

# Poem Structure - Lines and Stanzas

This page is an introduction to poem structure and poetry techniques. What's the best way to divide your poetry into lines? (Hint: "at random" is not the right answer!) Learn more below.

## Poem structure - the line is a building block

The basic building-block of prose (writing that isn't poetry) is the sentence. But poetry has something else -- the poetic line. Poets decide how long each line is going to be and where it will break off. That's why poetry often has a shape like this:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying:  
And this same flower that smiles to-day  
To-morrow will be dying.

That's the beginning of a poem by Robert Herrick. No matter where it is printed, the first line always ends with the word "may" and the second line with the word "a-flying" because the poet has written it this way. If you print a piece of prose such as a short story, the length of the lines will depend on the font size, the paper size, margins, etc. But in poetry, the line is part of *the work of art* you have created. The length of the lines and the line breaks are important choices that will affect the reader's experience.

- **The sound of the poem** - When people read your poem out loud, or in their heads, they will pause slightly at the end of each line.
- **The speed of reading** - Shortening or lengthening the lines can speed up or slow down the way people read.
- **How the poem looks on the page** - Does the poem look light, delicate, with a lot of white space around the lines? Or are the lines packed solidly together?
- **Emphasis** - Words at the end of a line seem more important than words in the middle.

## Poem structure - types of lines

If you are writing a poem with a particular form, such as a sonnet, your choices about line length are limited by the rules of the form. But you still have to decide how to fit the ideas and sentences of your poem over the lines.

- When you fit natural stopping points in a sentence to the end of your line, the reader takes a little pause.
- When a sentence or phrase continues from one line to the next, the reader feels pulled along.
- If your line break interrupts a sentence or idea in a surprising place, the effect can be startling, suspenseful, or can highlight a certain phrase or double-meaning.

## If you are writing in free verse...

...you have even more decisions to make than a poet writing in a traditional form. You can decide to use short lines or long lines, or to vary the length. You can decide to stack your lines evenly along the left margin, or to use a looser or more graphical form. Some poets even write poems that are in the shape of the thing they are writing about, for example, a circular poem about the moon. You have many options, but these choices should never be made randomly.

## Poem structure - stanzas

In prose, ideas are usually grouped together in paragraphs. In poems, lines are often grouped together into what are called stanzas. Like paragraphs, stanzas are often used to organize ideas.

## Poem structure - decisions about form

So many decisions to make -- line length, line breaks, arrangement, speed, rhythm. How should you choose? The right form for your poem depends on, and works with, the poem's content, or what it's about. If the poem is about flying, you probably don't want lines that feel slow and heavy. If you're writing a sad poem, short bouncy lines might not be the way to go.

You may feel overwhelmed by so many issues to think about. How can your inspiration flow freely if you have to keep track of all of these aspects of a poem? The answer is to do the work in two stages.

- First, let your ideas flow.
- Then, go back to the poem later and work on improving the poem structure and form.

In the second stage, it's a good idea to experiment a lot. Try breaking the lines in different ways and compare the effects. Try changing the order of things. Try reorganizing things to move different words to the end of the lines so that the reader's attention goes to them. You've got nothing to lose -- you can always go back to an earlier version. As you go through this process, ask yourself:

- What is my poem about?
- What feeling or mood do I want the reader to have?
- Do I want the poem to move quickly or slowly? Are there places I want it to speed up or slow down?
- What words or phrases do I want to highlight?

There are a lot of things to consider. But the more poetry you write -- and read, the more natural and instinctive some of these decisions about poem structure will become to you.