

Poetry and Prose: What's the Difference?

Nearly all writing shares the goal of communicating a message to an audience, but how that message is communicated can differ greatly.

The divisions between poetry and prose aren't clear-cut, but here are some generally accepted differences.

Prose

Most everyday writing is in prose form.

The language of prose is typically straightforward without much decoration.

Ideas are contained in sentences that are arranged into paragraphs.

There are no line breaks. Sentences run to the right margin.

The first word of each sentence is capitalized.

Prose looks like large blocks of words.

Poetry

Poetry is typically reserved for expressing something special in an artistic way.

The language of poetry tends to be more expressive or decorated, with comparisons, rhyme, and rhythm contributing to a different sound and feel.

Ideas are contained in lines that may or may not be sentences. Lines are arranged in stanzas.

Poetry uses line breaks for various reasons—to follow a formatted rhythm or to emphasize an idea. Lines can run extremely long or be as short as one word or letter.

Traditionally, the first letter of every line is capitalized, but many modern poets choose not to follow this rule strictly.

The shape of poetry can vary depending on line length and the intent of the poet.