

“Punctuating Poetry”

A Presentation by John Roche for NMSPS November 9, 2024

“How do I punctuate my poems?” is an oft-asked question. Should one capitalize each line, using periods and commas at the ends of lines, use lots of dashes like Emily Dickinson, follow E.E. Cummings in eschewing capitals altogether, or even create one’s own system of notation like some experimental poets? The answer will depend on your own personality and what you are trying to convey.

To punctuate is literally to “point out” by way of marks. Another meaning is to “occur at intervals throughout,” suggesting a close relationship between punctuation and rhythm. Taken broadly, “punctuation” includes all the “road signs” a given poet chooses to post for the reader. These may include not only punctuation marks and capitalization, but typefaces and font sizes, spacing and line breaks, or even icons, drawings, etc.

Let’s look at some various approaches:

1. John Keats, “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer” (sonnet 24)

MUCH have I travell’d in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told 5
That deep-brow’d Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken; 10
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men
Look’d at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

[This famous sonnet follows the conventions of that format in capitalizing all lines. It also heavily punctuates endings with semicolons or periods. Keats utilizes dashes in lines 12 and 13. Why? He also indents 2nd and 3rd lines of the first two quatrains, yet breaks that pattern in third quatrain with “Or”. Why?]

2. Poetry Foundation version, which oddly left indents it all, thus flattening it out (unlike original manuscript). What is the effect on our reading?

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

**3. Emily Dickinson, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes” —(372)
(omitted from the early editions edited by friends and family members)**

After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

[Note formal capitalization, even Germanic capitalization of some nouns. Why the dashes? Critics point out that her early poems relied on the quite assertive exclamation mark, whereas by the 1860s she had switched to dashes as her dominant mode of punctuation. And sometimes used “slanted or vertical” dashes. Also that she “published” her work in letters and postcards and homemade booklets, often with illustrations and whimsical calligraphy—vowels that look like eyes or feet, etc.]

with gravity
 to start her death-defying leap
 And he
 a little charleychaplin man
 who may or may not catch
 her fair eternal form
 spreadeagled in the empty air
 of existence

[Note how the Ferlinghetti takes advantage of the full page, under the influence of Cummings, and probably Charles Olson, whose *Projective Verse* essay (1950) influenced the Beats and others.]

6. Larry Eigner, "Six Poems"

LARRY EIGNER

LARRY EIGNER

SIX POEMS

I

much space along the
 wall ride
 the times sound of the motor
 in one place the cellar
 full of cans and the sun
 about here, on brushes

 lying round the spare
 years
 the turf of flowers at the panes
 before the hedge the neighbor's
 the west may shine
 single smatter of rain

 upstairs the heat of absorption
 there are many sides the pipes are only cool
 interrupted quick shingles the
 shadow bent nesting some spots
 as the smoke in winter
 the plane carrying transmitters
 perhaps the
 screen is a broken frame
 I leave it in the corner behind

2

stand on one foot

 like a tree

227

[Eigner was a Projectivist poet influenced by Olson and Creeley. His intensity of attention to the minuteness of line may also be connected to his cerebral palsy and the necessity of composing on a manual typewriter using only right index finger and thumb.]

7. Michael McClure, from *Ghost Tantras* (1964)

MARILYN MONROE, TODAY THOU HAST PASSED
THE DARK BARRIER

diving in a swirl of golden hair.

I hope you have entered a sacred paradise for full
wan-n bodies, full lips, full hips, and laughing eyes!

AHH GHROOR. ROOHR. NOH THAT OHH!
OOOH ...

Farewell perfect mammal.

Fare thee well from thy silken couch and dark day!

AHH GRHHROOR! AHH ROOOOH. GARR
nah ooth eeze farewell. Moor droon fahra rahoor
rahoor, rahoor. Thee ahh-oh oh thahrr
noh grooh rahhr.

[An example of McClure's "beast language" and theatrical capitalizations, which are meant to influence performance. Some Slam poets also use caps and idiosyncratic typography to indicate volume and other speaking techniques.]

