



Poetry Rocks!

Take your dreams seriously...play with them. ®

Tool 20

The Break Dance

WHAT IS POETRY MADE OF?

FORM/SHAPE

Arrangement of Lines

PURPOSE

To expand on and practice what you've learned about arranging words, lines, and stanzas in poems, honing in on the artistry of the poetic line.

BACKGROUND

I've never found any better way of explaining why and how to arrange lines of poetry on a page than this excerpt from John Drury's book *Creating Poetry*. This contains the Shakespeare sentence/line examples from Tool 19; I've repeated them here so you can see them in context to this more complete conversation about line breaks, end-stopped lines, and enjambment:

In shaping a poem, the poet acts as designer, sculptor, composer, weaver, architect. The poet's two basic tools—or are they materials? forces? are the line and the sentence. Like the composer, the poet can use them contrapuntally, perhaps syncopating one against the other. As the poet writes and revises—sometimes starting with a pattern in mind, a regular beat, a tradition, sometimes experimenting, venturing in the dark—the poem's form takes shape.

*"Not all poetry is written in lines, but most is. The line calls attention to itself and requires a pause (however slight) before going on to the next one. As in a song, each line sounds out as a unit, even though sentences may go on for several lines. The eye takes in lines differently from the way it takes in a paragraph of prose. One of the joys of writing poems is playing off sentences against lines—a resource the prose writer sorely lacks. The line, of course, is the poet's basic unit of composition, but there are several ways of laying out sentences on that gridwork, modeled by lines from Shakespeare's *Tempest*:*

1. Sentence = Line: *Be not disturb'd with my infirmity.*
2. Sentence = Part of a line: *What would my potent master? Here I am.*
3. Sentence = More than one line:
*We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

Shakespeare uses end-stopping (halting at the end of a line, usually aided by a period or another punctuation mark) and enjambment (letting one line spill over into the next). The line-break gives a slight pause, but a line that's enjambed will still push over strongly into the next. It's as if the end of a line swelled up like a wave, letting the words surf right along, flowing into the next line. Good enjambment has an exhilarating feel; it's breathless; it's an onrush. Good end-stopping takes a breath, pausing contentedly.

Think of the lines as a kind of framework on which you lay different lengths of colorful material. Sometimes you'll need short little scraps, a patchwork of quick utterances. Sometimes you'll need to wind a long sentence over the course of many lines—perhaps an entire poem consisting of a single sentence. In general, the longer the sentences, the more a poem flows. Short sentences have a choppy, bouncy, nervous, intense feel. In general, long sentences lull, short sentences rouse. It depends on whether you want the sweep of violins or the percussion of kettle drums. Of course, the poet (like a shrewd composer) will usually want to vary sentence lengths for emphasis, variety, a sense of melody, and surprise.

One important consideration to keep in mind as you break your lines is that the last word of each line is a very important one. It gets the most emphasis, and also is the swivel between your lines on which you can hang multiple meanings and create suspense or anticipation.

Somewhere in my study of poetry, I came across the expression "the integrity of the line." The practice I took from this was to consider whether each line of each of my poems was pleasing as a stand-alone unit, whether it was a single word or many words, a complete sentence or a disjointed fragment. The pleasure of any particular line can come from its sound, via repetition of sounds, words, etc., from its meaning (or meanings), from an element of surprise, from its visual appeal, or

any other aspect that occurs to me as I play with my lines. It's a foreground/background kind of thing in which I consider both the lines themselves and the breaks between them.

WHAT TO DO

Write a poem in which you focus on your line breaks as instruments of meaning, rhythm, and style, or rearrange the line breaks in a poem you've already written.

EXAMPLE

I love to work with line breaks to wrest maximum value from my poems. Some of the very deliberate line break choices in the following poem, "Reading 'Snow White' to My Daughter," were:

- To end the first line of the first stanza with the word "gasps" to create a "gasp-like" pause for the reader
- To end the fourth line of the first stanza with the word "given" to make the reader wonder for a moment what it was that was a given
- To utilize slant rhyme by using the ending words "given," "Queen" and "seven" in the first stanza
- To repeat the word "comb" in the fifth line of the second stanza
- To keep the direct quote from the story of "Snow White" as its own end-stopped line at the end of the second stanza
- To alter the rhythm of the poem at the climax by making "Who is fairest of them all?" and "My daughter eyes me sideways." end-stopped lines that are also complete sentences
- To use assonance and rhyme in the last three lines of the last stanza
- To break the last thought, "Feeding her what she will need," after the words "feeding her" so that the phrase serves to express both that it is a mother's job to feed a child AND to feed a child what she needs
- To play with alliteration, consonance, and assonance throughout, as in the repeated final "t" sounds in "sweet, innocent Snow White"
- To focus on the "integrity of the line" throughout

Reading “Snow White” to My Daughter

The typical fairy tale splitting of the mother into a good ... mother and an evil stepmother serves the child well.

~ Bruno Bettelheim

Her eyes widen. She actually gasps [enjambéd]
at the Queen’s cruel attempts [enjambéd]
to do in sweet, innocent Snow White. [end-stopped]
I use as much expression as I can, given [enjambéd]
memory’s abrupt glimpse of the face [enjambéd]
in which I dressed the Queen [enjambéd]
when I was seven. [end-stopped]

It’s hard to get through [enjambéd]
the part about the huntsman [enjambéd]
sent to the woods for Snow White’s heart. [end-stopped]
The tightened stay-laces. [end-stopped]
The poisoned comb. I comb [enjambéd]
my daughter’s hair each morning [enjambéd]
face to face before my mirror [enjambéd]
and that narcissistic question, [end-stopped]
Who is fairest of them all? [end-stopped]

The plot quickens—the Queen [enjambéd]
is dressed in the rags of a farmer’s wife, [end-stopped]
carries a loaded basket, holds out [enjambéd]
the apple. My tongue stumbles [enjambéd]
on the words as I wonder [enjambéd]
what I carry in my own basket. [end-stopped]

My daughter eyes me sideways. [end-stopped]
The fruit is choking me. [end-stopped]
I keep on reading, feeding her [enjambéd]
what she will need. [end-stopped]

REFLECTION

Solidify your understanding of line breaks: take a moment to write down, in your own words, what you’ve learned about the hows, whys, and whens.

HONE YOUR CRAFT

Note whether poems you enjoy utilize end-stopped lines, enjambed lines, or a combination. Try to enter the thought process of the poet as he made these choices.

As you write your own poems, keep experimenting with line breaks.

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