

# Caesura



## DEFINITION

What is a caesura? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A caesura is a pause that occurs within a line of poetry, usually marked by some form of punctuation such as a period, comma, ellipsis, or dash. A caesura doesn't have to be placed in the exact middle of a line of poetry. It can be placed anywhere after the first word and before the last word of a line. In the following line from the prologue of *Romeo and Juliet*, the comma after "Verona" marks a caesura: "In fair Verona, where we lay our scene."

Some additional key details about caesuras:

- The plural of caesura is caesurae.
- A line of poetry can contain multiple caesurae.

## How to Pronounce Caesura

Here's how to pronounce caesura: sez-**yoo**-ra

## Caesura in Depth

Caesurae have been used in poetry since the time of the ancient Greeks and Romans—though, back then, the term was even more specific and referred to pauses that actually threw off the [meter](#) of a line of poetry. The Romans and Greeks, however, wrote their poetry using much more rigid conventions of meter than are used in English verse, and the word caesura has long since come to mean simply a pause in the middle of a line, such as:

To be, or not to be — that is the question...

In this famous line from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the dash in the middle of the line represents a pronounced pause. Read the line aloud yourself and you will hear the pause. The comma after "To be" is another example of caesura in this line, though the pause is arguably a briefer one.

## How Poets Mark Caesura

When analyzing poetry, poets and scholars sometimes mark instances of caesura by using a symbol called a "double pipe," which looks like this: ||. Here's an example of how the double pipe is used to mark caesura in context:

To be, || or not to be — || that is the question...

As you can see, from this example, it is possible to have multiple caesurae in a single line of poetry.

## Feminine vs. Masculine Caesurae

In poetry that uses meter, each caesura is defined as "masculine" or "feminine" depending on whether the pause comes after a **stressed** or **unstressed** syllable. A feminine caesura follows an unstressed syllable, as in:

The woods are lovely, || dark and deep

A masculine caesura, on the other hand, is one that follows a stressed syllable, as in:

My words fly up, || my thoughts remain below

Generally speaking, feminine caesura often are a bit shorter and feel "softer." Masculine caesura often feel harder and more abrupt.

## Initial, Medial, and Terminal Caesura

Instances of caesura are also sometimes referred to based on where they occur in the line.

- **Initial caesura occurs toward the beginning of a line**, such as the comma in "To be, or not to be — that is the question..."
- **Medial caesura occurs in the middle of a line**, such as the dash in "To be, or not to be — that is the question..."
- **Terminal caesura occurs near the end of a line**, such as the dash in the line "Then there's a pair of us — don't tell!"



## EXAMPLES

### Caesurae in *Beowulf*

[Beowulf](#) is one of the oldest surviving poems written in Old English. Poems written in Old English often used lots of caesura, and Seamus Heaney's modern English translation of *Beowulf* does an excellent job of preserving the original text's prolific use of caesurae. This example shows that, although the use of caesurae can create an unusual or jarring rhythm that might be perceived by some as more "modern," it has actually been in use for many centuries.

A ring-whorled prow rode in the harbour,  
Ice-clad, || outbound, || a craft for a prince.  
They stretched their beloved lord in his boat,  
Laid out by the mast, || amidships,  
The great ring-giver. || Far-fetched treasures  
Were piled upon him, || and precious gear.  
I never heard before of a ship so well furbished  
With battle tackle, || bladed weapons  
And coats of mail. || The massed treasure

Was loaded on top of him: || it would travel far  
On out into the ocean's sway.

Both of the caesurae in the second line are feminine, because each pause follows an **unstressed** syllable: **Ice-clad**, || **outbound**, || a craft for a prince.

### Caesura in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 42"

This excerpt from Sonnet 42 by Shakespeare contains an example of caesura in each line except the fourth.

If I lose thee, || my loss is my love's gain,  
And losing her, || my friend hath found that loss,  
Both find each other, || and I lose both twain,  
And both for my sake lay on me this cross,  
But here's the joy, || my friend and I are one,  
Sweet flattery, || then she loves but me alone.

### Caesura in Ashbery's "Our Youth"

This stanza from John Ashbery's poem "Our Youth" gives a more modern example of caesura using three different types of punctuation: ellipsis in the first two lines, a period in the third, and finally a comma in the fourth.

Blue hampers . . . || Explosions,  
Ice . . . || The ridiculous  
Vases of porphyry. || All that our youth  
Can't use, || that it was created for.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use caesurae to create variation in the rhythm of a poem, or to emphasize words in the middle of lines that might not otherwise

receive attention. Since line breaks in poetry tend to serve as a natural pause regardless of whether the lines are **end-stopped** with punctuation, the rhythm of poems with lines of equal length can become somewhat monotonous and unvaried without the use of caesurae to create pauses in the middle of lines. The use of caesurae also allows writers to formulate their thoughts and images using more complex sentence structures with different clauses and a freer use of punctuation than is possible without the use of caesurae.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Caesura](#): A somewhat technical explanation, which also discusses how caesura are used in poetry written in different languages.
- [The dictionary definition of Caesura](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of caesura (it comes from the Latin word "cut").

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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