

Introduction: The Structure of a Poem

Poets utilize structural elements of poetry in order to successfully convey the meaning of their work. The stanza structure; the length of the lines; sound devices; word choice – they all aid the creation of tone and mood in a poem, and work together to present the meaning. It is important that you have a good understanding of the structural elements of poetry, so that you can understand how they work to support and carry the ideas of a poem.

FORM

Form, in poetry, can be understood as the physical structure of the poem: the length of the lines, rhythm and meter, the system of rhymes and repetition etc. Certain specific poetic *forms* have been developed over time in different cultures. Examples of such forms are: the sonnet, haiku, the villanelle, ballad etc.

Questions to ask: Is the poem an example of a particular form? If so, what?

STANZA STRUCTURE

One of the most fundamental structural aspects of a poem is the *stanza*. Generally speaking, the stanza is the arrangement of lines into groups, separated by an empty line - similar to verses, or paragraphs. Stanzas are often named according to how many lines they contain; for example, a four-line stanza is called a quatrain.

Questions to ask: Is the poem divided into stanza? If so, what type, how and why?

RHYTHM & METER

Each line of a poem will have its own structure, and the *meter* is the rhythm and sound pattern of a line of poetry. The rhythm is important as it gives the poem its sound and differentiates it from prose. The meter is defined by the pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables in a line.

Questions to ask: Is there a set meter? If so, what is it? If not, what effect is produced?

LINE STRUCTURE

Lineation dictates when a line of poetry stops and a new line begins. When analyzing a poem, the line structure is essential; poets choose to place words in a certain order for a reason, and the construction of their lines is important when understanding the tone and meaning of the poem.

Questions to ask: Where are the line breaks? What effect does this have when reading?

SOUND EFFECTS

Poets employ techniques of sound to enhance their poems. The way the words and lines sound to the reader will affect the mood, tone, fluency and possibly even the meaning of a poem.

Questions to ask: What sound devices are used? What effect does this have on the tone?

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Using figurative language in a poem allows the poet to express his/her thoughts in a deeper, more effective manner through metaphors, similes, hyperbole, oxymorons etc. This method creates vivid images in the mind of the reader, which enhances the meaning of the poem.

Questions to ask: What figurative language techniques are used? What images do these create?

Stanza Structure

stanza | 'stanzə | **noun**

a group of lines forming the basic recurring metrical unit in a poem; a verse.

One of the most basic and fundamental structural elements of a poem is the *stanza*. Generally speaking, the stanza is the arrangement of lines into groups, separated by an empty line - similar to verses, or paragraphs.

Types of stanzas:

One way to understand stanza structure is to count the number of lines in a stanza. There are names for stanzas with different numbers of lines:

- 2 lines: **Couplet**
- 3 lines: **Tercet**
- 4 lines: **Quatrain**
- 5 lines: **Cinquain**
- 6 lines: **Sestet**
- 7 lines: **Septet**
- 8 lines: **Octave**

Note:

Some poems will stick to a rigid stanza structure with each stanza consisting of the same number of lines, while other poems may be composed of a mix of different lengths of stanzas.

Stanzas are also often characterised by a certain rhyme scheme. For example, a **couplet** typically is two lines of the same length which rhyme.

Is the stanza structure of a poem significant?

How a poet chooses to structure their words is important. Stanzas are often deliberately organised to serve a purpose. This may be in order to group ideas or images together, to indicate a change in tone, idea or focus, or the stanza breaks can be used as a pause for thought or to create a brief silence, which holds meaning. Similarly, a poem may not be broken up into individual stanzas, because the poet doesn't want you to pause while reading.

Have a look at an example:

Examine the stanza structure of the poem below:

Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night

By Dylan Thomas

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Analysis

* This poem is organised into SIX stanzas - 5 tercets and 1 quatrain.

* The first stanza introduces the argument the speaker is making.

* Each of the next 4 stanzas (tercets) deals with different types of men (wise men, good men, wild men, grave men).

* The final quatrain is different in meaning and structure. It is longer (4 lines) as the speaker makes his personal appeal.

* The stanza structure helps convey the argument of the speaker - the essential meaning of the poem.

Stanza Structure

Practice Worksheet

For each of the following, briefly describe the stanza structure, and comment on how it affects the tone and meaning of the poem (you should do this in the same way as the example was analyzed on the information page).

Suicide in the Trenches

By Siegfried Sassoon

I knew a simple soldier boy
Who grinned at life in empty joy,
Slept soundly through the lonesome dark,
And whistled early with the lark.

In winter trenches, cowed and glum,
With crumps and lice and lack of rum,
He put a bullet through his brain.
No one spoke of him again.

You smug-faced crowds with kindling eye
Who cheer when soldier lads march by,
Sneak home and pray you'll never know
The hell where youth and laughter go.

