

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Poetry Track

Step Seven: Why Line Breaks Matter

We went over this at the very beginning of the year, but I wanted to take today to touch on it again. Line breaks are one of the most important tools at a poet's disposal. When you are writing a poem, how do you know where to end the line of verse? How you want the poem to sound will often determine where you break your lines, for to some extent your line breaks are the poem's musical notation, determining pauses, tension, emphasis, and pace. Here are several common reasons for breaking a verse line at a particular place:

1. To stop a line of poetry at the end of a sentence or phrase unit, as in the following poem:

The moon is like an etching,
Fine-lined against the sky.
The gingko is like a crude sketch,
Hardly worthy to be signed.
-Eve Merriam, "Simile: Willow and Gingko"

2. To create a pace and/or sense of unbroken flow, breaking the line in the middle of a phrase unit, forcing the reader to either ignore the line end or pause slightly where, if it were prose, you normally would not pause, as in the following excerpt:

his hair was
wild and uncombed
and he was
barefoot
-Charles Bukowski, from "The Man with Beautiful Eyes"

3. To give special emphasis to a particular word or phrase by putting it at the end of the line, which often calls for more attention to it. In the following excerpt, the poet is working against the natural pauses, enjambling her lines for increased tension:

Darker now. I put out
the wet laundry. In the wind
the pulley creaks and shifts.
My dresses lift, tugging
at the pins. I go in
to where my daughter sleeps.
-Kim Addonizio, from "Night Feeding"

4. To use line breaks as punctuation to clarify syntax and meaning, as in the following excerpt:

There were some dirty plates

and a glass of milk
beside her on a small table
-William Carlos Williams, from "The Last Words of My English Grandmother"

5. To keep the poem "tight" and minimalist, the thought and emotion emerging with great compression and energy. Use short lines for this effect, as in the excerpt below:

Kiki Diaz spits
just like I used to spit
back when I was growing up
thirty years ago
in Memphis
on Prescott Street.
-Bobby Byrd, from "Good Field, No Hit"

6. To achieve a sweeping lyricism for large-spirited poems, keeping the lines longer, as in the following excerpt:

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origin of all
poems,
You shall possess the good of the earth and sun, (there are millions of suns
left,)
You shall no longer take things at second or third hand, nor look through the
eyes of the dead, nor feed on the spectres in books,
-Walt Whitman, from "Song of Myself"

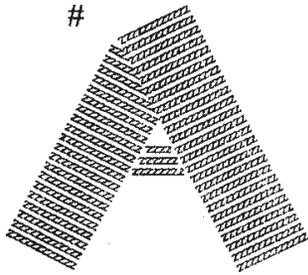
7. To surprise the reader or create irony, as in the following excerpt:

Smokey the Bear heads
into the autumn woods
with a red can of gasoline
and a box of matches.
-Billy Collins, from "Flames"

8. To create a pattern, as in an anaphoric poem, where each line begins with the same word or phrase, as in the first excerpt; to create energy, where repetition of the first word gives momentum to the lines, compelling them forward as in the second excerpt.

In November I lost my foodstamps, the computer said I did not exist
In November I lost my best friend who said I did not exist
In November I lost my manuscripts and felt as if I did not exist
In November I sent 2 postcards to my mother who wrote back saying she
had not heard from me and DID I STILL EXIST?
-Harold Norse, from "In November"

9. To create a visual design, as in concrete or shape poems.



-Norman Henry Pritchard II

10. To mask a rhyme. In the excerpt from “Night Feeding”, the rhymes *pins/wind* and *creaks/sleeps* are muted by line breaks.

11. To experiment or play with how the works look on the page, as in the following excerpt:

Imagine Whitman remembering each blade of grass.
Imagine Stalin phoning Mayakovski.
Imagine Stalin phoning Frank.
You can't imagine that?
Frank phoning Stalin?
Of course.

-Andrei Codrescu, from “The Inner Source”

12. To hide multiple meanings, as in “mirror” poems that can be read top-to-bottom or bottom-to-top, or in poems within poems as in the example, “Walking with the Monster” below, where there is a separate “side” poem created by the spacing and line breaks:

Life was radical right after I met	the monster
Later, life	became
harder, complicated. Ultimately,	a living
hell, like swimming against a riptide,	walking
the wrong direction in the fast lane of the freeway,	waking
from sweetest dreams to find yourself in the middle of a	nightmare.

13. To enjoy the freedom to whatever looks/feels/sounds right!