

1. Which of the following two lines is iambic pentameter and which is made up of two anapests followed by two iambs?
 - a. When you're sleepy and old and very gray
 - b. When you are old and gray and full of sleep
2. Which of the following two lines is a mixture of iambs (~/) and anapests (~/~/) and which can be said to begin with a dactyl (/~/) followed by a trochee (/~/), an anapest (~/~/), and an iamb (~/)?
 - c. In the West is the bird who whistles in the night.
 - d. West is the Region where I heard her sing.
3. Which one of the following two lines is made up entirely of iambs, and which is made up of an initial trochee followed by a series of iambs?
 - e. Come now, this world is wiser than you think.
 - f. The morning light doth break upon the hill.

If you are unable to answer the questions above, it means that some of the “technical” terms that we’ve been using are still not clear. Don’t get too upset. It’s not easy to learn all about poetic meter in a few minutes. It would be an excellent idea, however, for you to clear up the words in this chapter that you misunderstand. You can check within the chapter (the first usage of any technical word is in italics), or go back to the earlier chapters that dealt with meter. You can also look up any confusing words in an ordinary dictionary. Then come back to our little quiz and take it again.

Poem 38: A Metrical Poem...With a Vengeance

Wouldn’t it be fun to write a poem in which you use all of the meters we’ve mentioned? That would be sixteen different metrical feet—if you do all four paenonic measures. If you’re ambitious and have a quirky sense of humor, such a task should appeal to you. Make the poem sixteen lines long, with three or four feet to each line.

A fine resource for poets interested in meter is *Strong Measures*, by Philip Dacey and David Jauss. The book contains numerous poems in traditional forms by contemporary American poets as well as useful appendices about meter and form.

Line Breaks

In traditional metrical poetry, poetry in fixed forms, the question of where one ends a line does not arise. If, for example, the poem is in iambic pentameter—as sonnets traditionally are—then each line will end after the metrical foot containing the fifth accented syllable, that is to say, after the fifth metrical foot.

Sometimes a poet only counts accents per line rather than both accents and syllables. This is called *accentual verse*. Here are some lines from an accentual poem which contains two accents per line despite differing numbers of syllables:

Everybody’s
had this room
one time or another
and never thought
to sweep. Outside
the snows stiffen,
the roofs loosen
their last teeth
into the streets.

—Philip Levine (from “Saturday Sweeping”)

Other poems find their formal structure by the number of syllables in each line rather than by the number of accents or metrical feet. Philip Levine, whom we have just quoted, sometimes likes to work in loose *syllabic verse*. In his poem “What Work Is,” most of the lines are nine syllables long. Here are the first eleven lines of that poem, all but two of which are that length:

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you’re

old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another.
Feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair, blurring your vision
until you think you see your own brother
ahead of you, maybe ten places.

—Philip Levine (from “What Work Is”)

An interesting example of a syllabic poem is Sylvia Plath’s “Metaphors.” It is a riddle-poem, and the fact that there are nine lines and each line has nine syllables are two of the clues. The title, appropriately, has nine letters. The answer to the riddle will be found near the end of this chapter.

Metaphors

I’m a riddle in nine syllables,
An elephant, a ponderous house,
A melon strolling on two tendrils.
O red fruit, ivory, fine timbers!
This loaf’s big with its yeasty rising.
Money’s new-minted in this fat purse.
I’m a means, a stage, a cow in calf.
I’ve eaten a bag of green apples,
Boarded the train there’s no getting off.

—Sylvia Plath

But what of verse which is unrhymed and unmetrical and written in conformity with no predetermined pattern whatsoever? Where in that case does one end the verse line?

The truth is that there are no rules—one decides as one goes. Two experienced poets writing the same sentence might well choose to break their lines in different places. Some poets tend to prefer lines that are relatively short, some prefer lines that are somewhat long, and others vary the line length continually. The question of how you want the poem to sound will often determine where you break your lines, for to some extent your line breaks act as part of 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. It is often logical to stop a line of poetry at the end of a sentence or phrase unit, as in the following poem:

I Advertised for a Part-Time Job

A man called;
said he’d been in an accident,
needed someone to massage his wounds.

I said I was sorry
but wasn’t qualified,
neither nurse nor masseuse.

