

THIRTEEN WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE POETIC LINE

by Dana Gioia

1. The most obvious difference between prose and verse is lineation. In art the obvious is always important—although it is usually exactly what experts ignore. Poetic technique consists almost entirely of exploiting the expressive possibilities of lineation as a formal principle to communicate and intensify meaning.
2. The three common principles of organization for the poetic line are metrical, syntactic, and visual. Each system operates by different rules, but all systems share the assumption of the paramount importance of lineation in focusing the expressive energy and meaning of the poem.
3. Every element in a poem—every word, line break, stanza pattern, indentation, even all punctuation—potentially carries expressive meaning. If you do not shape that potential expressivity, each passive detail weakens the overall force of the poem. Those passive elements are dead weight the poem is obliged to carry.
4. There should be a reason why every line ends where it does. Line breaks are not neutral. Lineation is the most basic and essential organizing principle of verse. A reader or auditor need not understand the principle behind each line break intellectually, but he or she must intuitively feel its appropriateness and authority.
5. The purpose of lineation in verse is to establish a rhythm of expectation that heightens the listener's attention and apprehension. The purpose of poetic technique, especially meter, is to enchant the listener—to create a gentle hypnotic state that lowers the listener's resistance and heightens attention. Free verse lacks the steady physical beat of metrical poetry, but it seeks the same neural effect by different means. Lineation is the central organizing principle of free verse.
6. The reasons determining line length should be consistent within a poem— unless there is an overwhelming expressive necessity to violate them. It takes time and energy to establish a pattern of expectation. Violate the pattern too easily or too often, and the governing pattern falls apart. A badly executed pattern is worse than no pattern. Without an expressive pattern there is no poem.
7. Every poem should have a model line. The standard line length should be clear—consciously or unconsciously—to the listener or reader. The standard should be maintained throughout the poem, except for meaningful expressive variation. After each of these disruptive junctures, the poem either returns to the model line or creates a new standard. The expressive value of all disruptions should be greater than the loss of momentum and the breaking of the pattern's spell.

8. Each poetic line has two complementary obligations—to work well within the total pattern of the poem, and to embody in itself the power of poetic language. The successful poem does not merely balance those differing obligations; it uses them as partners in a seamless dance. Unless they dance, there isn't poetry, only versified language.
9. Each line should have some independent expressive force. Filling out a pattern is not sufficient justification for a line of verse. It should have some independent vitality in musical, imaginative, or narrative terms. The individual line is the microcosm of the total poem. It should embody the virtues of the whole. That is one reason that poetry can be quoted with such advantage.
10. The lineation tells the reader how to hear, see, and understand the poem. As the central formal principle of verse, lineation establishes the auditory and semantic patterns of the poem. The overall formal power of the poem cannot be achieved if lineation is done carelessly.
11. Line endings represent one of the most powerful expressive elements in poetic form. Poetic lines *turn* on the final word in each line. (The original meaning of *versus* is “to turn a plow making furrows in a field”—hence “the turn” is one of the ancient governing metaphors for poetry and poetic technique.) This verbal turning point, even when it isn't rhymed, offers enormous potential for meaningful effect.
12. The word at the end of a poetic line should bear the weight of imaginative or musical scrutiny. The end word of a line is highly visible and audible. Never end lines on weak words unless there is a strong expressive necessity. The end words—rhymed or unrhymed—should generate energy for the poem.
13. The line break is nearly always audible (and always visible), even if only as a tiny pause or echo. One doesn't hear the bar in music, but the trained listener always knows where it is by the shape of the notes around it. Since the line break is so prominent, it must be used for expressive effect. If it doesn't work for the poem, it will work against it.