

# Enjambment

In *A Poetry Handbook*, poet Mary Oliver says, “prose is printed (or written) within the confines of margins, while poetry is written in lines that do not necessarily pay any attention to the margins, especially the right margin.” There is a natural pause for the reader at the end of any line of poetry, whether that line contains a whole thought, a clipped phrase or even a single word.

Lines are considered enjambed when they don’t end with punctuation or can’t be understood independently on their own. Enjambment is a method or technique used to control or even force or alter pace. It can also be used to force the reader’s attention or even confuse the reader into considering a new meaning possibility for the line.

Consider this short poem by Geoffrey Brock, “Homeland Security”:

The four am cries  
of my son worm  
through the double  
foam of earplugs

and diazepam.  
The smoke alarm’s  
green eye glows.  
Beneath the cries,

the squirm and bristle  
of the night’s catch  
of fiddlebacks  
on the glue-traps

guarding our bed.  
Necrotic music.  
Scored in my head.  
And all night columns

of ants have tramped  
through the ruins  
of my sleep, bearing  
the fipronil

I left for them  
home to their queen.  
Patriot ants.  
Out of republics

endlessly perishing.  
If I can hold  
out long enough,  
maybe my wife

will go. If she  
waits long enough,  
maybe he’ll go back  
down on his own.

Look what happens if the first sentence of the poem is re-formatted poem to take away that enjambment and end-stop the lines. This means each line terminates in a complete phrase or with end punctuation.

The four AM cries of my son  
worm through the double foam  
of earplugs and diazepam.

The difference is not only in pace but in meaning. In the original, the first line “The four AM cries” is open to several possibilities (an alarm sounding, a ritual, an abrupt wake-up, a subway train, etc). The meaning narrows under the re-formatting “The four AM cries of my son” leaving little doubt as to the situation.