums (bottom). The piano staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one flat and a 4/4 time signature. It features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, marked with a '(repeat 8x)' instruction. The bass staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, showing a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and rests, with a '1 + 1 + 2' organization indicated. The drum staff is in bass clef with the same key signature and time signature, showing a complex rhythmic pattern with 'x' marks above the notes, and a '2-beat motive' indicated.

R Slinkin' through the night on the brink of something great,  
 I've given up everything for this one second  
 and I'll never make a list where I state all my nevers,  
 cause some things for me need to be forever.  
 E You can't kid a kidder, you can't yoke the joker,  
 I'm an entertainer and a secondhand smoker.  
 Been a center focus, my inner child opus rises  
 Hope is eye to eye with truth, no surprises  
 E I'm a *Vanna White* letter turner | *Better Ted Turner*, letter |  
 |*writer book burner had a* | *matchbook* ready  
 Knight Rider sleeping bag with matching bed and I got  
 Flowers on my pillow, pull the t-shirt on my head, and when I'm  
 R sleepin' (I'm thinkin') I'm dreamin' (no dreamin')  
 On the brink some days, and goin' crazy in ways.  
 Some succumb with age in the dumb day's mind  
 I don't sleep 'cause sleep is the cousin of wasted time

← four-measure sentence in the lyrics overrides repetitive beat; defines a four-bar phrase.

← 1 + 1 + 2 organization in the lyrics supports new 4-bar expansional beat

← sudden acceleration in the lyrics created by 2-beat motive takes control from the beat, defines 1.5-bar phrase

← beat and lyrics realign, one-beat lyrical repetition matches one-beat repetitions in the music

Example 16. Mos Def, "Auditorium" (from *The Ecstatic*, 2009), 0:14–0:48 (produced by Madlib [Otis Jackson, Jr.])

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>[ 1.1 The way I feel, sometimes it's too hard to sit still.<br/>         1.2 Things are so passionate, times are so real.<br/>         1.3 Sometimes I try and chill, mellow down, blowin' smoke.<br/>         1.4 Smile on my face but it's really no joke.<br/>         2.1 You feel it in the streets, people breathe without hope.<br/>         2.2 They goin' through the motion, they dimmin' down the focus.<br/>         2.3 The focus gets clear and the light turn sharp<br/>         2.4 and the eyes grow teary, the mind grow weary.<br/>         3.1 I speak it so clearly sometimes y'all don't hear me.<br/>         3.2 I push it past the bass, know nations gotta feel me.<br/>         3.3 I feel it in my bones, black I'm so wide awake<br/>         3.4 that I'm hardly ever sleep. My flow forever deep,<br/>         4.1 and it's volumes or scriptures when I breathe on a beat.<br/>         4.2 My presence speak volumes before I say a word. I'm<br/> <b>4.3 everywhere: penthouse, pavement and curb.</b><br/> <b>4.4 Cradle to the grave, tall cathedral or a shell,</b><br/> <b>5.1 universal ghetto life, holla black you know it well.</b><br/>         5.2 <i>quiet storm</i> <i>vital form</i> pen pushed it <i>right across</i> <br/>         5.3 mind is a <i>vital force</i> high level <i>right across</i> <br/>         5.4 soul is the <i>lions roar</i> voice is the siren (...)<br/>         6.1 I swing round, ring out and bring down the tyrant.<br/>         6.2 Chop a small axe and knock a giant lopsided.<br/>         6.3 The world is so dangerous, there's no need for fightin'.<br/>         6.4 Suckas trying to hide like the struggle won't find 'em,<br/>         7.1 and the sun bust through the clouds to clearly remind 'em its<br/> <b>7.2 everywhere: penthouse, pavement, and curb.</b><br/> <b>7.3 Cradle to the grave, tall cathedral or a shell,</b><br/> <b>7.4 universal ghetto life, holla black you know it well.</b></p> | <p>← Beat defines a four-bar phrase.</p> <p>← Two-measure sentence begins to undermine the beat, but still ends at the same time as the hypermeasure.</p> <p>← Overlapping rhyme scheme combined with single-bar syntactical units helps destabilize the hypermeter.</p> <p>← Two 1.5-measure sentences displace the syntax against the beat.</p> <p>← As a result of the earlier displacement, three-bar refrain is now misaligned with the beat.</p> <p>← Italicized rhythmic motive strongly defines a three-bar phrase, bringing the lyrics back into alignment with the beat.</p> <p>← Return to single-measure sentences supports the beat again.</p> <p>← Three-bar refrain now properly aligned with the beat.</p> |
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