He said he’d teach me;
he’d pay \$60.00 an hour!

“WHERE are your wounds?” I asked.

After a slight pause he said,
“You’d have to not be too modest.”

I took a job in an office,
\$6.00 an hour.

I don’t do wounds.

—Kathleen Iddings

The author has divided this poem into seven stanzas, one for each sentence. Notice in the following poem how each line ends where there would be a natural pause in speaking it. Line three, though it follows this pattern, gives additional emphasis to the phrase, “I’ve caught her,” while expanding upon it in the following line. Notice too that the author plays with stanza breaks, turning this brief six-line poem into four stanzas:

The Freedom Fighters

her mother ranks cleanliness
just a little higher than godliness,

so when my daughter realizes I’ve caught her
wiping her hands on her jammies in the kitchen,

she winks conspiratorially,

and I wink back.

—Gerald Locklin

2. Often for pace and/or a sense of unbroken flow, one works against this principle of ending at the end of a natural phrase unit and enjambes the line, ending in the middle of a phrase unit and forcing the reader to either ignore the line end or pause slightly where, had one been

reading prose, one would not have thought to. As we have mentioned earlier, in rhymed poetry enjambment helps mute the rhymes, calling less attention to the rhyme word. Letting the meaning constantly run from line to line often increases both the sense of urgency and—as in this case—the illusion of ordinary, nonpoetic conversation. In the following excerpt the brevity of the lines also helps to create this effect:

he was holding a
fifth of whiskey
in his right
hand.
he was about
30.
he had a cigar
in his
mouth,
needed a
shave.
his hair was
wild and
uncombed
and he was
barefoot
in undershirt
and pants.
but his eyes
were
bright.
they *blazed*
with
brightness...

—Charles Bukowski
(From “The Man with the Beautiful Eyes”)

3. You may want to break a line to give special emphasis to a particular word or phrase by putting it at the end of a line, which often calls more attention to it. “Tugging” in the following stanza takes on an ominous ring it might otherwise not have had. Here, too, the poet is working against the natural pauses, enjambling her lines for increased tension. Read the lines aloud and you will hear it:

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. There are times when a line break can play the part of punctuation, clarifying the syntax and meaning. Since punctuation notates a breath pause as well as a syntactic shift, line breaks are often used so that the reader will know where to pause when reading the poem. As such, they are also a musical notation. Such line breaks are especially useful in poems that have little or no punctuation:

this is the final insult
flat on your back
in the open casket
made up to look
like a harlot
wrinkled face twisted
into a mortician’s
idea of bliss...

—Al Masarik (from “Dirge”)

5. Perhaps you have conceived of a poem as somewhat “tight” and minimalist, the thought and emotion emerging with great compression and energy. That effect might be accomplished more effectively with short lines. Note how the following lines seem to spit out of the speaker:

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”)

And here’s the same effect in the opening stanza of a poem called “The Vocal Groups”:

every block had one
in the halls
in the parks
in the projects
hangin’ out on the corner.
o-o-o-o-in’ & ah-h-h-in’
& doo-whap-doo-wha-a-a,
false tenors cracking the air
in half

—Robert Scotellaro (from “The Vocal Groups”)

6. A large-spirited poem with an embracing vision might seem to require long, inclusive lines. So the lines in the visionary poetry of Whitman, Blake, and Christopher Smart are often extremely long. In twentieth-century American poetry, we see this impulse toward the long, inclusive line in Carl Sandburg, Allen Ginsberg, and Thomas McGrath, among others. Here is a passage from Section 2 of Whitman's "Song of Myself." Notice the kind of sweeping lyricism he achieves with the long line:

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,
You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take things
from me,
You shall listen to all sides and filter them from your self.

When the poetic line extends past the right-hand margin of the page, the convention is to indent the rest of it so that the reader knows it is part of the previous line. Were the paper wide enough, the words would be placed on a single line.

7. Sometimes you may wish to break your line for the surprise or irony that is caused when the first word or phrase of the following line alters the meaning that was established in the previous line. In the following excerpt, note how the fourth line completes the third in a surprising way, changing the idiomatic phrase "carried on" to a different idiomatic expression, "carried on business":

In the other room, I'd dance
To the radio with Annie's kids
While she carried on

Business in her bedroom. She paid me
Those afternoons by the hour
To keep her children

Happy and out of the way.