Acquainted with the Night

By Robert Frost

I have been one acquainted with the night.
I have walked out in rain — and back in rain.
I have outwalked the furthest city light.

I have looked down the saddest city lane.
I have passed by the watchman on his beat
And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.

I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street,

But not to call me back or say good-bye;
And further still at an unearthly height,
One luminary clock against the sky

Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right.
I have been one acquainted with the night.

Anthem for Doomed Youth

By Wilfred Owen

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them, no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs, —
The shrill demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.

What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.

Poems: Line Structure

line |laɪn| **noun**

a part of a poem or song forming one row of written or printed words.

Lineation dictates when a line of poetry stops and a new line begins. When analyzing a poem, the line structure is essential; poets choose to place words in a certain order for a reason, and the construction of their lines is important when understanding the tone and meaning of the poem.

You want to ask the following questions when thinking about the line structure of a poem.

How long are the lines?

The length of a line will affect the speed you read it, and will affect the tone and meaning. If the poem is composed of short lines, then you will read the poem quite quickly, as your eye moves rapidly from line to line. If the poet puts a single word on its own line, the word may be emphasized. What if the poem is composed of longer lines and then one line is considerably shorter? That will emphasize that particular line.

Where does the line break or pause?

Lines of poetry are not the same as sentences. One sentence, or thought can run over many lines and even end mid-line, and a new sentence can begin in the same line. Therefore, where the poet chooses to break the lines and start a new one is significant.

- **End-Stopped:** When there is a break at the end of a line, denoted by a comma, period, semicolon, or other punctuation mark, that line is *end-stopped*, and the effect of this is that a brief pause is created between lines. See the following example:

"The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep."

- From *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening*, by R. Frost

Each line ends with a pause. This slows your reading of this final stanza and makes each line more deliberate, which conveys the labored and tired feeling of the speaker.

- **Enjambment:** Enjambment is the continuation of a sentence or clause over a line-break; the thought runs on from one line to the next. See the following example:

"April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

- From *The Waste Land*, by T.S. Eliot

Note how these lines flow from one to the next without a break at the end. This mimics the ongoing process of the seasons. It also creates tension as the reader gets to the last word and wonders what follows. Breeding... what? Mixing... What? Stirring... what?

- **Caesura:** A strong pause or stop within a line is called a *caesura*. A caesura will usually occur in the middle of a line of poetry, but can occur towards the beginning or the end of a line (but not between lines). These types of caesurae are called medial, initial, and terminal respectively. The effect of such a pause is that it creates a brief silence for thought or reflection, and can emphasize certain words. See the following example of a medial caesura:

"Good-Nature and Good-Sense must ever join;
To err is Humane; to Forgive, Divine."

- From *An Essay on Criticism*, by Alexander Pope

Note the break between "Humane" and "to", created by the semi-colon. This break emphasizes the comparison and contrast between the human and the divine.

What is the last / first word of the line?

When a reader gets to the end of a line of poetry, the last word of the line is emphasized as it takes a split second longer for the reader's eye to move from the end of a line to the beginning of the next. Therefore, that last word stays in the mind of the reader just a fraction of a second longer. Often poets end their lines with rhymes, which adds to the emphasis of these words.

Line Structure

Practice Worksheet

When analyzing the structural elements of a poem, the line structure is important. Examine the poem below (which is written in free verse form) and then answer the questions about line structure.

Granadilla

By Amy Lowell

I cut myself upon the thought of you
And yet I come back to it again and again,
A kind of fury makes me want to draw you out
From the dimness of the present
And set you sharply above me in a wheel of roses.
Then, going obviously to inhale their fragrance,
I touch the blade of you and cling upon it,
And only when the blood runs out across my fingers
Am I at all satisfied.

1. How is punctuation used in the poem? Explain 2 examples, and discuss the effect produced.

2. Explain how the length of the lines affects the poem's tone or meaning.

3. Are there any end-stopped lines? Give examples and explain the effect produced.

4. Is there enjambment in the poem? Give an example and explain the effect produced.

5. Are there any caesuras? Give an example and explain the effect produced.

UNDERSTANDING POETRY

Line Structure

Practice Worksheet

When analyzing the structural elements of a poem, the line structure is important. Examine the poem below (which is written in free verse form) and then answer the questions about line structure.

Grass

By Carl Sandberg

Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work—
I am the grass; I cover all.

And pile them high at Gettysburg
And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:
What place is this?
Where are we now?
I am the grass.
Let me work.

1. *How is punctuation used in the poem? Explain 2 examples, and discuss the effect produced.*

2. *Explain how the length of the lines affects the poem's tone or meaning.*

3. *Are there any end-stopped lines? Give examples and explain the effect produced.*

4. *Is there enjambment in the poem? Give an example and explain the effect produced.*

5. *Are there any caesuras? Give an example and explain the effect produced.*
