



Poetry Love by Greg Pincus

## A breakthrough in poetry—understanding line breaks and other ways to make poems sing and pop.

Something that makes a huge impact on your success as a poet is line break (where you stop and start each line). You may have never thought about this before; you just wrote words until you ran out of room at the right hand margin and then you began a new line. Let's change that now. But how, you ask, do I know where to end the line? Unlike rhyming poetry where the rhyming words are at the end of the lines, there is no rule for line breaks in unrhymed poetry-- only this advice: Words that belong together, that somehow make sense together, should be placed together on a line. That might mean six words or a dozen words or only one word. That might mean a complete sentence or a phrase. Here are a few of the main pieces of advice:

- It's logical to break after a sentence or phrase.
- You may emphasize a word by putting it at the end of a line or on a line all by itself.
- Line breaks often take the place of end punctuation.
- A line break in an unexpected place can create surprise, humor, or irony in the poem.
- Line breaks often contribute to the organic shape of a poem.

Experiment with your line breaks until they seem just right. When you read poems, ask yourself why you think poets placed words where they did in their poems. Be sure you have a reason for where you placed words in your poems.

**Besides lines breaks, here are more helpful things to consider when you write poetry:**

1. **Read your poem aloud** listening to the rhythm of your words. Take out words you don't need; change weak or dead words. Add an image or comparison if the poem isn't "speaking to you."
2. Strong verbs are the engines that make any writing move. Stay revved up. **Look at the verbs you used**, especially *is* and *was*, and see if you can think of and use stronger ones (or just leave the weak ones out).
3. Poetry usually has rhythm to it like music (poetry's first cousin) does. Is your poem flowing from line to line or do you want a choppy effect? Adding, omitting, or changing words can help the poem flow smoothly and sound like music. **Think music; think poetry. Love music; love poetry.**
4. Repeat a line or word to emphasize it if it sounds good. (Martin Luther King was a master of this)
5. If you use rhyme, don't let it use you. **Rhyme shouldn't force you to use a word** you don't mean or that doesn't fit or sounds silly or childish. Try to use surprising, unexpected rhymes when you can.
6. Are all your lines in the right places? **Try moving ideas and lines around.**
7. A poem can conclude with a surprise or unexpected ending.
8. Good poems often contain alliteration or metaphors or other **figurative language**.
9. Be specific, not general. **Give a clear picture of what you mean.** *Rose* is specific; *flower* is general. Do your words make clear pictures for the reader? Instead of telling us something is good or nice or pretty, show us what makes it like that. Let us see the picture in your mind when you use those words. **Paint a picture with words.** If you are showing us, you won't need the general adjectives at all. Mark Twain said about the adjective, "When in doubt, cross it out." Good advice!
10. **Don't worry if you are not currently a poet and think poetry is not for you.** Poetry lets you discover who you are. "How do I know what I think until I see what I say" (E. M. Forster). And Grace Paley said, "Write what you don't know about what you know." How? By imagining it in another way. For instance, you know what a baseball is, but what does it feel like to be a major league player? To be the last person on Earth who remembers the game? To be the baseball flying through the air? Surprise yourself and you will surprise your readers too.