



ARTICLE FOR STUDENTS

Learning the Poetic Line

How line breaks shape meaning.

BY REBECCA HAZELTON

If you want to understand poetry, and maybe learn how to write it, you definitely want to learn about the different kinds of poetic lines and the uses of line breaks in poetry. The more poetry you read, the more you'll notice some poets use short lines, some use long, some set all the lines on the left side of the page, and some indent lines differently all over the page. The relationship between the poetic line (including its length and positioning and how it fits into other lines) and the content of a poem is a major aspect of poetry. Some critics go so far as to say that lineation is *the* defining characteristic of poetry, and many would say it's certainly one major difference between most poetry and prose. In *A Poetry Handbook*, poet Mary Oliver says, "prose is printed (or written) within the confines of margins, while poetry is written in lines that do not necessarily pay any attention to the margins, especially the right margin." Critic and poet James Longenbach, in his preface to *The Art of the Poetic Line*, also links the definition of poetry to lineation: "Poetry is the sound of language organized in lines." But the line can be difficult to talk about because it doesn't operate independently of other poetic elements, as sense, syntax, sound, and rhythm can. Instead, it is a modifier or an amplifier of sense, syntax, sound, and rhythm—which is precisely why an exploration of line can so illuminate poetry as a whole.

The best way to approach the many ways poetic line can operate is to first examine how poets actually use it. Let's start by reading Geoffrey Brock's "Homeland Security" aloud, emphasizing each line break with a distinct pause and each stanza break with a slightly longer pause. This is a clumsy way to read because you don't normally want to pause at the end of a line that doesn't have punctuation, but this exercise forces us to consider Brock's line-break decisions. When I read the poem aloud in this way, I notice how many of the lines are enjambéd, meaning they don't end with punctuation or can't be understood independently on their own. Each time Brock enjambes a line, I face questions I can't answer without proceeding quickly to the next line. This withholding produces a subtle kind of mystery or anxiety, as I'm not quite sure what each line means until I continue reading the next one.

My thought process goes something like this:

The four AM cries	(Cries at four a.m., or is four a.m. itself crying?)
of my son worm	(Ah, a baby or kid. Weird to end on worm. Is the son wormlike?)
through the double	(Double what?)
foam of earplugs	(Ah, earplugs! There must be two of them. OK, I'm feeling good here—wait, there's a big break.)
and diazepam.	(Oh. Huh. This is an anti-anxiety drug. That raises the stakes a bit. And the diazepam is part of the double foam, isn't it? One more barrier the cries have to break through. The speaker is both physically and mentally guarded.)

Brock's use of enjambment allows him to dole out information bit by bit, heightening readers' curiosity and the drama hidden inside an otherwise common domestic scene. Look what happens if we reconfigure the poem to take away that enjambment and end-stop the lines, as below. This means each line terminates in a complete phrase or with end punctuation.

The four AM cries of my son
worm through the double foam
of earplugs and diazepam.

Far fewer questions propel me through the poem. The brief mysteries are clarified, and gone are some of the odder valences the enjambment produced, such as the interesting association between *worm* and *son*, which lumps the child in with other things to guard against, such as poisonous spiders. (Note, however, that the similar vowel sounds of *son* and *foam* are highlighted in this new arrangement, as are the em sounds closing off *foam* and *diazepam*—a hint of consonance. We'll talk more about sound later.) And if I take this experiment even further:

The four AM cries of my son worm through the double foam of earplugs and diazepam.

Well, now I'm just uninterested. Without the odd tones and questions the original enjambed lines produced, this scene seems ordinary and dull.

We should also think about the choices Brock isn't making. Consider a more severe enjambment:

The four
AM cries

Breaking on *four* amplifies the sense of it as a numeral, but the number of cries doesn't seem to have any real significance. Brock's original lineation suppresses this unwanted significance. Lineation is one of many devices poets use to emphasize or subordinate meaning, to orchestrate ambiguities, and to encourage the interpretations they desire while closing off unwanted avenues. Lineation shapes readers' involvement in and understanding of a poem. As a writer of poetry, it's one of the best ways to steer readers' experience of language and different potential meanings.

