

End-Stopped Line



DEFINITION

What is an end-stopped line? Here's a quick and simple definition:

An end-stopped line is a line of poetry that ends with some form of punctuation, such as a comma or period. For example, the poet C.P. Cavafy uses end-stopped lines in his poem "Ithaka" when he writes "Ithaka gave you the marvelous **journey**. / Without her you wouldn't have set **out**. / She has nothing left to give you **now**." If a line of poetry contains a complete phrase it is considered to be end-stopped even if it lacks punctuation.

Some additional key details about end-stopped lines:

- The easiest way to tell if a line is end-stopped is to look for punctuation at the end. That might include a comma, colon, semi-colon, dash, period, question mark, exclamation point, or ellipsis. The punctuation signifies the end of a grammatical unit, whether that unit is a clause of a sentence or a complete sentence.
- Consistently end-stopping the lines of a poem tends to have the effect of accentuating the rhythmic quality of the poem, since it makes the pauses occur more regularly.

End-Stopped Lines and Meter

End-stopped lines are used in all types of poetry, including poetry both with and without a meter.

- **End-stopped lines in metered poetry:** In both [formal verse](#) (poetry with a strict meter and [rhyme scheme](#)) and [blank verse](#) (poetry with a strict meter but no rhyme scheme), end-stopping lines has the effect of increasing the feeling of regularity in the rhythm of the poem—sometimes rather dramatically. This is because the lines in a metered poem all contain the same number of syllables, a fact which becomes more pronounced to the listener when pauses at the end of lines are inserted at regular intervals. The increased rhythmic quality provided by end-stopped lines can make the poem easier to follow, since it is broken down into more digestible units. At the same time, such end-stopped lines can sometimes make the rhythm seem *too* regular, or dull.
- **End-stopped lines in poetry without meter:** In [free verse](#), which lacks a meter, the length of lines can vary dramatically, so the use of end-stopped lines doesn't necessarily lend *regularity* to the rhythm. But end-stopped lines *can* nonetheless accentuate the rhythm of the poem—whether it's a regular or irregular rhythm. This is because line breaks usually cause a reader to pause

slightly—so when a line break is coupled with an end-stop, this pause can feel even further exaggerated.

End-Stopped Lines vs. Enjambed Lines

The opposite of an end-stopped line is an [enjambed](#) line, in which the sense of a sentence or clause continues across a [line break](#) without any punctuation mark. To get a sense of the difference between [end-stopped](#) and [enjambed](#) lines, take a look at this excerpt from [Romeo and Juliet](#) which contains some of each type:

When he shall **die**,
Take him and cut him out in little **stars**,
And he will make the face of heaven so **fine**
That all the world will be in love with **night**
And pay no worship to the garish **sun**.



EXAMPLES

End-Stopped Lines in Shakespeare's "Sonnet 18"

Here is a rare example of a Shakespearean [sonnet](#) in which every line is end-stopped. Typically, Shakespeare wrote sonnets in which at minimum the first line was [enjambed](#).

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date;
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;
Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

End-Stopped Lines in Alexander Pope's "An Essay on Man: Epistle 1"

The English poet Alexander Pope was known for writing in closed [couplets](#), a rhyming form that is heavily end-stopped. In this stanza from his poem "An Essay on Man: Epistle 1," every line is end-stopped.

Say first, of God above, or man below,
What can we reason, but from what we know?
Of man what see we, but his station here,

From which to reason, or to which refer?
 Through worlds unnumber'd though the God be known,
 'Tis ours to trace him only in our own.
 He, who through vast immensity can pierce,
 See worlds on worlds compose one universe,
 Observe how system into system runs,
 What other planets circle other suns,
 What varied being peoples ev'ry star,
 May tell why Heav'n has made us as we are.

End-Stopped Lines in Percy Shelley's "A Lament"

In this example from the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, some of the lines are **end-stopped** and some are **enjambéd**. This scenario, in which a poem has some of each type of line, is actually more common than for an entire poem to be either entirely end-stopped or entirely enjambed.

O world! O life! O time!
 On whose last steps I climb,
 Trembling at that where I had stood before;
 When will return the glory of your prime?
 No more—Oh, never more!

Out of the day and night
 A joy has taken flight;
 Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar,
 Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
 No more—Oh, never more!

End-Stopped Lines in Dickinson's "Fame is a bee."

Dickinson's use of punctuation is a bit unusual (she uses dashes to replace many different types of punctuation), so her poems make for an interesting example of end-stopped lines. It may not always be clear, because the punctuation is nonstandard, what *kind* of pause is supposed to come at the end of a line, but even so the rhythmic quality Dickinson creates in her poems through the use of end-stopped lines is unmistakable.

Fame is a bee.
 It has a song—
 It has a sting—
 Ah, too, it has a wing.

End-Stopped Lines in Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay"

Anne Carson is a contemporary poet who writes in free verse. Here is a passage from her long poem "The Glass Essay," in which every line is end-stopped.

It is as if we have all been lowered into an atmosphere of glass.
 Now and then a remark trails through the glass.
 Taxes on the back lot. Not a good melon,

too early for melons.
 Hairdresser in town found God, closes shop every Tuesday.
 Mice in the teatowel drawer again.

End-Stopped Lines in C.K. Williams's "The Nail"

C.K. Williams is known for his use of very long, grammatically complex lines. End-stopping lines is a good technique for this kind of writing, because the punctuation at the ends of lines give readers a moment to pause and digest what they have just read instead of needing to carry onto the next line immediately. Every line in this example (the first stanza of the poem) is end-stopped.

Some dictator or other had gone into exile, and now reports
 were coming about his regime,
 the usual crimes, torture, false imprisonment, cruelty and
 corruption, but then a detail:
 that the way his henchmen had disposed of enemies was by
 hammering nails into their skulls.
 Horror, then, what mind does after horror, after that first
 feeling that you'll never catch your breath,
 mind imagines—how not be annihilated by it?—the
 preliminary tap, feels it in the tendons of the hand,
 feels the way you do with *your* nail when you're fixing
 something, making something, shelves, a bed;
 the first light tap to set the slant, and then the slightly harder
 tap, to em-bed the tip a little more ...



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Generally speaking, the ends of lines are a natural place for punctuation in poetry because [line breaks](#) *already* suggest a pause. Because of this, end-stopped lines are used in most poetry. However, that doesn't mean that it's all that common for every line of a poem to be end-stopped. More typical is that some lines of a poem are end-stopped, while others aren't.

In terms of a single line of a poem, a poet might choose to end-stop it in order to:

- Give it more weight.
- Add a feeling of finality or certainty to the language.
- Simply because the poet didn't want the sentence or clause to run-on beyond the line break for reasons of rhythm, meaning, or something else.

When end-stopped lines are used together in sequence—one after another—it can make the poem feel somewhat slower or heavier because all the pauses are doubly-accentuated through punctuation and line breaks. [Enjambment](#), by contrast, often has the opposite effect—of speeding up the poem, since one line runs-on into the next instead of getting resolved at the end. But end-stopped lines don't always feel heavy or clunky. Just as often, the regularity of the pauses

at the ends of lines can help listeners or readers to understand the information being presented in the poem, since end-stopping has a way of breaking the poem up into more comprehensible units.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on End-Stopped Lines](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of End-Stopped](#): A basic definition of end-stopping.
- This [reading](#) of a heavily end-stopped poem "The Burning Babe" by Robert Southwell will give you a sense for the heavy and rhythmic quality that end-stopped lines can give a poem.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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