

Enjambment



DEFINITION

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

Enjambment is the continuation of a sentence or clause across a line break without any terminating punctuation mark, such as a comma or period. For example, the poet John Donne uses **enjambment** in his poem "The Good-Morrow" when he continues the opening sentence across the line break between the first and second lines: "I wonder, by my troth, what thou and I / Did, till we loved? Were we not weaned till then?"

Some additional key details about enjambment:

- A line or stanza of poetry is enjambed if it doesn't have punctuation at the end—such as a comma, colon, semi-colon, period, question mark, exclamation point, or ellipsis.
- The opposite of an enjambed line of poetry is an **end-stopped** line, which is a sentence or clause whose terminating punctuation *does* fall at the end of a line of poetry.
- Enjambment has the effect of encouraging the reader to continue reading from one line to the next, since most of the time a line of poetry that's enjambed won't make complete sense until the reader finishes the clause or sentence on the following line or lines.

How to Pronounce Enjambment

Here's how to pronounce enjambment: en-**jam**-ment

How to Tell If a Line is Enjambed

Sometimes, whether or not lines of poetry are enjambed or end-stopped will be obvious because the punctuation (or lack of punctuation) will make it obvious. But in other poems it can be less clear whether or not lines are enjambed.

Clear Instances of Enjambment

For instance, take these lines from [Romeo and Juliet](#), the first, second, and fifth of which are **end-stopped**, and the third and fourth of which are **enjambment**:

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**.

Here the first two lines, as well as the fifth line, are clearly end-stopped, as they end with commas and periods. Meanwhile, third and fourth lines are enjambed, as there is no punctuation to interrupt the flow of the sentence across the line breaks. More generally, the punctuation (or lack of it) in this example makes it very clear what's enjambed and what's end-stopped.

Unclear Instances of Enjambment

However, in some poems it may be difficult to tell whether a line is enjambed based only on punctuation. Many poets use punctuation in idiosyncratic ways (or not at all), and in those cases, a reader must pay attention to the *phrasing* of the poem—how the poet uses line breaks and punctuation to push the poem forward or to create pauses. Take a look at the following excerpt from a poem by Emily Dickinson, who is known for her unusual use of punctuation.

Because I could not stop for Death—
 He kindly stopped for me—
 The Carriage held but just Ourselves—
 And Immortality.

The first three lines of the stanza end, somewhat weirdly, with a dash. So, are they all end-stopped? In this case, it may be helpful to look more carefully at the sentences (rather than the punctuation) and ask where the pauses occur.

The first two lines, re-written with proper punctuation, would read: "*Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me.*" The syntax of the sentence implies a comma after the word "Death" and a period after the word "me"—so, in this case, the poet's use of dashes is not misleading; both lines are, in fact, end-stopped.

The third and fourth lines, however, when re-written with proper punctuation, might read: "*The carriage held but just ourselves and immortality.*" Here, there's no punctuation after the word "ourselves." So, is the third line enjambed? The answer is that it's open to interpretation. In fact, there are three ways to look at whether the third line of the poem is enjambed:

- **Focus only on the punctuation and decide that it's end-stopped** because of that dash with which Dickinson ends the line.
- **Focus on the sense and syntax of the sentence, and decide that it's enjambed** because the overall sentence structure, when not weirdly punctuated with dashes, does not imply any punctuation, such as a comma.
- **Focus on the poet's intention, and decide that it's end-stopped** based on the interpretation that, even though the dash doesn't imply punctuation such as a comma, it *is* meant to create a pause that would cause the line to function as if it was end-stopped.

As this example illustrates, enjambment is not always a simple matter of punctuation—it can be subject to interpretation based on other factors, such as sentence structure and the phrasing of lines.

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Under a strict definition of enjambment, based solely on punctuation, every line highlighted in yellow would be described as enjambed because it doesn't have terminal punctuation. But if these same lines are read with an eye toward where punctuation is *implied* by the sentence structure (even though the poet doesn't include punctuation), it may be argued that the yellow lines end naturally in pauses, and are therefore end-stopped.

For example, pay special attention to the line "**and whatever a sun will always sing is you.**" Not only does the line read as though it were the end of a sentence, but the following line *must* be read as the beginning of a new sentence, and thus a period is implicit at the end of the first stanza even though none is used. The original, unpunctuated line fits the *strict* definition of enjambed lines, but a further and more nuanced examination reveals that oftentimes the enjambment of a given line is open to interpretation.



EXAMPLES

Shakespeare's "Sonnet 116"

Four of the first eight lines of this sonnet by Shakespeare are **enjambéd**.

Let me not to the marriage of true **minds**
 Admit impediments. Love is not **love**
 That alters when it alteration **finds**
 Or bends with the remover to remove:
 O no! It is an ever-fixed **mark**
 That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
 It is the star to every wandering bark,
 Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.

Enjambment in Anne Carson's "The Glass Essay"

Here are the first two stanzas of Anne Carson's long poem "The Glass Essay." The lack of punctuation at the end of the first stanza provides an example of an **enjambéd** stanza. The second line of the first stanza and the first line of the second stanza are also **enjambéd**.

I can hear little clicks inside my dream.
 Night drips its silver **tap**
 down the back.
 At 4 A.M. I wake. **Thinking**
 of the man **who**
 left in September.
 His name was Law.

ee cumming's "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]"

In this poem by ee cummings, whose poems were known for their eccentric (and lack of) punctuation, a majority of the lines are **enjambéd**, a few are **end-stopped**, and some lines are open to **interpretation**. The excerpt below is of the first two stanzas of the poem.

i carry your heart with me(i carry it in
 my heart)i am never without it(anywhere
 i go you go,my dear;and whatever is done
 by only me is your doing,my **darling**)
 i fear
 no fate(for you are my fate,my sweet)i want
 no world(for beautiful you are my world,my **true**)
 and it's you are whatever a moon has always **meant**
 and whatever a sun will always sing is **you**



WHY WRITERS USE IT

The effect that enjambment has on a line or an entire poem can vary, depending on the context. Here are a few of the reasons a writer may use enjambment in their poetry:

- **To create a sense of anticipation in a poem**, since the full meaning of enjambed lines only becomes clear by reading further in the poem. In this way, enjambment can also create a feeling of movement or confusion in a poem.
- **To control the phrasing or rhythm of a poem** by inserting pauses, in the form of line breaks, where they otherwise wouldn't be. Especially for poets who are sparing in their use of punctuation, the use of a line break in the place of punctuation can help to create a pause in the rhythm.
- **To emphasize a meaningful word.** Ending a line with a word that wouldn't normally receive emphasis can be a good way of shifting the reader's focus to particular words that require added weight in the poem.
- **To create sentences of varied lengths and rhythms** without having to vary line length.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Enjambment](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Enjambment](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of enjambment (spoiler: it comes from a French word meaning "to stride over").
- A [short video](#) explaining enjambment in under three minutes.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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Chicago Manual

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