



Learning the Lines

Recommended Grade Range: Middle School

Learning Objective(s)

Students will be able to...

- ✓ Understand the musical and narrative functions of lines in poetry.
- ✓ Identify different types of line breaks.
- ✓ Listen for a poem's natural cadence when read aloud.

Before Class Begins...

- Make copies of a few formal, rhymed poems (See the "Lesson Resources" section of this lesson plan for some suggestions).
- Cut the lines into strips and put them into an envelope (make sure not to mix up your lines--each envelope should have line strips from just one poem!).
- Repeat this process of cutting poems with a couple of unrhymed poems.

Lesson Agenda

Do Now

- ◆ Students should begin class in assigned small groups. Provide each group with an envelope of their cut-up poem, and **ask them to re-assemble the rhymed poem as they think it was originally written.**
 - ◆ If a group is struggling; advise them to first read the lines to themselves silently to get some sense of what the poem could be about; then, they should try reading the lines aloud, noticing any similarities in sound or theme.
- ◆ When a group finishes ordering their rhymed poem, **give them an envelope with lines from an unrhymed poem.**
 - ◆ This will prove tricky in new ways; without rhyme to guide them, students will be led by what Frost called "the sound of sense," i.e. how phrases and sentences that make a poem strike across the lines.

Share Out

- ◆ Once the groups have completed ordering their two poems, **let each group present their poems.**
 - ◆ Ideally their work can be projected onto the board, so that other groups can follow along.
 - ◆ If all groups arranged the same two poems, ask for volunteers from different groups to read their poems, noticing the differences in arrangement.



Mini Lesson

- ◆ Once all groups have shared out, share the original versions of each poems. Discuss any discrepancies between the original and the student's rearrangements.
- ◆ In this discussion, students should share about their process using the following guiding questions:
 - ◆ Was it difficult to figure out the line order?
 - ◆ What do you think your poem is about?
 - ◆ How did the poem's meaning contribute to figuring out the line order?
 - ◆ How did reading the lines aloud help your process?
 - ◆ Did you notice any patterns in your lines?

Closing

- ◆ Point out the **variety of line lengths in the poems**. Explain to students that poetry is often distinguished from prose because it is broken into lines.
- ◆ Encourage students, in their future readings of poems, **to look closely at the line**, and to practice reading poems aloud. Reading aloud will help them distinguish moments of rhythm and breath.

Homework

- ◆ Follow-up assignments vary; see the "Suggestions for Next Steps" section of this lesson plan.

Suggestions for Next Steps

- ◆ For a deeper dive into lineation, you may wish to discuss how different kinds of punctuation offer cues about how a poem should be read (commas as short breaths, periods or em-dashes as longer beats). You could enhance this discussion with videos of poems being read aloud, paying attention to the length of readers' pauses and cadences.
- ◆ This could be the launching activity for a longer unit on recitation, in which students practice reading poems aloud with varying emphases.
 - ◆ For example, a student could practice reading a rhymed poem with a pause at the end of each line, landing hard on enjambed rhymes (creating a sing-songy rhythm). A student could then try reading the same poem to focus only on their breath, to hear the rhythms of sentences as they are struck across lines.

(Lesson Resources on Following Page)



Lesson Resources

Rhymed Poem Suggestions:

Some easier poems from the Favorite Poem Project anthology *Americans' Favorite Poems*:

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

Some trickier poems from *Americans' Favorite Poems*:

- "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost (rhymed in terza rima, wherein three-line stanzas interlock: aba//bcbc//cdcd//ded//ee).
- "Hope is the thing with Feathers-- (254)" by Emily Dickinson (off-rhymed abcb//dede//fggg).
- "The Time I've Lost in Wooing" by Thomas Moore (varied line lengths, rhymed: aabbaccddc//eeffeegghg).

More advanced poems from *Americans' Favorite Poems*:

- "One Art" by Elizabeth Bishop (a complex villanelle, a French form of five tercets rhymed aba//aba//aba//aba//aba//abaa).
- "The Waking" by Theodore Roethke (another villanelle).
- "Minstrel Man" by Langston Hughes (short lines; each stanza has just two rhymed lines, in the 4th and 8th line).

Unrhymed Poem Suggestions

All 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).

The Favorite Poem Project is a nonprofit organization dedicated to celebrating, documenting, and encouraging poetry's role in our lives.



This lesson was made possible by submissions from teachers at the 2001 Favorite Poem Project summer poetry institute and Rachel M. Dillon (NYC Public Schools).

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