—Corrine Hales (from "Annie's House")

Here are the opening lines of a poem by Jack Marshall, a poet who tends to use line breaks for irony, surprise, and enrichment of meaning. Notice how the second line seems to have one meaning—until the reader, continuing to the following line, completes the phrase. The

same thing, to perhaps a lesser extent, is also true of the following line:

This is the bodiless night
when those who've loved no longer can

live as one wearing their flesh
with easy knowledge that it is common...

—Jack Marshall (from "This is the Bodiless Night")

8. Poets are often concerned with the visual shape of their poems—perhaps more so than is generally acknowledged—and will often break lines based on how those line lengths make the poem look on the page. Occasionally you may have a particular visual design that you're interested in accomplishing. Here are lines that take advantage of the computer's ability to center lines on a page:

Imagine Whitman remembering each blade of grass.

Imagine Stalin phoning Mayakovsky.

Imagine Stalin phoning Frank.

You can't imagine that?

Frank phoning Stalin?

Of course.

—Andrei Codrescu (from "The Inner Source")

9. Anaphoric verse, that is to say verse that tends to begin with the same word or phrase in each line, is usually end-stopped, the line ending at the end of the sentence or clause. Here is the beginning of a long-lined anaphoric poem by Harold Norse. Each line begins with "In November." At times the poetic lines run on for as many as eight actual lines on the page:

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?

In November I paid the telephone bill and received a final
notice for the non-payment

In November my girlfriend accused me of unreality and
infrequency with a tendency to dematerialize on week-
ends and holidays even Jewish ones and stormed out
leaving a sinkful of dirty dishes and linen blackened by
her feet, souvenirs of blood and tobacco burns...

—Harold Norse (from "In November")

10. Line breaks are often guided by the poet's intuitive sense of what is needed, rather than by any conscious reasoning. Perhaps you simply feel that a line needs to end at a particular word, not for any reason that you can articulate but simply because that line break feels right to you. It might have something to do with musical notation and with emphasis. It is not unlikely that a great many lines in free verse poetry are broken where they are for just this intuitive sense of where the line ought to end.

11. Sometimes a poet will break a line to mask a rhyme—so the rhyme words don't fall at the ends of lines. Addonizio, in the excerpt from "Night Feeding," could have broken lines to create end rhyme with *pins/wind* and *creaks/sleeps* but chose not to, thereby muting those rhymes. By the same token, a poet might wish to end a line on a rhyme word to call attention to it.

12. On occasion, there are special reasons for particular spacing and line breaks. Here is a poem by Paul Blackburn that attempts to be a transcription of the author's last phone conversation with one of his mentors, William Carlos Williams. Williams had suffered a number of strokes and had great difficulty speaking during the last few years of his life. Notice how poignantly Blackburn captures the hesitant, clipped anguish of Williams' voice by his line breaks, odd spacing, and use of punctuation:

Phone Call to Rutherford

"It would be—
a mercy if
you did not come see me...

"I have dif-fi / culty
speak-ing, I
cannot count on it, I
am afraid it would be too em-
ba
rass-ing
for me ."

—Bill, can you still
answer letters?

"No . my hands
are tongue-tied . You have...made
a record in my heart.
Goodbye."

—Paul Blackburn

13. Many modern poets, abandoning the feeling that a new line must start at the left-hand margin, use a more improvisational or open typography to help notate their poems so that the reader has some indication of respective pauses. This isn't, of course, a precise system of time measurement, but if one reads the Blackburn poem with the spaces indicating pauses, one probably comes closer to the author's intention. Why has he separated the periods from the final letter of the sentence? Isn't that a perfect way to give a sense of the tension within a statement by someone for whom each word is agony? It is almost like a silent sigh a second or two after the sentence has been completed. Many contemporary poets do not start their lines at the left margin but vary their line placement the way Blackburn does here.

Here are a few lines written in *tercets* (three-line stanzas) that have a progressively indented margin:

What interests me
is what turns
over at the boiling point, peeling

mass from light
letting bone show through.
Not the pinned down, home

sweet home, but the phantom
photon jumping orbit to feed
what's given with time back

into time; flame
to be lived, out-
living flowers still to come...

