

Journalism/Creative Writing Extended Project Poetry Track

Step Eleven: Punctuation Choices

Poetry is different from prose. Poems often use incomplete sentences, rhythm patterns, rhyming words, and figurative language to help readers feel a certain way or get a picture in their minds. Proper punctuation and capitalization are not always needed to achieve these goals.

Many years ago, poetry and prose followed similar rules for punctuation and capitalization. "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost is a good example.

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

The punctuation marks - comma, hyphen, colon, and period - are used the way they would be used in a paragraph. Rules for capitalization are also followed. The first word in every sentence is capitalized, and so is the pronoun *I*. For more formal, traditional poetry, follow the normal prose grammar rules.

Traditionally, in poetry, the first word of each line of the poem is also capitalized. These traditional rules are consistently found in older, classical poetry. In contrast, many modern poets choose not to follow these rules. You can make your own decision whether you want the first letter of each line capitalized.

As a poet, you have a few options for how to end your lines.

1. You can have some sort of punctuation at the end of each line (period, comma, semicolon, hyphen, etc.)
2. You can have complete thoughts on each line and then use the line break AS the punctuation
3. You can use enjambment, where you break the line in the middle of your thought in order to "pull" your reader along to the next line
4. You can use punctuation in the middle of lines to control the way in which your reader paces themselves

You should probably decide *how* you're wanting to do punctuation/capitalization within your poems and keep it consistent throughout your collection. It will make your work as a whole more cohesive and let your voice be easily apparent throughout the poems. Obviously, if you change structures between poems you may also change punctuation techniques, but otherwise I'd recommend trying to be consistent.

