Line Break

DEFINITION

What is a line break? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> A line break is the termination of one line of poetry, and the beginning of a new line.

Some additional key details about line breaks:

- Line breaks divide poems into lines, and the length of lines determines the appearance of the poem on the page: long and skinny, short and wide, or a shape entirely its own.
- The location of a line break is often dictated by the number of syllables in the line, but just as often it is freely chosen by the poet.
- Line breaks serve an important function in setting the rhythm of a poem, since they insert a pause between the final word of one line and the first word of the next line. For this reason, line breaks conventionally occur where natural pauses in language also occur—such as after punctuation, at the end of a thought, or between distinct images.

Line Breaks in Depth

Even more than the content of a poem, it is often the line breaks that make a text recognizable to people *as* poetry—that is to say, recognizable as being distinct from prose, which doesn't use line breaks in the same way. Because of that, the line could be considered the fundamental unit of poetry, and the line break the marker of these units. The sections that follow cover the basic characteristics and conventions that govern the way line breaks are used in poetry.

Line Length

Up until quite recently—beginning in the 19th century—the only accepted way to break a line was according to a poem's meter. For that reason, it's helpful to have a strong grasp of what meter is in order to understand how it informed the use of line breaks. We provide more details about meter on its own page, but offer a quick primer here.

- **Meter:** A pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that creates the rhythm of lines of poetry. The units of meter are called feet. Feet have different stress patterns. For instance, an iamb is a foot with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (de-**fine**), while a trochee has the opposite: a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable (**Po**-et). Poetic meters are defined by both the *type* and *number* of feet they contain. For example, *iambic pentameter* is a type of meter commonly used in poetry that contains five iambs per line (thus the prefix "penta," which means five).

In formal verse (poetry with a strict meter and rhyme scheme) as well as in blank verse (unrhymed poetry with a strict meter), the poem's meter determines the length of each line by requiring that each line contain a particular number of syllables. So, a poem written in iambic pentameter (five iambs per line) will have a line break every ten syllables, as in the following example:

> Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
> Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

In free verse (poetry without any specific meter or rhyme scheme), line length is determined by the poet's desire to create a particular rhythm, or to place more emphasis on certain words by inserting more space around them. In free verse, unlike in formal or blank verse, line length may vary considerably throughout the poem, as in the following example:

> Many ways to dance Giselle, but tonight as you
> watch you think that she is what art is, creature
>
> who remembers
>
> her every gesture and senses its relation to the time
> just a moment before when she did something
>
> close to it...

Capitalization

Until the 19th century, the first word of each line of poetry was capitalized as a rule, whether or not it was the beginning of a new sentence. Today, there is no standard for capitalization at the beginning of lines; some poets do it and some poets don't, though it's generally seen as a somewhat formal detail leftover from a bygone age of poetry. Here, for example, are the first lines of an early poem by John Ashbery that uses capitalization at the start of each new line, even though later in his life Ashbery, like many other modern poets, stopped observing this convention in his poetry.

> Sitting between the sea and the buildings
> He enjoyed painting the sea's portrait.
> But just as children imagine a prayer
> Is merely silence, he expected his subject
> To rush up the sand, and, seizing a brush,
> Plaster its own portrait on the canvas.

Punctuation

Although line breaks themselves tend to have the effect of creating a pause in the rhythm of a poem—and it is common for poets to use punctuation at the end of lines—line breaks don't necessarily have to

coincide with the use of punctation. Lines that *do* end with some form of punctuation are called end-stopped lines, while lines that *don't* end with punctuation are called enjambed lines. For example, in these lines from *Romeo and Juliet*, the first, second, and fifth lines are end-stopped, while the third and fourth are enjambed:

> When he shall die,
> Take him and cut him out in little stars,
> And he will make the face of heaven so fine
> That all the world will be in love with night
> And pay no worship to the garish sun.

Line Breaks and Syntax

Syntax is a term that refers to the structure and word order of a sentence. Generally speaking, poets place line breaks within their poetry so that they don't meaningfully disrupt the syntax of the sentence, but instead create pauses that mimic the natural pauses of speech. However, this not always the case; some poets use line breaks to intentionally create an *unusual* cadence or phrasing in their poems. Using line breaks in these two different ways produces a very different effect. For example, take the following two examples, which use the same words but employ line breaks in different places:

> A short walk from my room in Budapest
> beneath the palace district
> and the disused hospital in the rock
> was the famous bathhouse called Rudas.

vs.

