

LEARNING THE LINES



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Outcomes

This lesson introduces students to the way lines do work in poems and create texture. As a musical score gives direction to the player of an instrument, the line and line-break give direction to the reader of a poem.

Students will learn the difference between end-stopped lines (lines that end with punctuation) and enjambed lines (lines that break where there is no punctuation, that continue in the reader's same breath). You may also choose to use the lesson to introduce students to charting rhyme-scheme using like letters to represent rhymed words, or to introduce them to some new forms. The lesson will also guide students toward listening to the natural cadences of a poem when reading it aloud.

This lesson was made possible by submissions from teachers at the 2001 FPP summer poetry institute.





Ideas and Methodologies

- Make copies of a couple formal, rhymed poems and cut them apart into lines.
- Divide the class into a few groups. Give the line-strips to the students (you may decide to give different poems to the different groups) and ask them, as a group, to "re-assemble" the poem the way they believe it was written, using the rhymes to guide them. Encourage them first to read the lines silently to try to get a sense of what the poem is about, then to say the lines aloud, pairing them with various lines, to help figure out the line order.

Following are some poems you may use from the Favorite Poem Project's anthology, Americans' Favorite Poems:

- "Sonnet 18" by William Shakespeare (an English sonnet rhymed abab cdcd efef gg),
- "Baby Song" by Thom Gunn (written in couplets aa bb cc, etc.).

And some trickier ones (since rhymes repeat, and some are off-rhymes) also from AFP:

- "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost (rhymed abaab cdccd efeef ghggh)
- "Acquainted with the Night" by Robert Frost (written in terza rima, where rhymes in three-line stanzas interlock like so: aba bcb cdc ded ee)
- "Hope is the thing with Feathers — (254)" by Emily Dickinson (using off-rhymes: abcb dede fggg)
- "The Time I've Lost in Wooing" by Thomas Moore (in varying line-lengths: aabbacddc eeffegghg, and with some great rhymes using one or more words, i.e., "sought me" "brought me" and "taught me"; and "won me" "on me" "outrun me."




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Still more advanced:

- In re-assembling these, and those above, students may mix up some lines, which could lead to good discussion!
 - "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop (a villanelle, with some tricky rhymes, i.e. "last, or" rhymed with "master"; a villanelle is a French form, consisting of five tercets (three-line stanzas) rhymed aba aba aba aba, followed by one quatrain rhymed abaa — for a total of 20 lines). Having students put the poem together from pieces may help them understand the form before you explain it's "rules."
 - "The Waking" by Theodore Roethke is another villanelle.
 - "Minstrel Man" by Langston Hughes (here, the lines are short and each stanza has just two rhymed lines, the 4th and 8th lines)
- Next, do the same with a couple of unrhymed poems. These will prove tricky in other ways. Without rhyme to guide them, students will be led by what Frost called "the sound of sense" — how the phrases and sentences that make a poem strike across the lines.

Some suggested poems from Americans' Favorite Poems:

- "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden (a kind of sonnet, because it has 14 lines, but it is not rhymed).
 - "The Snow Man" by Wallace Stevens (a difficult poem in some ways, but very good for this kind of lesson; you may also ask students to look for all the winter words in the poem, as a kind of exploration of images).
 - "The Moon Sails Out" by Federico Garcia Lorca (a poem with wonderfully textured lines, even in translation)
 - From "Tao te Ching" by Lao Tzu (Here, the lines are end-stopped, each a kind of maxim, but the sense builds line by line, i.e. the first line begins "To understand others," the next "To understand yourself," and so on).
 - "An Old Man's Thought of School" by Walt Whitman (Whitman's varied line lengths, some very long, offer another way of thinking of the line).
 - "The lower leaves of the trees" by Sone No Yoshitada (a haiku)
- Let each group present their poems, letting the other groups read along with the complete poem. If all groups looked at the same poems, ask one student to read the rhymed poem and one to read the unrhymed poem.
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- Discuss any discrepancies. If there were none, talk about the process. Was it difficult? What is the poem about? How did the meaning of the poem contribute to figuring out the order of the lines? Did it help to read the lines aloud? Did they notice patterns? Point out the variety of line lengths. One thing that distinguishes poetry from prose is that it is broken into lines. After having looked so closely at the way lines work to make a whole poem, students will have a better understanding of that distinction.
- Looking closely at "the line" — the thing that distinguishes poetry from prose — can lead to the practice of reading poems aloud gracefully, paying attention to rhythms and breaths. Linebreaks and punctuation in poems offer cues about the way a poem should be read aloud — commas are short breaths, periods longer beats. Some poets pause lightly at line breaks, others do not. Reading aloud is also driven by cadences in the language — monosyllabic words slow things down, Latinate words extend lines.
- You may direct your students to read poems aloud with varying emphases. One student may read a rhymed poem pausing at the end of each line and landing hard even on rhymes that end an enjambed line (this is common to beginning readers and sounds sing-songy and not very natural). You may direct the same student to continue with his or her breath when the lines are enjambed, to hear the rhythms of the sentences as they are struck across the lines.
- Try similar varying readings with free verse poems and poems of varying line lengths. You may read a few lines or poems too — first in a clunky way and then following the more natural (though, perhaps formal — because reading poems is a vocal presentation) rhythms. Discuss the different kinds of reading with your students.





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