—Jack Marshall (from "Chaos Comics")

The author of those lines says that the jagged shape of the tercets—he thinks of them as both analogous to sawblades and to the flow of water—appeals to him for its sense of continuous movement, and that tercets themselves appeal to him—more than quatrains would—because the odd number of lines offers less sense of closure. The form creates a sense of torque in which everything tightens and turns. Given this sense of what he wants his poems to do, one can understand why, for the same reason, he is given to line endings that often set up a surprise—the following line often giving the sense of the bottom dropping out from under the reader.

14. There are times when the line breaks of a poem are an inevitable facet of the poem's logic. This is the beginning of such a poem by Terry Hertzler:

A is for America. It's funny the things we do for love.

B is for bombs. B-52s dropped thousands of bombs on Vietnam—they tore up a lot of ground. Bouncing Betties were small, anti-personnel bombs used in ambushes. One blew the legs off a friend of mine.

C is for Charlie; the Viet Cong. They thought we were invading their country.

D is for dead.

E is for E-1, E-2, E-3, etc. Those are Army ranks. The higher the number, the less chance you'd fall under "D".

—Terry Hertzler (from "A Vietnam Alphabet")

The Solution to Plath's Riddle The answer to the riddle poem by Sylvia Plath—and the explanation for her use of a nine-syllable line—is: a pregnant woman. One will rarely have so specific a motive for breaking lines of unmetered poetry at particular places. Your line break decisions will often be guided by one or another of the reasons listed above.

Poem 39: Working with Line Breaks

Write a poem that has lines longer or shorter than the length you're comfortable with and generally use. If you tend to work in very short lines, avoid them in this poem. If you have never used very long lines, experiment with them. Try for at least one line break that generates surprise or irony. Include in this poem the name of someone you haven't seen in several years; a kitchen appliance; an article of clothing; the name of a street, newspaper, song or movie; one line about a town you've never lived in; and any three of the following words: mucus, tongue, sprawling, relaxed, maniacal, wrinkle, and spinach.

Poem 40: An Accentual Poem

Write a poem about a job you once had. Speak in the voice of someone convinced that the reader has probably experienced something similar. Begin with the phrase "Everybody's had this...(boss/prob-

lem/job/feeling/notion/experience, etc.)." Alternate between two-beat and three-beat lines. Make sure that they don't fall neatly into iambic feet. Remember that some lines that have three accents might be only five or six syllables long, while others that contain three accents might be ten or twelve syllables long. To decide how many beats there are in each line, you are going to have to trust your ear. Keep reading your poem aloud to see how it sounds, and where the accents fall. See, too, if you can't use at least one striking metaphor in this poem and an instance of rich consonance.

Poem 41: Working with Syllabics

Write a short rhymed poem that contains lines of alternately seven and nine syllables. Though you can keep to perfect rhymes where you wish to, try for enough off-rhymes—assonance and partial consonance—to keep it from having too formal and rhymy a feeling. In fact, if the casual reader doesn't notice that it's a rhymed poem, all the better. You may wish, in order to further mute the end-rhymes, to use a more subtle rhyme scheme than *abab*. Perhaps every fourth line will rhyme so that you end up with something like *abcdabcd* or some variation on that pattern. Or perhaps you will opt for a random rhyming pattern in which the only rule is that every line must rhyme with at least one other line.

In this poem reveal at least two of your smaller secrets ("I never go anywhere without dental floss"/ "I read Harlequin Romance novels every chance I get," etc.). Then compare your more innocent foibles with the monstrous crimes of Hitler, Stalin, Attila the Hun, or whoever comes up in your mind. It might be a real person in your life, perhaps your mother's father, or a neighbor who shot his wife, or perhaps it's someone you recently read about in the paper: a man who killed a family of six, or a woman who drowned her two children. Let whatever tone and discourse that emerges out of this situation develop as it will.

Poem 42: Open Field Poetics

Write a poem in which you alter the conventional typography so that at least a third of your lines do not start at the left margin. Look at the excerpts from Blackburn and Codrescu in this chapter and at the Anne Waldman poem in Chapter 23, and try playing with your