

Going Organic: Line Break in Free Form Haiku

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The line is the fundamental structuring tool in writing poetry and understanding how and when and why to use it is even more essential in the writing of free verse [1] where neither poet nor reader has the guide of a predetermined metrical pattern or stanza structure. I remember the moment, back in the mid 1990s, when I suddenly "got" line break, a real eureka moment that illuminated the correlation between form and content in free verse poetry.

Over the years I developed and refined my ideas about the structuring possibilities available to free verse poets but when, in 2006, I started studying and writing haiku, my, by now inbuilt, free-verse poet's attention to form was more of a hindrance than a help. Line breaks that could be supported in a longer free verse poem were now shouting from the page. "Yoo hoo!" they called. "Aren't I a clever girl?!" And no one likes a show off.

Over the years I have managed to develop a lighter touch but attention to line break in free form haiku still remains an essential crafting element. As **John Barlow** says:

In a poem as short as haiku every word, and just as importantly every pause and silence—whether these be internal or at the end of the poem—has to play a full part in both meaning and rhythm. [2]

Line break, and the pause it creates, contributes to the meaning of the haiku.

The following list of possible reasons for breaking a line forms the basis of two seminars in all of my poetry writing courses:

1. To emphasise normal speech patterns and pauses.
2. As a form of punctuation, i.e., to direct the reading of
4. To emphasise a single word on a line, or the last or first word on a line.
5. To confine an image to a single line or to split an image over more than one line.
6. To introduce a dramatic effect, e.g., misdirection, temporary ambiguity, hesitancy.
7. To reflect the poem's dominant mood or emotional tone.
8. To play with the surrounding white space on the page.
9. To express the poem's organisation.
10. To suggest balance or imbalance.

I was interested to explore how well they might apply to writing haiku.

- 1. To emphasise normal speech patterns and pauses.**
- 2. As a form of punctuation, i.e., to direct the reading of the poem.**

Because of its reputation for simplicity and lack of adornment a haiku with an understated form, i.e., one that comfortably fits normal speech patterns and subtly directs our reading, might be automatically accepted as the most effective, but if those lines/ speech patterns also reinforce the theme then the effectiveness is increased.

the scent of cut grass
carried on a March breeze
a still-sleepy bee [3]

The line breaks in **Brian Tasker's** haiku make it easy to read; they don't cut or extend the breath, they reveal the images in turn, there's no confusion. We feel the leisureliness of the moment because of this arrangement and also because of the soothing repetition of three principal stresses in each line. I admit to a certain suspicion of centred haiku—it often seems to be chosen for decoration rather than anything to do with the haiku itself—but here the choice seems conscious and I feel "centred" too, at rest in the middle of the page.

3. For the music of the line.

I close my book—
a wave breaks its silence
against the rocks [4]

It is often because of their music that some haiku pin themselves to our memories and this is the case with Caroline Gourlay's haiku. My free verse poem editor automatically identifies a line break at an obvious point in the middle of line two:

I close my book—
a wave breaks
its silence against the rocks

and I do believe that the new third line would make for a more interesting line in a free verse poem. But restraint is the better option here and the haiku is more memorable for the comforting rhythm of its opening and closing iambic lines that surround the three heavy stresses in the middle line.

4. To emphasise a single word on a line or the last or first word on a line.

Here's another haiku from **Brian Tasker**:

first warm day
the ground
gives a little [5]

Placing a word, or image, on a line of its own naturally draws attention to it so we need to be sure that the attention is deserved. Here, the weight we apply to the word "ground" as we read it parallels the imagined physical weight the haiku wants us to experience: the change of the season we detect when the ground "gives a little" to our footfall.

The verb "gives" at the opening of the third line is separated from its subject and becomes a vehicle for other ideas: giving as in "gift," the "little" gift we are rewarded with as we realise spring is on its way.

5. To confine an image to a single line or to split an image over more than one line.

A three-line haiku often segments the image, or images, it contains, but when we feel poets are working consciously with this technique we place more trust in them:

summer sales
a Caravaggio
chalked on the kerb [6]

The "Caravaggio/chalked on the kerb" in **Matthew Paul's** haiku is a single image yet the poet breaks

the line to slow us down in our reading. When we read "Caravaggio" master paintings come to mind, but the following line reverses our expectation. This is the work of a street artist, although not something we might appreciate any less. In fact, the skill and location of these works often have more power to attract us than paintings held in museums. When we read the haiku again the fracture created by the line break invites us to ponder on the ideas of value and greatness, and on what can be bought and sold.

In contrast, **John Barlow** lays out his imagery in a more traditional manner:

out between showers
her milk tooth grin
wobbling with her bicycle [7]

The poet wants us to experience the break between showers *before* we see the child's smile and *before* we see her learning to ride her bicycle. The order of perception⁸ is important: knowing the child is young ("milk tooth") impacts on our emotional response to the final line. There is tenderness and there is unease, in the subject of the haiku, in the viewer of the scene and in the reader. Once we have experienced the haiku in its parts we go back and absorb it as a whole and the concrete imagery—the breaks between showers, a child's shaky smile during the rite of passage of learning to ride a bike—takes on the deeper significance about parenting and releasing a child into the world.

6. To introduce a dramatic effect, e.g., misdirection, temporary ambiguity, hesitancy.

skipping stones—
the stuttered marriage
proposal [9]

In **Terra Martin's** haiku the break in line two temporarily misdirects the reader as to the meaning (is the marriage itself "stuttered" or fragmented?) and injects its own stutter into the phrase "marriage proposal." This reflects the nervousness of the person doing the proposing and links wonderfully to the image of skipping stones in the first line—the way they bounce and rise and bounce again before finding their resting place.