> A short walk from my
> room in Budapest beneath the
> palace district and the disused
> hospital in the rock was
> the famous bathhouse called Rudas.

The first example above uses line breaks in a way that follows the syntax of the sentence much more naturally than the second example, which is quite jarring. But some poets want to achieve that jarring effect, and use line breaks to purposefully alter the way in which someone would naturally read a given sentence. E.E. Cummings is a poet who even went so far in that direction as to break lines in the middle of words. Here's an excerpt from one of Cumming's poems that uses line breaks in aggressive opposition to natural syntax:

> dim
> i
> nu
> tiv
>
> e this park is e
> mpty(everyb
> body's elsewher
> e except me 6 e

Line Breaks vs. Stanza Breaks

While the majority of this entry focuses on line breaks, which separate one line of poetry from the next, line breaks are closely related to stanza breaks (also called "double line breaks"), which separate groupings of lines into stanzas. For example, the first two stanzas of Edward Thomas's "The Green Roads" have two line breaks and one stanza break:

> The green roads that end in the forest
> Are strewn with white goose feathers this June,
>
> Like marks left behind by someone gone to the forest
> To show his track. But he has never come back.

A stanza break, as shown above, is usually distinguished from a line break through increased white space between the two lines. However, sometimes—particularly when poetry is excerpted inside a piece of prose—line breaks and stanza breaks can be indicated by a slash (/) and a double slash (//), respectively. In this notation, the first two stanzas of "The Green Roads" would look like this:

> The green roads that end in the forest/Are strewn with white goose feathers this June,//Like marks left behind by someone gone to the forest/To show his track. But he has never come back.

Poetry Without Line Breaks

Some poets write in paragraph form rather than using line breaks. These types of poems are called prose poems because they take the appearance of prose writing. Here's an example of a prose poem by the contemporary poet Louise Glück:

> Long, long ago, before I was a tormented artist, afflicted with longing yet incapable of forming durable attachments, long before this, I was a glorious ruler uniting all of a divided country—so I was told by the fortune-teller who examined my palm. Great things, she said, are ahead of you, or perhaps behind you; it is difficult to be sure. And yet, she added, what is the difference? Right now you are a child holding hands with a fortune-teller. All the rest is hypothesis and dream.

How can you tell what is and isn't a poem without line breaks? The answer is that it's largely dependent on context. *This* prose poem was written by a well-known poet and published in a book surrounded by other poems. But even if it weren't, any self-contained piece of prose such as this—with a beginning and an end—could be considered a prose poem as long as the person who wrote it defined it that way.

Nontraditional Line Breaks

While all the line breaks shown so far have been clear movements from one line to another, some line breaks are more ambiguous or look different than those discussed above.

Indentation

Lines of poetry are typically aligned to the left side of the page, but poets sometimes indent lines (move them away from the lefthand margin) in order to complicate traditional line breaks. Indentation does not mean that a line is not properly broken. Rather, the indentation, much like a line break itself, further informs the phrasing or rhythm of the poem. For example, a line that is indented more than others on the page might be read as having a slightly longer pause preceding it, or a delayed beginning, as though the poet is catching his or her breath. In the following example from a poem by Jorie Graham, the use of indentation is inconsistent and even falls in the middle of a line sometimes, creating a halting rhythm in the poem. Regardless of the irregularity of indentation, though, every new line in this poem has its own line break.

> Then the cicadas again like kindling that won't take.
> The struck match of some utopia we no longer remember
> the terms of—
> the rules. What was it was going to be abolished, what
> restored? Behind them the foghorn in the harbor,
> the hoarse announcements of unhurried arrivals,
> the spidery virgin-shrieks of gulls, a sideways sound, a
> slippery
> utterly ash-free
> delinquency
> and then the subaqueous pasturings inexhaustible
> phosphorous handwritings the frothings of their own
> excitements now
> erase, depth wrestling with the current-corridors of depth ...