As the worm example shows, poets can use enjambment to not only pique readers' curiosity but also to suggest additional meanings and sound combinations. The line breaks in Robert Creeley's "I Know a Man" illustrate this particularly well. Creeley's language is conversational, beginning in midstream and proceeding as a run-on sentence. The poem's seemingly dashed-off quality is reinforced by Creeley's use of abbreviations and symbols (*sd*, *yr*, *☺*), which he used about 50 years before the advent of texts and tweets. Yet the lines undermine the breezy effect of the language by breaking abruptly across syntactic units, violating readers' sense of order, and creating a breathless unease. The line breaks disrupt the rhythm. Creeley, unafraid to end his lines with pronouns or articles, even splits a word across lines:

...sd, which was not his
name, the darkness sur-
rounds us, what ...

Breaking on *sur-* is almost painful for readers or listeners—we know *rounds* is coming but for one agonizing moment, it doesn't. We long for and dread the rest of the word, when our expectations will be met, but the darkness will descend. Yet breaking *sur- / rounds* in this way also gives *rounds us*, suggesting that even as darkness envelops us, it defines and shapes us as well. Just as a stone is worn and shaped by the sea, darkness makes us well rounded. We would not be ourselves without it, and without this inventive line break, we wouldn't ever come to that possible observation in the poem.

So far, I have concentrated on how enjambment can impact syntax and thereby modify the sense of phrases, words, and even parts of words. But end-stopping a line can have just as powerful an effect as enjambment. Enjambment keeps readers on the edges of their seats, wondering what will happen next. An end-stopped line offers completion and, potentially, reassurance. Read, for example, a few lines from Richard Siken's "Litany in Which Certain Things Are Crossed Out."

and left you bruised and ruined, you poor sad thing.

You want a better story. Who wouldn't?

A forest, then. Beautiful trees. And a lady singing.

Love on the water, love underwater, love, love and so on.

What a sweet lady. Sing lady, sing! Of course, she wakes the dragon.

Love always wakes the dragon and suddenly

flames everywhere.

I can tell already you think I'm the dragon,

that would be so like me, but I'm not. I'm not the dragon.

I'm not the princess either.

Who am I? I'm just a writer. I write things down.

I walk through your dreams and invent the future. Sure,

I sink the boat of love, but that comes later. And yes, I swallow
glass, but that comes later.

And the part where I push you
flush against the wall and every part of your body rubs against the bricks,

shut up

I'm getting to it.

Siken's end-stopped lines promise stability and certainty, echoing the desire for a "better" story, a happily- ever-after tied up with a beautiful song. At the same time, Siken undercuts that desire. The

components of that fairy-tale ending—a forest, trees, a lady singing—are trotted out like cardboard scenery. The song is just a collection of clichés, devolving into the meaningless repetition of the word love. Her efforts are summed up with a condescending “sweet,” and the song unwittingly and inevitably “wakes the dragon.” Meanwhile, Siken’s speaker refuses to adhere to expectations. Even as readers cycle through possible identities (dragon, princess), the end-stopped lines lend these denials an unassailable authority, allowing Siken’s speaker to make an even more unbelievable claim: “I’m just a writer. I write things down.” We don’t believe the speaker is “just” a writer anymore than we believe a writer only “write[s] things down,” but that end-stopped line makes it seem more definite, and it encourages us to buy in to that belief, if only for a moment. Then, just as we think we have a handle on things, enjambment enters again and so does chaos in the narrative—the boat of love will sink, glass will be swallowed, and bodies will undergo a violence that seems sexual and possibly non-consensual. The back and forth tension between the comforting completion of an end-stopped line, the poem’s content, and intermittent enjambment lends the poem its frisson.

