

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.

Natural pauses in spoken words

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.

Most important words

But some of the "real" poets argued that line breaks should be placed so the most important words ended 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.

Enjambment for emphasis, surprise

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.



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, then give them 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 we talk about why the poet might have made the decisions he/she did. Often students insist that the poems they wrote are better 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 you should choose for your own work, because only you know what's best for your poems.*

Multiple strategies in same poem

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

Poetry
is not prose

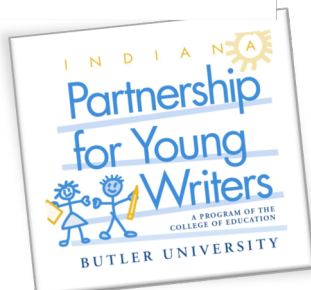
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