POETRY STANDARDS FOR PUBLICATION
IN *PEN IN HAND & EMERGING VOICES*

by Roderick Deacey, Editor, *Pen in Hand*

Here are a few general points to help you prepare your poems for publication in *Pen in Hand* and *Emerging Voices.* These suggestions are intended to help smooth the path of your words and thoughts directly into the minds of your readers. While you may ignore these guidelines, I recommend that you consider them; one or two are mandatory. These unspoken rules are based on overwhelming feedback from literary editors who deal with thousands of submissions a year. We edit all poetry submissions to *Pen in Hand* and *Emerging Voices* to these standards. *I understand that these guidelines are heavy going for younger Teen Club members. Teen Club leaders, please interpret as necessary.*

1. Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath, and Seamus Heaney all had one thing in common—they capitalized the first letter of the first word in every line of their poems. **Standard practice these days is not to do this**; it's distracting and doesn't add anything to the poem. It also has the effect of making your poem look dated—
   Nobody wants that, do they? For examples of how poems should look, check out recent issues of leading literary magazines such as *Poetry*, *Rattle*, or *Poet Lore*, printed or online. Or you can check issues of *Pen in Hand* on the Maryland Writers Association website.

2. Please don't think of punctuation as just a bunch of old-fashioned rules you grudgingly have to follow—**punctuation is there to guide the reader**. I'll repeat that; **PUNCTUATION IS NOT FOR THE WRITER BUT THE READER.** The correct use of punctuation marks (periods, dashes, exclamation points, question marks, semicolons, etc.) helps the flow of words and makes the poem easier to read correctly.

   Think about this—more than 98% of printed words that people read during the average day are punctuated using accepted punctuation rules. Because of this, **standard punctuation is effectively invisible to the reader.** People only notice punctuation when missing or out of the expected norm. For this reason, editors prefer you to punctuate normally, as if the poem is prose, regardless of line breaks. Your words are important and best presented with regular punctuation.

   Note: If you get the urge to experiment with your poem, remember that **e.e. cummings**—*an exceptional poet—tried every possible combination of punctuation marks and capitalization about a century ago.*

"No punctuation" is also accepted by most readers. It has one simple concept—there is no punctuation! "Got it," says the reader's brain. However, certain punctuation formats end up sabotaging the poem, diverting the reader's attention to the punctuation rather than the natural flow of the words. For example, you should always avoid the "no punctuation but capitalization" format, where the words that would be capitalized following periods at the end of sentences are capitalized as if the periods are there. Why do that? The reader subconsciously looks for the missing periods while reading and ends up with a vaguely unsettled feeling about the whole poem. Not the desired response.

The W.S. Merwin "no-punctuation" approach (originated in 1913 by French-Italian-Polish poet Guillaume Apollinaire) is happily accepted by editors, although no punctuation at all puts a lot of pressure on you to make appropriate line breaks. It also puts more pressure on editors to decide if you know what you are doing.

Note: Merwin's format capitalizes only the first letter of the first word of the poem and the "I" in first-person poems. Apostrophes in contractions are usually considered part of the word, so if you want to say "can't" instead of "cannot" or "it's" instead of "it is," that's acceptable. So are apostrophes to indicate possession, like "David's piano." Hyphens in hyphenated words, as in "French-Italian-Polish poet" or "low-fat diet" are also fine. However, question marks, exclamation points, and dashes are not acceptable. Some other no-punctuation formats are accepted so long as they are consistent, like capitalizing the first word of every stanza. Also, consider using additional spaces for commas if you want to have that extra pause (three spaces is a common comma substitute).

One thing that is NOT acceptable to editors is SPORADIC punctuation, where you toss in an occasional comma every few lines, add a solitary period at the end of 25 lines of unpunctuated free verse, or hide a couple of commas in the middle of some lines in an otherwise unpunctuated poem. **Please, no half measures—punctuate completely or not at all.**

3. Other things that should always concern you are spelling, typos, and consistent tenses of verbs, plus shifting pronouns. You may think you are too experienced to make these simple errors, but I see them every day. Don't forget the one-or-the-other words like "it's" and "its" or "your" and "you're." Make sure you are using the correct "to" or "two" or "too." One missing "o" in the "too" of "too much" is too much—reject pile! Editors have no hearts. Finally, remember that poems contain relatively few words, so please choose each word carefully—and make sure all words mean what you think they mean.

