

The Logic of Lineation

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Grade Level: University

Time Frame: 1 hour

Objectives: Students will explore the effects of line endings by discussing lineation in an existing poem and generating lineated poetic text. Students will also spend time listening to and transcribing poetry; ELL students may find this particularly beneficial, though the exercise is also useful to students of poetry generally.

Prior Knowledge and Skills: None required.

Required Materials: Hard copies and recording of W.S. Merwin's "For the Anniversary of My Death"; computer with Internet access and audio/video playback capability. Poem text is available [here](#); recording is available on [voca](#), the Poetry Center's online audio/video library (use the 1975 recording).

Sequence of Activities

Introduction: 10 minutes

Ask students: what makes a poem different from prose in English? When the concept of line endings emerges, ask students what purpose they think line endings serve in poetry.

Writing Activity I: 20 minutes

Divide students into small groups of 3-4. Ask students to listen to the first 30 seconds of the [voca](#) recording of Merwin's "For the Anniversary of My Death" (in his reading of February 12, 1975) and transcribe that section of the poem. Transcriptions should be lineated; in other words, each group should guess where line endings occur.

Give students copies of the published version of the poem and have students mark the published version's line breaks in their transcriptions (with slashes or other marks). Discuss: how did the students' lineation choices differ from the poet's? What surprises occurred?

Writing Activity II: 20 minutes

Ask students to look around them and write a 2-sentence description of the space in prose; one sentence should describe something that they see, and the other should describe something that they hear. (Note: given more time, students can write descriptions that include details from all 5 senses.)

Ask students to pair up and exchange prose descriptions. Students will break their partner's prose description into lineated poetry.

Have volunteers read each version in pairs (first the prose description, then the lineated version). Ask everyone to listen for differences in emphasis, pacing, and meaning between the two versions.

Conclusion: 10 minutes

Wrap-up discussion: how does poetic lineation affect meaning and/or music in a text? Share additional student writing as time allows.