Dropped Lines

A "dropped line" is the term for a single line of poetry that is split into two separate lines using a specific style of indentation, such that the first line is aligned to the left side of the page but the second line is indented so that it begins just beneath the point on the page where the first line ended. The following example is an excerpt from a poem by Charles Wright, who used dropped lines often:

> I stand inside the word *here*
> as that word stands in its
> sentence,
> Unshadowy, half at ease.
>
> Religion's been in ruin for over a thousand years.
> Why shouldn't the sky be tatters,
> lost notes to forgotten
> songs?

Dropped lines can be used for a variety of reasons. They can add space in the middle of a line that is at once more than and less than the space added by a typical line break, and they also add dimension to the poem visually.

Run-on Lines

If a poet writes a line of poetry that ends up being too long to fit on the page without interruption when the book goes to print, that line is generally broken into two lines, where the second line is indented to indicate that it is meant to be a continuation of the previous line. The following example is an excerpt from a poem by CK Williams, who was famous for his use of run-on lines.

> A girl who, in 1971, when I was living by myself, painfully
> lonely, bereft, depressed,
> offhandedly mentioned to me in a conversation with some
> friends that although at first
> she'd found me—
> I can't remember the term, some dated colloquialism
> signifying odd, unacceptable, out-of-
> things—
> she'd decided that I was after all all right ... twelve years later
> she comes back to me from
> nowhere...

These run-on lines—though they appear to be new, indented lines—actually do *not* follow line breaks. The indentation, in this case, marks that the indented line is part of the previous line, and should not be considered on its own.

EXAMPLES

Example of Line Breaks in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

As with nearly all of Shakespeare's works, *King Lear* was written in iambic pentameter. This means that the line breaks occur (more or less) every ten syllables.

> There would have been a time for such a word.
> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.

Example of Line Breaks in Dr. Seuss's *Green Eggs and Ham*

The lines in this book by Dr. Seuss use iambic tetrameter, so that each line contains eight syllables.

> I do not like them in a house.
> I do not like them with a mouse.
> I do not like them here or there.
> I do not like them anywhere.
> I do not like green eggs and ham.
> I do not like them, Sam-I-Am.

Example of Line Breaks in Robert Creeley's "The End"

This short poem consists of three couplets and uses line breaks in a mix of traditional and nontraditional ways. The excerpt shown here is the first three lines of the poem. The first line break fits intuitively with the syntax of the sentence, acting as a pause where a comma might otherwise be. The second line break, however, occurs at a point that is markedly at odds with where the syntax would dictate a pause. The result of this enjambment is that the words "The grey" hang strangely at the end of the line without their meaning being resolved in any way.

> When I know what people think of me
> I am plunged into my loneliness. The grey
> hat bought earlier sickens.

Example of Line Breaks in Charles Olson's "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You"

Olson was an innovative poet who used line breaks in a nontraditional way. In this excerpt from his poem "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You," the capitalization at the beginning of lines and sentences is inconsistent, indentation is used in idiosyncratic ways, and line breaks don't always occur in places where the syntax would make a pause seem natural.

> the thing you're after
> may lie around the bend
> of the nest (second, time slain, the bird! the bird!
> And there! (strong) thrust, the mast! flight
> (of the bird
> o kylix, o
> Antony of Padua
> sweep low, o
> bless
> the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
> on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,
> And the flake-
> racks
> of my city!

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use line breaks because it's part of what makes a poem a poem. By inserting more white space into the text, poets are able to exercise a greater degree of control over the speed and rhythm at which their poetry is read, thereby distinguishing it from both everyday language and prose literature. So in many ways, the question of "why writers use line breaks" is no different from the question of why people write poetry at all.

But that leaves the question of how poets use line breaks to achieve different effects, and the answer to that question can sometimes seem to have as many answers as there are poets writing today. Most commonly, though, writers use line breaks to determine a poem's speed and rhythm. For example, a poet may choose to use shorter lines and more line breaks in order to slow readers down and ask them to pay extra careful attention to each individual word that is being used. On the other hand, a poet may use long lines if the style of the poem is more conversational or if the sentences contain complex ideas with many clauses, since longer lines are easier and faster to comprehend. Ultimately, line breaks can be used in any way the poet desires to alter how the text of a poem is delivered to the reader.

OTHER RESOURCES

- The Wikipedia Page on Line Breaks: A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- The dictionary definition of Line Break: A basic definition of line break.
- A twelve-minute video that describes in depth the way that line breaks can influence the way we read and understand poems.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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