Siken’s layout of the lines on the page reinforces (and even mimics) that back and forth tension. You’ve probably encountered many poems in which all the lines begin along the left margin. These poems are in keeping with a long poetic tradition and promise a certain kind of regularity. Even if readers are unsure of what a poem is about, they at least know where their eyes should land as they move from one line to the next. But Siken’s lines meander across the page; some are left aligned, and others are surprisingly indented. We don’t know, as we read, where we’ll end up next. Even when we return to that left margin, it no longer seems as reassuring as it once did, because now we know that the left margin isn’t guaranteed. The effect is unsettling; something we thought dependable is revealed as anything but.

Less obvious but equally important is how Siken uses his line breaks to amplify or diminish sound. Often when we think of line breaks and sound, we think of the rhyme and meter of formal poetry, such as these lines from William Wordsworth’s “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud.”

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o’er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host, of golden daffodils;
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,

Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Here, the meter and the rhyme scheme are inseparable from the line breaks. However, although modern free verse may not have an intrinsic, predictable rhyme pattern, line breaks can have profound effects on a poem's sound. Siken, for instance, breaks several times on *dragon* or on near rhymes for it:

Love on the water, love underwater, love, love and so on.

What a sweet lady. Sing lady, sing! Of course, she wakes the dragon.

This emphasizes the dragon identity the speaker denies, so it should come as no surprise that the speaker later confesses, "Okay, so I'm the dragon." It's also interesting to consider where Siken is not breaking the line:

Who am I? I'm just a writer. I write things down.

I walk through your dreams and invent the future. Sure,

I sink the boat of love, but that comes later. And yes, I swallow
glass, but that comes later.

Siken could have broken on the slant rhymes *writer*, *future*, and the first *later*, but doing so could have overemphasized those concepts, thereby unbalancing the poem. Instead, Siken buries them within the line, creating a more understated linkage between a writer, the past, and the future. A few lines later, he chooses to not break the lines on the repeated grunting **u**'s, soft **s**'s, and **sh**'s:

And the part where I **push** you
flush against the wall and every part of your body rubs against the bricks,
shut up
I'm getting to it.

These sensual sounds suggest a sexual reading but are positioned within the lines, rather than at the end. Instead, Siken breaks the lines on *bricks* and *it*. There are no soft **s**'s and **sh**'s here. The *t* and *k* endings of *bricks* and *it* are just as rough as the bricks and as violent the real story we are promised.

Just as line breaks work with and against the content of a poem, line breaks can complicate or confirm

the idea of the sentence. In the following excerpt from “Somewhere Holy,” Carl Phillips extends one sentence over eight stanzas of similar line length while employing enjambment and end-stopping (in that lines end on complete phrases). I’ve bolded enjambed lines, for illustration.

There are places in this world where

you can stand somewhere holy and be

thinking If it’s holy then why don’t

I feel it, something, and while waiting,

like it will any moment happen and

maybe this is it, a man accosts you,

half in his tongue, half in yours, he

asks if maybe you are wanting to get

high, all the time his damaged finger

twitching idly like on purpose at a

leash that holds an animal you can’t

quite put your finger on at first, until

you ask him, ask the man, and then

he tells you it’s a weasel and, of

course, it is, you’ve seen them, you

remember now, you say Of course, a weasel.

Phillips is often referred to as “a poet of the sentence” for the way his sentences languidly unfold over lines and stanza breaks, detouring and circling back on themselves through repetitions and asides. Those long, complex sentences wouldn’t pack nearly the punch without Phillips’s line breaks, which allow readers to take small rests as they travel through his extraordinary clausal digressions. In this way, line breaks can alter the speed limit for traveling in a poem. Enjambment zips readers through a poem, eager to find the next clue; stanzas give us pause, and end-stopping can bring us to a halt. All of these discourage readers from scanning a poem as one might a block of prose.