SOME GUIDELINES FOR LINE BREAKS IN FREE VERSE POEMS

Carefully considered line breaks are important. In poems, the line break does not always come at the end of a sentence or clause, but it does represent the briefest of pauses, maybe an intake of breath, so it should not occur at an awkward place. As a poet, you want your lines to flow as smoothly as possible into the brain of the listener/reader—anything that interrupts the flow detracts from what you are trying to say. Here are some suggestions to minimize distractions:

Try not to end a line with a conjunction, "and," "or," "so," etc. These almost always are a more comfortable fit at the beginning of the next line—an unexciting "and" dangling at the end of a line has a deadening effect. If you are tempted to leave an "and" dangling, read the line ALOUD without the "and," then read it again with the "and" at the end—you can hear/feel the difference immediately.

Avoid ending a line with an article, "a," "an," "the"—the line will seem unfinished. Better to put the article at the beginning of the next line, next to the noun or adjective and noun. Sometimes a preposition at the end of a line can have the same effect as a dangling "and" so be careful. However, ending a clause or sentence with a preposition at the end of a line is not incorrect; also you shouldn't split up paired combinations—see the Robert Frost example below.

Give each line the read-aloud test!

Avoid ending a line with a subject pronoun, "I" (or "i"), "we," "you," "he/she," "they," etc. When "I" is going to do something, it's usually better next to the verb. Object pronouns, "me," "him/her," "us" (or "you"), plus possessive pronouns, "his/hers," etc., may be okay.

Remember, these are guidelines; they can be broken or ignored if the context justifies that. For example:

> "I shall be telling this with a sigh
> Somewhere ages and ages hence:
> Two roads diverged in a wood, and **I**—
> I took the one less **traveled by**,
> And that has made all the difference."

Robert Frost seems to break these “rules” but note that the “I” at the end of line 3 here (a rhyming word) would not work without the repeated “I” at the beginning of line 4. Also, the “by” at the end of line 4 pairs up with “travel” like other verb and preposition pairings such as “…via the paths we **walk on,**” “…this impasse I’ve **come to,**” etc. *Note: this Frost example is not from a free verse poem, obviously, but the points made still hold true.*

For the most part, keeping these “rules” in mind will lead to a better arrangement of words on the page and optimum flow for the reader when writing in today’s most popular form—“free verse.” Sometimes, a difficult read with jagged flow is the intention, to perhaps create an “edgy” or uneasy feel. Usually, encouraging the reader is preferable.

Note: If you are writing formal poems, like sonnets or villanelles, the words that end lines may be determined by meter or rhyme considerations rather than other criteria, but even then, it’s good to have these “rules” at the back of your mind. If it is not a rhyming word, a dangling “and” can still weaken a line.

Finally, there are practical considerations to consider. In the case of *Pen in Hand,* for example, the lines of print are only 4.125 inches wide (*Emerging Voices*’ print pages are only 3.5 inches wide). This means the average word count per line (at 12-point type in Times New Roman) is between eight and 15, depending on the length of the individual words (fewer for the Garamond font in the smaller *Emerging Voices*). If you are prone to writing long lines, you may find your line chopped into two at an unfortunate place in the layout process—the worst case being a widow, a single word (or maybe two) pushed to the next line. It is far better to anticipate this by breaking the line yourself at a natural break point.

Remember, too, if you are submitting your poem to a literary magazine to be scanned by an editor who is only going to choose one or two poems out of a couple of hundred that have come in that day, that dangling “and” may be just enough to send your creation onto the reject pile without being read further.

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Questions or issues, please email me, Roderick Deacey, peninhand@marylandwriters.org These guidelines have a broader application and should be followed for any poems submitted to literary magazines to improve chances of selection for publication.
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