

Where to break the line? Certainly, that is one of the most challenging issues we poets face, especially if we are writing free verse. In formal verse there are rules to guide us and rhymes to achieve. But in free verse the breaks must be guided by other principles. Most of us wrestle with this issue as we revise and revise. Wesley McNair offers us some useful tips.

### **Ten Tips for Breaking Lines in Free Verse**

1. Break your lines to suggest the mind at work shaping the poem, because every poem is a process of thought.
2. The poem is also about things that happen. Break to increase your reader's anticipation about what will happen next.
3. Break to suggest your poem's mood. For an openness of expression, try a long, end-stopped line. To create uncertainty or suspense, combine short lines with a long sentence, revealing and concealing as you go. For a mood of agitation or excitement, try a variable line-length with a jagged margin.
4. Break to create a tension between the line and the sentence, remembering that the interplay of the two is the central drama of free verse, each having a different purpose. Charles Simic: "The line is Buddha; the sentence is Socrates."
5. Think of your poem as a musical score, in the way Denise Levertov recommended, using lines to emphasize vocal rhythm and the pitch of intonation, and line breaks as short intervals of silence or rest.
6. Break so your reader sees how to say your poem.
7. But don't forget the wordlessness around the poem, which can be made articulate by a line break or by an artful arrangement of lines.
8. Break mainly on nouns, verbs, and the words that describe them; they carry the sentence's essential meaning.
9. In your line breaking imitate the stresses of meditation and feeling, which are present in every earnest and intimate conversation and are the true source of the line break.
10. Believe these tips and don't believe them. Let the feeling life of your poem be the final authority.