

The difference between poetry and prose

Line Breaks, white space



by Julie Patterson, writer-in-residence, Indiana Partnership for Young Writers

Two years ago I was in Boston with 200 other writers, attending workshops and readings, and engaging in long spirited conversations about the writing process. In one workshop, the facilitator divided us into small groups and asked, “What’s the difference between poetry and prose?”

In spite of the fact that my group included three especially brilliant poets that I admire, we stammered through a few false starts. Someone first suggested the use of imagery differentiated the two, then quickly retracted that statement, citing several fiction authors whose prose is noted for its imagery.

Someone else suggested “length,” but one of the brilliant poets countered with examples of book-length poems like Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*.

Trying process of elimination instead, someone else said, “Well, some poems tell stories and some have persuasive intent, so the difference isn’t the *purpose* of the writing.” We all nodded in agreement.

“Rhythm?”

“No, prose writers manipulate sentence and word length to create rhythm too.”

I locked eyes with the brilliant poet who intimidates me the least. “White space? Something to do with white space?” I asked.

My peers puckered pensively, and it was quiet for a moment. Then some doubt crept in.

“I don’t know. Prose writers think about white space, too, especially authors of children’s books,” said a children’s book author.

“Yes, but I think it’s different in a poem. Maybe I should say *line breaks*, not *white space*,” I offered.

“Both of those things equate a moment of silence to a poet,” said a brilliant poet. “And I think that’s the other key difference. Prose *can be* read aloud, but poems are *meant to be* read aloud.”

We began trying to craft a sentence to capture our thoughts and grew increasingly confident in our poetic conclusion: *Poetry is not prose broken into lines. It uses the negative space of silence, yet demands to be heard.*

But our confidence quickly escalated to cockiness. “Let’s write our answer as a poem,” someone said. And that’s when the real trouble began.

Several of us novice poets relied solely on our ears, placing line breaks where we felt the natural pauses were in the spoken statements:

Poetry is not prose
broken into lines.
It uses the negative space
of silence, yet
demands to be heard.

But some of the “real” poets argued that line breaks should be placed so the most important words end each line, and that we should consider a stanza break between the two sentences:

Poetry
is not prose broken
into lines.

It uses
the negative space
of silence,
yet demands
to be heard.

But one of the brilliant poets wanted to use enjambment and white space to emphasize key phrases, give them double meaning or subvert readers’ expectations:

Poetry is not prose
broken into lines.

It uses the negative
space

of silence,

yet demands
to be heard.

And that sent the brilliant poets
into a frenzy, using all of these
strategies at once:

Poetry
is not prose

broken
into lines.

It uses
the negative

space
of silence,

yet

demands to be
heard.

So then we all got carried
away crafting dozens of
variations and arguing which
were the best representations
of our message.

This, I believe, is what non-
poets fail to recognize about
poetry. There are no universal
rules for placing line breaks



and white space. The “right”
way lies in the poet’s heart—
the intended meaning or
effect—but notice, it is
definitely not accidental.

When you teach line breaks in
poetry, you can teach students
a few of these strategies
(breaks at natural pauses,
breaks at most important
words, breaks to emphasize
meaning or surprise readers),
then give students the words to
a poem written out as a block
of prose and ask them to
guess where the line breaks
go. I like to use “This Is Just to
Say” by William Carlos
Williams and “Hidden” by
Naomi Shihab Nye.

On the following day, students
share their versions of these
poems and justify the line

break choices they made.
Then I show them the poet’s
published version, and talk
about why the poet might have
made the decisions he/she did.

Often students claim that the
line breaks they made result in
better poems than the ones
Williams and Nye created.

*No, I insist. You can’t know
what was in their hearts as
they wrote these poems. What
they chose was the “right” way,
just as I can’t tell you what line
breaks you should choose for
your own work, because only
you know what’s best for your
poems.*



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