

## Brief Review: Punctuation and Line Breaks in Poetry

Cadence or pace in poetry is influenced by the rhythm of the words, but it is also influenced by the amount and kind of punctuation. **The general rule: the more punctuation, the slower the poem will read.** Punctuation is not the only factor influencing a reader's pace, but it is an important influence. When punctuation occurs at the end of a line, it is called an end-stopped line. A run-on line, also called enjambment, occurs if there is no punctuation at the end of the line, or if the idea expressed in one line is continued on in the next. Enjambment urges the reader to move to the next line without pausing. It lessens the sing-song effect or a regular end-rhyme pattern. A mark of punctuation that comes within the line itself is called a caesura. Caesuras cause the reader to pause or stop in the middle of a line, providing a clear break in thought or slowing the pace of the poem. **Some poets omit punctuation or use it minimally. If you decide not to use punctuation, or if you decide to use it sparsely, perhaps you will have to give even more thought to leading the reader to a correct reading of your poem.** You may subscribe to the philosophy that multiple readings are possible and legitimate. In fact, you may encourage it by using deliberate ambiguity, but be sure that is truly what you intend to do. **You then might want to consider line length and appropriate spacing (or stanza structure) between passages, realizing that space slows the reader somewhat, and also that word placement on the page will affect a particular reading of your poem.**

Examples of end-stopped line, enjambment and caesura—all in one poem:

### God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God. **Example of an end-stopped line (enjambment)**

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
Example of caesura; the punctuation slows the line  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the clearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
Example of enjambment  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

### Line Placement – Practice Exercise:

Punctuation has been omitted from the following poem. Rewrite this poem two to four times, each time punctuating the poem differently and spacing the words on the page the way you want them to look. Show your poems to the group and read the various revisions. Do different readings produce different contextual results?

### Title of Poem: Free Flight

Like the phoenix from the ashes she is flying again emerging from inside herself a  
metamorphosis of strength from agony sun reflecting gold on gold wings blinding  
eyes with brightness and beauty flying above all

(author unknown)

**Source:** *The Creative Writing Guide* by Candace Schaefer and Rick Diamond. Longman: New York, NY; 1998. (ISBN: 0-321-01123-6.)

**You are encouraged to consult the following links (listed below) as a general guide to poetry writing, line breaks, punctuation, and so on:**

- <http://www.writingforward.com/grammar/grammar-rules/breaking-grammar-rules-in-poetry-writing> (Nice overview!)
- <http://lamonaca.deviantart.com/art/Punctuating-Poetry-Part-One-103788331> (Has other helpful links to writing poetry.)
- [http://www.absolutewrite.com/specialty\\_writing/punctuate.htm](http://www.absolutewrite.com/specialty_writing/punctuate.htm) (Great one! Lots of examples and clear definitions, too!)