8. Robert Creeley, "The Whip" (from *For Love*, 1962)

I spent a night turning in bed,
my love was a feather, a flat

sleeping thing. She was
very white

and quiet, and above us on
the roof, there was another woman I

also loved, had
addressed myself to in

a fit she
returned. That

encompasses it. But now I was
lonely, I yelled,

but what is that? Ugh,
she said, beside me, she put

her hand on
my back, for which act
I think to say this
wrongly.

[Note despite the extreme enjambment and lack of rhyme, these are left-justified couplets with fairly conventional use of punctuation. How do the stanza breaks modulate the poem's semantic flow? Why the commas in lines one, twelve, thirteen?]

9. Robert Creeley, "Goodbye"
(First appeared in journal *The Exquisite Corpse*, 1996)

Now I recognize
it was always me
like a camera
set to expose

itself to a picture
or a pipe
through which the water
might run

or a chicken
dead for dinner
or a plan
inside the head

of a dead man.
Nothing so wrong
when one considered
how it all began.
It was Zukofsky's
"Born very young into a world
already very old..."
The century was well along
when I came in
and now that it's ending,
I realize it won't
be long.

But couldn't it all have been
a little nicer,
as my mother'd say. Did it
have to kill everything in sight,

did right always have to be so wrong?
I know this body is impatient.
I know I constitute only a meager voice and mind.
Yet I loved, I love.

I want no sentimentality.
I want no more than home.

[Note Creeley's use of left justification and conventional end punctuation, though with sparse capitalization and with varying stanza lengths. Note the increased punctuation in the final stanzas. Why?]

10. Naomi Shihab Nye, "Blood"

(from *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland, Oregon: Far Corner Books, 1995))

"A true Arab knows how to catch a fly in his hands,"
my father would say. And he'd prove it,
cupping the buzzer instantly
while the host with the swatter stared.

In the spring our palms peeled like snakes.
True Arabs believed watermelon could heal fifty ways.
I changed these to fit the occasion.

Years before, a girl knocked,
wanted to see the Arab.
I said we didn't have one.
After that, my father told me who he was,
"Shihab"—"shooting star"—
a good name, borrowed from the sky.
Once I said, "When we die, we give it back?"
He said that's what a true Arab would say.

Today the headlines clot in my blood.
A little Palestinian dangles a truck on the front page.
Homeless fig, this tragedy with a terrible root
is too big for us. What flag can we wave?
I wave the flag of stone and seed,
table mat stitched in blue.

I call my father, we talk around the news.
It is too much for him,
neither of his two languages can reach it.
I drive into the country to find sheep, cows,
to plead with the air:

Who calls anyone civilized?
Where can the crying heart graze?
What does a true Arab do now?

[Naomi Shihab Nye's "Blood" may be a good example of the contemporary workshop-influenced conventions regarding punctuation. If so, how do they differ from 19th century conventions on the one hand, and the Modernist and Beat experimenters on the other?]

Your Turn!

Below is an example of a "joey," I form I created for my "Joe the Poet" persona poems, though it has been adopted by others to write about various characters and themes. This ten-line, less-than-100-word form relies on extreme compression, using parataxis (juxtaposition without conjunctions) and similar devices. It is extremely pared down, with scant punctuation, so that there are "no highway signs or dividing lines / and very few rules to guide" as the Grateful Dead once sang.

Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to take this bare-bones poem and redo it with clearer punctuation and syntax. Feel free to add rhyme or stanza breaks or anything you like. You may exceed the ten-line, 100-word limit for added descriptive detail.

Joe the Hermit

nobody can call me text me email me skype me tweet me
but you can write me
ive got po box in town thirty miles up dirt road follows arroyo
if not too snowy or muddy can get there once a week
only stranded a few weeks a year
chevy truck has no reverse don't want to go back
please send royalties money order easier to cash
ive got credit at piggly wiggly hardware store
barmaids all know my name
what else do I need but guitar pad pen paper

Time permitting, you might try creating your own 10-line persona poem. Not necessarily about Joe.