

Playing with Lines

One thing that sets poetry apart from prose is the way lines are arranged. In prose, we say what we have to say in paragraphs. In poetry, we tell our stories in lines and stanzas.

A good way for students to get the feel of how the form of poetry differs from prose is to play with lines. Here is a poem from *Pirates* (Boyds Mills Press, 2008). I've shown the poem the way it appears in the book.

Signing Up a Crew

Gather 'round, ye scurvy mates,
I'm signing on a crew.

You there! Can ye tie a knot?
Ye'll do.

I'd say you've snatched a purse or two.
Ye'll do.

Does the thought of plundered gold
Make ye shiver?
Make ye bold?
Ye'll do.

Ha! You're rotten through and through!
Ye'll do.

Phew! You stinking drunken lout!
You'd whack your uncle's gizzard out!
Well step right up!
Beyond a doubt
Ye'll do!

Here's the same poem rearranged into a paragraph.

Signing Up a Crew

Gather 'round, ye scurvy mates, I'm signing on a crew. You there! Can ye tie a knot? Ye'll do. I'd say you've snatched a purse or two. Ye'll do. Does the thought of plundered gold make ye shiver? Make ye bold? Ye'll do. Ha! You're rotten through and through! Ye'll do. Phew! You stinking drunken lout! You'd whack your uncle's gizzard out! Well step right up! Beyond a doubt ye'll do!

Show this version to your students first. Explain that this is a poem and they need to decide how the lines should look on paper.

There will probably be many versions, which gives you an opportunity to discuss why they broke the lines the way they did. You can talk about how some lines have punctuation at the end to let the reader know to make a slight pause. The proper term for lines that end with punctuation is *end-stopped*.

Lines without end punctuation invite the reader to keep reading into the next line. That kind of line is called *enjambment*.

I suggest you begin with a poem that rhymes, like the one I used here, because it gives students more hints about how they might break the lines from paragraph form into poetic form. Once they have tried poems that have rhyme and meter, try them on a free verse poem, one that has neither rhyme nor meter. This presents a tougher challenge, but it will strengthen students' understanding of how the placement of lines in a poem help us read and appreciate the poem itself.

Here's a brief free verse poem to get you started, but you may prefer to choose examples of your own. Eaglet appears in *Wild Country* (Boyd's Mills Press, 1999)

Eaglet

Not quite ready,
he sits on the family nest
and calls for food.

Soon he must leave.
Soon he'll be ready,
but today the world
still looks big,
the future uncertain.

Not quite ready,
he sits on the family nest
and waits for food.

Eaglet

Not quite ready, he sits on the family nest and calls for food. Soon he must leave. Soon he'll be ready, but today the world still looks big, the future uncertain. Not quite ready, he sits on the family nest and waits for food.