Although close reading is the best place to start understanding the line, it can take you only so far. To

develop an effective use of line in your own work, you need practice, practice, and more practice. Whenever you have a draft of a poem, try changing the ways the lines break to see if they can bring new connotations or observations to the surface or to see if they can emphasize different aspects of your poem. Line breaks are one of the most important tools you have as a poet, so you want to make sure that your choices of line breaks are informed by knowing the other possibilities and being able to explain a little bit about why you finally formed the lines the way you did. To get started, try the following exercises.

Exercise 1: Dive into this exercise, called “Six S’s,” from Catherine Wagner in *Poets on Teaching: A Sourcebook*. It’s just as useful to a solitary writer as it is in the classroom—all it requires is taking a poem out of its lineated form and writing it out in prose. For an example, here is William Stafford’s poem “Traveling through the Dark” with all its line breaks removed.

Traveling through the dark I found a deer dead on the edge of the Wilson River road. It is usually best to roll them into the canyon: that road is narrow; to swerve might make more dead. By glow of the tail-light I stumbled back of the car and stood by the heap, a doe, a recent killing; she had stiffened already, almost cold. I dragged her off; she was large in the belly. My fingers touching her side brought me the reason—her side was warm; her fawn lay there waiting, alive, still, never to be born. Beside that mountain road I hesitated. The car aimed ahead its lowered parking lights; under the hood purred the steady engine. I stood in the glare of the warm exhaust turning red; around our group I could hear the wilderness listen. I thought hard for us all—my only swerving—, then pushed her over the edge into the river.

Now your task is to break the poem up into lines in six different ways—one for each of Wagner’s six S’s: speed, sound, syntax, surprise, sense, and space. This won’t take as much time as you think, especially if you print the above text six times and just use slashes (/) where you want the lines to break. You’ll get very different results depending on how you interpret those six S’s. For instance, if I choose to break lines in regard to the text’s “syntax,” I have to decide whether I am breaking lines to encourage regular syntax or to upset it. There’s a big difference between

Traveling through the

dark I found
a deer dead on
the edge of the
Wilson River road.

And

Traveling through the dark
I found a deer
dead on the edge
of the Wilson River road.

Or even

Traveling through the dark I found a deer
dead on the edge of the Wilson River road.

Exercise 2: Choose a traditional sonnet and relineate it to de-emphasize its rhymes. You might try Casey Thayer's "The Hurt Sonnet," Dan Beachy Quick's "Poem (Internal Scene)," or Adam Kirsch's "Professional Middle-class Couple, 1922." What's the effect of the new lineation compared to the original published version? Does it alter the meaning or tone of the poem? Does it retain the feeling of a sonnet, despite the change?

Now that you've spent some time playing with line breaks in other people's poetry, turn to your own.

Exercise 3: I've already mentioned the value of reading another writer's poem aloud and pausing at its line breaks; I suggest you try this with your own work as well. You might feel a little silly and sound portentous (and pretentious too!), but the exercise will encourage you to consider why you are breaking a line where you are. If you can't find a reason, consider those six S's: speed, sound, syntax,

surprise, sense, and space. Is there one or more of those you could emphasize or play with by changing your breaks?

Exercise 4: Try writing to the extremes. If you are normally a short-lined poet, try writing long. Read the poems of Walt Whitman and C.K. Williams to get into the mood. If you are normally a long-lined poet, get short. Does your subject matter differ for a long-lined poem versus a short-lined one? Your tone? Is this a “fast” poem or a “slow” poem in terms of pacing? Do you find yourself breaking lines for different reasons?

Exercise 5: Now re-break your “extreme” poem as its opposite. Think about how changing the line length does or does not affect the poem’s character. Do you find yourself revising as you change the line lengths?

Much more has been and could be said about lineation. We barely brushed the surface of sound and sense and touched only briefly on the important matters of the visual appearance of the poem on the page and the sound of the poem aloud. Yet, I hope this is enough to help you begin thinking about the various ways poets use lineation in their work. By examining the lineation choices of others, you’ll be better informed when making your own choices and more aware of the many possibilities of the line.

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