

Line Dancing: Reading Line Breaks on the Page and on the Stage
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CCSS.ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 9-10.4, 9-10.10, 11-12.1, 11-12.4, 11-12.7, 11-12.10

NCTE Standards: 1-6; 11-12

(Two Periods)

Overview

Most poems at once look different on the page, a sure sign of their uniqueness, their immediate claim to extra-ordinariness. This is because of the line unit and the line break; line breaks are one of the super powers poets have at their disposal. Like a musical measure, a line and the way a sentence may be broken over lines of poetry can create moments of surprise and delight. The surprising arrangement of words, phrases, and clauses, and sentences into lines is one of the richest sources of interpretation and pleasure in poetry, but it may also be one of the reasons that many students see poetry as strange and confusing. This exercise will help students become more comfortable with line breaks, to think about the ways in which they can inform not only the meaning of a poem on the page and the reader's experience of its language, but also how understanding line breaks may aid in the performance of poetry out loud as well.

From Theory to Practice

In my book *Wordplaygrounds*, I wrote that “deciding where and how to create line breaks is one of the most challenging aspects of writing poetry.” The same holds true for reading poetry. One of the most confusing aspects of poetry to many readers is the lineation of words on the page, because students have usually not had a lot of experience reading poems and considering lines.

Materials

Excerpt from Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Kay Ryan's poem “Sharks' Teeth”

Excerpt from Walt Whitman's poem “Song of Myself”

Kevin Young's poem “Negative” (Kevin Young uses line breaks to devastating effect in many poems. You might also try “Ode to the Hotel Near the Children's Hospital”; and “I am trying to break your heart”).

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Further Reading

Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. (1992). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

O'Connor, John, S. *Wordplaygrounds: Writing, Reading and Performing Poetry in the English Classroom*. (2004). Urbana, Illinois: NCTE Press.

Rebecca Hazelton, "Learning the Poetic Line," www.poetryfoundation.org

Objectives

Students will:

- Explore the relationship between line length and the subject matter of the poem.
- Practice close reading by considering the line as a unit of meaning.
- Choose a favorite line from a poem they will read with the class and use it to inspire an original poem of their own.
- Take a piece of recent writing (not necessarily poetry) and recast a section of that piece with new line breaks.

Session One

1. Ask students to list the differences between poetry and prose on the board. This list will highlight important differences in visual presentation (poems usually look different than prose) and the list will offer an opportunity to highlight the focus of this lesson: reading the line as a key unit of meaning in poetry.
2. Pass out copies of two poems: "Sharks' Teeth" by Kay Ryan, and "Song of Myself" by Walt Whitman.
3. Ask students to stand up, move away from their desks and form a circle.
4. Announce that we are going to play a variation of musical chairs. One student will read "Song of Myself" aloud. Everyone else in the class will walk in a circle as the reading starts. At the end of each line the reader will say, "Stop," and the walkers will stop moving. The reader will start again, and the circle will move again as before. (The Whitman poem is long, so we might just use its first section.)
5. Repeat the activity with a new reader for the poem "Sharks' Teeth."

6. Ask students what they thought and felt as they walked. Here students are literally thinking on their feet—and with their feet. Whitman covers a lot more ground with each line (and there are more metrical feet, or stressed syllables, per line) in part because his ambitions are huge. His is a poem about the limitless possibilities of the self and the magnificent expanse of America. Some have even suggested his *Leaves of Grass* is a paean to the American notion of manifest destiny as our nation continued to grow westward and outward. Kay Ryan’s poem features very short lines (only 3-5 words per line) that seem well suited to her topic: carving out small moments of quiet in our noisy technological age.
7. As a follow up, ask students to portray a line in a dramatic tableau: a wordless “frozen picture” in which students “perform” the line for the class. (See the attached photograph “Tableau” from my classroom). This, again, reinforces the idea of reading individual lines as carrying their own meaning within a poem.
8. For homework, invite students to write a response to a single line from one of the poems they read today.

Session Two

1. Pass out the **Excerpt from Toni Morrison’s novel *Jazz***. This is part of a large prose paragraph, so there are no line breaks within the paragraph. Yet the words are striking, beautiful, and “poetic.” Ask students to rewrite the passage in poetic lines. The length of each line is up to each student, but they should have a rationale for the choices they have made. Perhaps the “poem” will be tall and narrow like the cityscape she is describing; perhaps students will decide to end lines on the most interesting words; perhaps the words will be written in long, slack lines that imitate the narrative sentences of the passage. There is no “right” answer. Instead, this exercise gives students the opportunity to play around with language, the way poets do.
2. Having considered the line as the fundamental unit in poetry, ask students to read Kevin Young’s poem, “Negative.” First have the class read the poem silently, then have the class take turns reading one line at a time. The breaks in this poem are playful and sometimes even comment ironically on the “narrative” of the poem. Reading the poem line by line will help students hear the speaker’s voice more clearly.
3. Have a student (or two, or twenty!) read the poem aloud seeing if they can convey some of that line-play in their reading. Encourage students, for example, to pause slightly at the end of some lines so that the audience can hear what suggestions the lines contain in addition to the meaning of the sentences in which they occur.

Excerpt from Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1992).

I'm crazy about this City.

Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blasé thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible – like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last, everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree. Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. In halls and offices people are sitting around thinking future thoughts about projects and bridges and fast-clicking trains underneath (p. 7).



Classroom Tableau

Common Core State Standards

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.1, 11-12.1: Cite Strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone).

ELA-Literacy RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 9-10 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.7: Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

ELA-Literacy RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 11-CCR text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-CCR text complexity band independently and proficiently.

NCTE Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).