A different dramatic effect is achieved in **John Stevenson's**

a crowded street
I'm the one
who steps in it [10]

"I'm the one" is a phrase we might naturally associate with boasting or self-aggrandisement, particularly as the "I" is fore-grounded against an anonymous "crowded street." The line break creates a temporary ambiguity, as well as hesitancy... before we step, along with the narrator, into the unfortunate reality of the closing line. The line break is part of the self-deprecating humour in the haiku.

7. To reflect the poem's dominant mood or emotional tone.

after the crash
the doll's eyes
jammed open [11]

The shape of **Michael Gunton's** haiku, the "weight" of its square shape on the page reinforces the heaviness of the emotional theme. In addition, the two heavy stresses in each line further emphasise the sudden shock and grief associated with such an event. Notice too how the short second and third lines cut the breath slightly, reinforcing the theme of loss and distress.

An alternative layout, following a more traditional s/l/s pattern might have been:

after the crash
the doll's eyes jammed
open

but we lose the compression of the original shape and the line break after "jammed" adds a melodramatic element, the denouement hinted at but held back, and becomes unnecessarily titillating for such a serious subject matter and the understated approach of haiku writing.

8. To play with the surrounding white space on the page.

An unexpected line-break in another of **Gunton's** haiku:

summer evening
a man in a vest leans out
to water his plants [12]

contributes to the fun. This light hearted line-break uses the white space on the page so the reader "leans out" along with the man in the haiku: we feel the stretch into the whiteness of the right hand side of the page but also feel the emptiness in the drop below as suggested by the indent in the third line.

9. To express the poem's organisation.

Now looking back,
Where we had talked
Among the stones—
A wagtail in the rain [13]

This haiku, by **Tito**, has four lines rather than the traditional three. Why? My first response is that the first line might be redundant:

Where we had talked
Among the stones—
A wagtail in the rain.

I think that works. But critical analysis generally benefits from trusting the poet and attempting to discover his/her intention rather than imposing our own opinions too quickly. So what do the four lines and an extra line break achieve that the three lines don't?

The extra line adds far more than just three words. When I read the original and then my cropped version aloud, the latter feels significantly more compressed, and hurries me towards the juxtaposition of the place among the stones and the wagtail. The addition of the opening line, with its pronouncement of "Now," adds a gravitas to the haiku that's missing completely in my three liner. It expands the haiku too, creating a more balanced and considered division of commentary (the first two lines) and imagery (the last two lines). And of course, "looking back" can be read at different levels too: looking behind one, literally, but also looking back in time. The three lines I first suggested might make an acceptable haiku but the four lines are richer in terms of the emotional experience.

10. To suggest balance or imbalance.

Wandering the supermarket aisles
the diagnosis
sinks in [14]

Ken Jones uses line break to throw the reader off balance: all the physical weight of the haiku is anchored on the left hand side while two small words float on their own in the white space on the right. The form is perfectly suited to the reality of the experience, how it takes time for some kinds of information to sink in, how we fill our days with the weight of the ordinary, and how the "truth" of a situation can suddenly hit us and set us adrift.

Two lines can be an appropriate choice for haiku where the idea of balance is important.

in the darkness
pushing open a door [15]

Keith J. Coleman's haiku balances one thing against another: darkness against possible light, the unknown with what might become known, and while a three-line haiku could have been created with a break after "pushing/" the reciprocation of form (one line set against another) and this content would have been lost.

The list is by no means definitive; it represents an ongoing investigation into my own editing processes. I am sure other writers will have more and different reasons for shaping their haiku. I am sure too that some will challenge the emphasis on crafting suggested here, haiku writers who feel that haiku emerge from the moment and "all a haiku often needs is a little tighter focus and a little polish." [16]

Disagreement is good for critical debate and unanimity amongst poets is not a goal worth pursuing. What is important is each individual poet's attention to the conscious crafting of their work if, that is, their aim is to transform the raw material of personal experience into something that becomes important to others too.

Notes

1. "free verse" is a misnomer in that it is only "free" because of the absence of any pre-determined form on which to "hang" the words. I prefer the term "organic" because of the process of finding the form, during the conscious editing process, in direct response to subject matter, theme and emotional tone.
2. "An Introduction to the Origins, Mechanics and Aesthetics of English- language Haiku," in *The New Haiku*, John Barlow & Martin Lucas (eds.), Liverpool: Snapshot Press 2002, p. 193 .
3. Brian Tasker, *a ragbag of haiku*. London: The Bare Bones Press, 2004, unpag.
4. Caroline Gourlay in *another country; haiku poetry from Wales*, N. Jenkins, K. Jones, & L. Rees (eds.), Llandysul, Wales: Gomer Press 2011, p. 146.
5. Brian Tasker, *Ibid*. 6. Matthew Paul, *The Regulars*. Liverpool: Snapshot Press 2006, p. 17.
7. John Barlow in *The New Haiku*, p. 24.
8. For more on "Order of Perception," see Lee Gurga's *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, Lincoln, IL: Modern Haiku Press 2003, pp.37-38.
9. Terra Martin, *tiny words*, 15 June 2007, <<http://tinywords.com/>>
10. John Stevenson. *quiet enough*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2004, unpag.
11. Michael Gunton. *Echoes in the Heart*. Portsmouth, UK: Waning Moon Press, 1997, unpag.
12. Gunton, *Ibid*.
13. Tito, in *Stepping Stones, a way into haiku*, by Martin Lucas, Hornchurch, UK: BHS 2007, p. 9.
14. Ken Jones in *The New Haiku*, p. 94. 15. Keith J. Coleman. in *Stepping Stones, a way into haiku*, p.

142.

16. Bruce Ross. *How to Haiku, a writer's guide to haiku and related forms*. North Clarendon, VT: Tuttle 2002, p. 33.



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