The Poet's Language Toolkit

I. Punctuation helps poets generate or change pace in a line or more. It can help bundle or separate units of meaning. Poets can work with or against conventions of punctuating written language.

1. THE 4 STOPS: PERIOD; COLON; SEMI-COLON; COMMA
   a) Period . The strongest or heaviest stop. Only recently confined to the meaning of the spot at the end of a sentence. Periods defined rhetorically are units of argument or emotion. Current convention marks periods as sentences, and does so with three parts: period, space, capital letter.
   b) Colon : The second strongest stop. Can mark different sections of argument or a list of parallel items.
   c) Semi-colon ; Intermediate stop, pause is lighter than colon, stronger than comma. Often links ideas that are tangential but not parallel.
   d) Comma , the lightest stop, can mark a breathing pause for reading aloud

2. SPLITTING, JOINING, HIGHLIGHTING MARKS: DASHES; HYPHENS
   a) Dash —— used to force a pause or break, change ideas rapidly; can be variable length
   b) Hyphen -- used between two words, with no space on either side of it, to combine words & speed up intersections between ideas; often functions as a miniature metaphor, as in "pig-headed."
   c) Parentheses (or Lunulae) used to separate and often subordinate certain parts of a prose sentence, but in poetry calls special attention to what is encased (within) them.

3. INTERROGATION AND EXCLAMATION MARKS
   a) Question mark ? should cause a contemplative pause; can undermine what’s been said
   b) Exclamation point ! indicate surprise, joy, strong emotions. Using multiple exclamation points!!! can be dangerously cheesy.

II. Lineation, the organization of a poem into lines, can affect pace and meaning, and it becomes especially important in composing free verse, any poetry without a definite baseline meter or consistent rhyme scheme.

1) To create a good line break consider two questions: what words are on either side of the break and why? Is the line to be enjambed or end-stopped?
2) In metered poetry line length is governed by number of poetic feet for a given meter: 1 for monometer; 2 for dimeter; 3 for trimeter; 4 for tetrameter; 5 for pentameter; 6 for hexameter, etc. In lines of two-syllable feet like troches and iambics, a 5 foot line will always have 10 syllables. There the line must end.
3) Metered poetry also balances the length of a line by where the pauses fall in the line, and poets can control where the pause is placed by punctuating. In typical iambic pentameter, the mid point pause or medial caesura cuts the line, separating the first 2 feet (4 syllables) from the last 3 (6 syllables). Sometimes this pause breaks the syllable count into a 6-4 rather than a 4-6 split around the caesura.

4) If a series of lines all place the medial pause in the same place, this creates what Lennard calls a “rocking lineation,” and that sets up a kind of rhythm beyond that of the stress pattern in the individual feet. If you break a line with a medial caesura, and you also make the word just before the break rhyme with the word at the end of the whole line, you’ve used leonine rhyme.

**Showing lineation when quoting someone else’s poem.** The correct way to mark the end of a poetic line when it is quoted within a continuous sentence that is not block indented is to place one space after the word that ends the line, then place a front slash (also called a virgule) after that space, and another space after the slash and before the first word of the next poetic line:

Frost says, “I am overtired / Of the great harvest I myself desired” (ll. 28-30).

If your quotation jumps from the end of one stanza to the start of the next one, the convention is to use two slashes thus: //</p>

**III. Syntax** – the order of words in phrases, clauses, and sentences can have strong effects on meaning.

In poetry there is no incorrect syntax, but there may be some you generate that are impossible for your reader to understand. The more you defy the standard convention of English syntax, a Subject first, followed by a Verb, and then an Object of the Verb. This is often marked in shorthand as S-V-O syntax. The more you vary from this pattern, the more likely your reader may be confused. However, many poets have generated a “high style” primarily by playing around with syntax.

1. Earlier syntax was ordered by the rhetorical idea of a period and often featured a sentence made of units separated by 3 colons.
2. Latinate syntax usually puts the verb last, and often has adjectives follow rather than precede the nouns they modify.
3. What word you put at the end of line can also affect whether it will work better as an enjambed or end-stopped line. The 2-unit boundary of a couplet can be either reinforced or broken open by what words are placed where.
4. English syntax relies not only on order, but also proper use of relative pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions. Poets can add or subtract these for various effects.