

FINDING YOUR POEM'S BEST LINE BREAKS

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One of the key elements in writing a successful poem is choosing the best places to break your line. These selections may come during the editing process or you might write with your line breaks in mind. What's important for you as a writer is to feel that your line breaks are helping your poem be read, rather than distracting or detracting from your work. Determining where to break your lines can be tricky. If you are working with end rhyme, it's easier, as the rhyme comes at the end. If you're looking at a form such as a haiku or poems in Iambic pentameter, the line breaks will be dictated by the number of syllables you are allowed per line. However, when working in free verse, there are no rules on where to break your lines, which may leave you with many questions. Let's consider one of the most important ones:

How can my line breaks help *this* poem the most?

1. Rhythm and Enjambment

Let's consider the **RHYTHM** in your poem. Is the cadence working? Is there a good flow? Or do the lines feel more like complete, individual thoughts? If your poem feels like many separate sections, your line breaks might not be pulling their weight.

To fix this, try using more **ENJAMBMENT**. Enjambment is when a poet chooses to continue a thought past a line break. What this looks like in practice is a sentence that continues onto another line without a full stop. Let's look at an example from Eavan Boland's poem "Irish Interior":

opening into a distance of water song and a wood
they cannot reach: nothing belongs to them but this
melody and tyranny and hopelessness of thread

Consider how this excerpt might read without the enjambed line breaks:

opening into a distance of water song and a wood they cannot reach.
Nothing belongs to them but this melody and tyranny and hopelessness of thread.

Now, let's look at the benefits of the original poem. The use of enjambment makes the lines more manageable and even in length, allowing for a more seamless reading experience. By not using full stops to end the line, the reader is drawn along from one line to the next. Another benefit of the original is that it highlights the listing in the third line, which can be lost in the line length of the second version.

Turning to the second version, we see that due to the addition of full stops, the line length becomes unwieldy and the reading experience sounds more staccato. The relationships between the lines are also less evident. However, one benefit of the second poem is that each idea is separated, making it easier to follow individual thoughts.

Remember, there is always a give-and-take when working with line breaks. Both of the above line breaks have benefits, but as a poet, you must weigh which you believe will make your poem stronger.

2. **Breath**

When you read the poem out loud, where are you **BREATHING**? Is it in the middle of a line? If you're taking a breath where there is no indication in the line breaks, your reader is unlikely to be taking that breath with you. How does the poem sound when you take that breath away? Consider this example from Landa Wo's "And Then":

And then
What do we do with sea winds
That caress the hill without staggering?
And then
What to do with the tweak that lies at the bottom of an ocean
At a time when birds abscond?

This stanza has a staccato flow which is quite different from the previous example. In this stanza, the line breaks act almost as an alternative to punctuation, and therefore give an understanding of where to breathe. Including many short thoughts with an abundance of breath points can be good when working with a very short poem, or as a way of shifting the breathing pattern during a long poem.

3. **Emphasis**

When you ask a friend or fellow student to read the poem, do they pick up on the images and points you want them to? Or do they overlook them? This might be a good place to add **EMPHASIS** to an idea by placing it at the end or beginning of a line, and/or using a stanza break. You can see this at work in Ocean Vuong's "Toy Boat":

toy boat
toy leaf dropped
from a toy tree
waiting

waiting
as if the sp-
arrows
thinning above you
are not
already pierced
by their own names

Consider how the line breaks here give emphasis to certain words in this stanza, highlighting an overall theme. Having “toy” at the beginning of the first two lines adds immediate emphasis to the word, which is further solidified through repetition. The sparse language already gives each word weight, but breaking the word “sparrows” to reveal the internal word “arrows” accentuates the theme of discomfort and violence that has been tenuously built. The more violent actions are also held till the ends of lines, which helps them not be lost. For instance, “dropped”, which sounds aggressive in this context, and “pierced”.

An important concept to understand with line breaks is that they can and should have multiple uses. All of the examples above use line breaks not just for rhythm, breath, and emphasis alone, but all three. The key is determining which balance of these components works best for your poem.

Going further with your line breaks

The poetic qualities listed above are the three main considerations when working in a standard free verse form. However, other poetic forms, such as haikus, will dictate your line breaks. Using these forms or developing modified versions can help organize your line breaks and allow your words to shine. We’ll go over a couple of these ideas here:

What if my poem doesn’t need any line breaks?

Some styles of poems, such as lists, may look best in prose paragraph form. However, this doesn’t mean that you don’t need to pay attention to how your lines end and begin. Line breaks may be dictated by where they naturally fall on your page, or you might choose to have more control and change the margins of your poem so certain words fall at the beginning or end of a line (or even change the poem so certain lines are longer or shorter).

What if I want to experiment with space on the page?

Line breaks can be an opportunity to have fun within a poem. Consider visual poems, which you likely came across in primary school. These are poems where the spaces between the words are strategically chosen to build an image. Many poets have reinvented this style to be more modern or refined. Visual poems now are not just ‘flower-shaped poems about flowers’ but can utilize the entire page to build a new idea of what poetry can accomplish on paper. In some cases, the space says just as much as the words. Looking at [Jordan Abel’s poem](#), “The silhouette of a pole on the shore of the Nass River”, one can see how he uses brackets and blank space to convey the erasure of indigenous bodies in the work of early Canadian ethnographers. When using space on a page (and therefore, line breaks), you should know what you want that space to SAY.

I have two versions of a poem with line breaks, and I don’t know which one is better.

Trusting your gut and poetic intuition is a learned skill. Most poets spend years developing a sense of their poetic tone and style, which includes determining how they make their line breaks. One good way to start learning what you like is to go out and read a lot of poetry and see what works for you in other people’s poems. Another good idea is to find a few friends whose creative opinion you trust and ask them which they prefer. If you find you’re still having trouble and you have the time, put your poem away for a couple weeks before looking at it again with fresh eyes.

Works Cited

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