This activity encourages students to consider the effect of line breaks, and to experiment with various ways to use lineation in their poems.

Background
Eileen Chong’s poem ‘Mid-Autumn Mooncakes’ is about the Chinese Mid-Autumn Festival or ‘Zong Qiu Jie’ Festival. Mooncakes are traditionally eaten to celebrate this festival.

Mooncakes are a type of pastry or little cake that contain lotus bean paste. They have a thin layer of pastry on the outside and contain a sweet thick filling. Mooncakes often also contain the yolks of salted duck eggs.

Traditional mooncakes have an imprint or a type of pattern on the top. These imprints or patterns are often the Chinese characters for ‘longevity’ or ‘harmony’. This wishes a long life to the person who eats the cake. The imprint often tells the buyer the name of the baker and the ingredients contained in the mooncake.

The imprint on the top of the mooncake might also include the following symbols:
• a rabbit, which represents the moon
• a picture of the Chang’e woman, who lives on the moon
• flowers and vines, which represent long life

Mooncakes are so popular that the Mid-Autumn Festival is sometimes known as the Mooncake Festival.

Lineation and Line Breaks
Etymology: the word line comes from the Latin word linea, meaning thread.

Line breaks literally break up the poem into units called lines. The number or length of lines can be important in particular types or forms of poetry. A poem’s arrangement of line breaks is its lineation.

The line break can occur before the end of the sentence, meaning that the sentence runs over onto the next line: this is called enjambment.

Line breaks are particularly important in poems that do not use punctuation.

Breaking the line can affect the pace, rhythm, sound, appearance and meaning of poetry. A line break might emphasize or introduce a pause or a silence. Placing a word at the end or beginning of a line can help you emphasise a particular word, symbol or idea.

Discuss how you might use line breaks, and why you might (or might not) use enjambment. Talk about the effect of lineation.
Unlineated, with capitals and punctuation

It's nearly mid-autumn. I spy the tins at the Asian grocer's - gaudy red peonies unchanged for forty years. Of course I buy the mooncakes with double yolks; here in Australia, yolk or no yolk, they cost the same. I should wait for you, wait for the full moon, light some lanterns and try to make out the lunar rabbit, the Chinese fairy, but I don't. I cut the mooncake into quarters and spoon out the deep orange yolks, leaving half-round cavities in the sweet lotus paste. Eaten on their own, the yolks are creamy, almost too salty. A continent away, I imagine my mother in her kitchen, slicing through shell and briny white, remember my father scraping the duck eggs into rice porridge. They always saved me the yolks. My bowl, a cradle of bright congee full of the gold of the mid-autumn moon.

Unlineated, with no capitals or punctuation

it's nearly mid autumn i spy the tins at the asian grocer's gaudy red peonies unchanged for forty years of course i buy the mooncakes with double yolks here in australia yolk or no yolk they cost the same i should wait for you wait for the full moon light some lanterns and try to make out the lunar rabbit the chinese fairy but i don't i cut the mooncake into quarters and spoon out the deep orange yolks leaving halfround cavities in the sweet lotus paste eaten on their own the yolks are creamy almost too salty a continent away i imagine my mother in her kitchen slicing through shell and briny white remember my father scraping the duck eggs into rice porridge they always saved me the yolks my bowl a cradle of bright congee full of the gold of the mid autumn moon

Activity

Read these two unilineated versions of Eileen Chong's poem 'Mid-Autumn Mooncakes'. Don't read the lineated version yet! Your task is to add line breaks to one of these unilineated versions.

Read over your chosen version. Rewrite the poem on a lined sheet, and insert your own line breaks and stanza breaks where you see fit. Don't look at the original while doing this.

In pairs, justify your line break choices to your partner.

As a class, you can each give an example of a choice you made and explain WHY you made it.

Post all the class' versions up around the room for everyone to read. View the different choices your peers made. Which do you like? Which are different to yours?

Go to the original version of the poem (next page) and consider Eileen's line breaks. What do you think about her lineation choices?
Mid-Autumn Mooncakes

Eileen Chong

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at the Asian grocer’s - gaudy red peonies
unchanged for forty years. Of course
I buy the mooncakes with double yolks:

here in Australia, yolk or no yolk,
they cost the same. I should wait for you,
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