Using Purposeful Line Breaks in Your Poetry

Poems are written in lines. The length of the line and where it breaks help establish the poem’s rhythm. A comma indicates a distinct pause; a period indicates a full stop. If there is no punctuation mark where the line breaks, regard that break as a very slight pause, like a half-comma, that emphasizes the last word on the line.

As the author of the poem, you get to decide where your line breaks will occur in your poem. There are two ways to do this. The first is called end-stopping. This is where a line of poetry ends with a punctuation mark. The second option is called enjambment. This is where you break lines in unexpected ways, not using punctuation to guide you.

Here is an example of a stanza which uses end-stopping:

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.  
--Sonnet 18 by William Shakespeare

Here is an example of a stanza which uses enjambment:

the back wings  
of the  
hospital where  
nothing

will grow lie  
cinders

in which shine  
the broken

pieces of a green bottle

--Between Walls by William Carlos Williams’s

Now, your task is to return to your poetry and decide how you want to utilize line breaks. You can mix and match the two, or stick to one.

First paragraph adapted from: www2.ups.edu/faculty/velez/Span_301/html/supple/poetry.doc