

How to Write a Haiku Poem

by Karla Jean Beatty

Haiku is a form of short poetry that began in Japan. Most often the poems are inspired by nature. These short poems use sensory details and simple, beautiful words to capture an image, emotion, or idea. In some ways, haiku is like a meditation or contemplation.

Japanese poets developed this poetry form using 17 *on*, or sounds. The *on* are divided into three phrases: 5 sounds, 7 sounds, 5 sounds. English poets translated those sounds to mean syllables. However, syllables can be much longer than sounds.

Contemporary haiku is not rigid about the 5-7-5 form. New Haiku poems are short, usually about 10-14 syllables. A skillful poet can take these few words and capture a striking moment that creates a lasting image in the reader's mind.

1. Understand the Structure

American school children are usually taught that Haiku has 17 syllables in the pattern of 5-7-5. It's not always written that way now, but 5-7-5 (Method 1) can be a good way to get started as a Haiku writer.

- **Method 1:** Write in three lines, with 5 syllables in the first line, 7 syllables in the second line, 5 syllables in the third line.
- **Method 2:** Write in three lines, about 10 to 17 syllables. Use a short-long-short format. Some poets favor writing in a syllable pattern of 3-5-3.

Contemporary Haiku poetry is usually shorter than 17 syllables. The words and imagery you choose are more important than the form.

2. Choose a Subject

A good Haiku poem is written about a striking personal reaction. When you see something special and want say to someone, "Look at that," you may have found a good subject for Haiku. It's about you, as a poet, witnessing an event or experiencing a quick moment of understanding, then using words to compress your observation or response. Simplify the experience in your poetry. Haiku poets write from personal experience, NOT from imagination.

3. Focus on Nature

Many Haiku poems use nature as a subject. You may want to focus on nature or natural events in human life. Often, haiku tries to capture a fleeting natural image, such as a frog jumping into water, snow hanging on branches, or leaves tossing in the wind. Try capturing movement in words. In contemporary Haiku, other topics may be covered, as well—urban experiences, relationships, or even humorous topics are possible.

4. Use a Seasonal Reference

An important element of Haiku is a connection to a season. A poetic reference to the season or changing of the seasons is called a *kigo*. These may take the form of:

- An obvious season word, such as spring or autumn.
- A clear seasonal image, such as snow, or falling leaves.
- A subtle reference, such as a daisy that only blossoms in summer.

These references set the stage as to time of year to round out the image you are creating in your haiku.

5. Express Ideas in Two Parts

Haiku poems usually contain two ideas—different, yet connected. The poetry focuses first on one part and then on the other, distinct, part. These are two juxtaposed ideas or images with a “leap” between the two parts. Basho example:

The sea darkens—
The voices of the wild ducks
Are faintly white.

Another way to create the two parts is to shift the perspective. For example, you could write two lines about a dragonfly on the grass, then end with an image of the wide pond. Basho example:

Resting higher
Than a lark in the sky
A mountain pass.

6. Describe Sensory Details

A poet uses details to show what caused emotion. Provide an image and use sensory words. Let the reader feel his or her own emotion about the image.

Haiku poems rely on details observed by the five senses. Ask yourself:

- What colors, textures, or contrasts do I notice about my subject?
- How does the subject sound? Was it loud, soft, grating?
- Does the subject have a smell or a taste?

Your sensory experience may be an autumn orchard that feels damp, smells both moldy and apple fragrant, and has fog swirling and misting. For example:

Apples fall
Sweet moldy dampness
Fog enfolds.

The poet’s trick is to show the reader a moment of true response rather than to tell or explain the emotions.

7. Do Not Do

Haiku is different than much of Western poetry. Here are some things to avoid doing that keep your poetry fresh and clear and true to haiku.

- Don't use cliches, such as *dark, stormy night*. Use creative, original language.
- Don't use rhymes at the ends of phrases.
- Avoid using metaphors, simile or other devices. These are too abstract. Haiku is about direct details.
- Avoid awkward or unnatural line breaks.
- Don't drop or add words or sounds solely to make a syllable count. Wording should be natural and easy.
- Don't include a title or sign the poem.

8. Be Inspired by Nature

The greatest haiku artists spent much time in nature. You will do well to go outside to be inspired. Take walks out in nature, note details that stand out. Make it a habit to carry a notebook to write down ideas or images as you see them. You can also just sit in front of a window and respond to the view. Tune into your surroundings and notice what ideas and images tend to jump out at you.

9. Write and Practice

Take your time in writing your haiku. Draft and refine every poem until you are satisfied that the words are ideal and the meaning is expressed. Consider each poem as practice for the next. You will see improvement as you gain understanding of the haiku structure. Basho, the great Japanese haiku poet, said that each haiku poem should ring a thousand times on the tongue. Try reading your haiku out loud. How does it sound? Do the words flow out smoothly? Refine until you are perfectly happy with your haiku poem.

10. Put It All Together

As you write your haiku, think of it as putting two images together to create harmony or contrast. Getting the two parts just right is a great challenge. Sometimes it is useful to create a "surprise" between the two ideas. Try following these steps to write a haiku:

1. Choose your topic—something striking about nature.
2. Write two lines about that topic, with beautiful words. Don't count syllables yet.
3. Write a third line that seems like a surprise. It should be completely different than the topic.
4. Now examine and analyze the three lines. Can you find some kind of link between these two unrelated parts? Is there a surprise relationship? Continue working your ideas in these three lines
5. Finally, rewrite the poem. You might want to try the 5-7-5 syllables pattern, or just keep it between 10 and 17 syllables total.

Take your time to edit your poem—draft, redraft, refine. Experiment with any new perspectives you might have.

Haiku, as in any art form, takes practice. Your understanding and skill grows as you create more and more haiku poems. Also, seek out and read haiku poetry. There is much published by Japanese masters, such as the poetry of **Basho**. And many poets have tried their hands at writing haiku. Use their works to boost your imagination and creativity.

To help you get to the next level, try these ideas:

- Carry a notebook with you at all times. You never know where inspiration will strike.
- Read haiku poems by other writers. Haiku is written in many languages, all around the world.
- Join a Haiku organization such as the Haiku Society of America, Haiku Canada, or The British Haiku Society.

You may be able to connect with other haiku poets through the internet. Haiku, at its most basic, is a splendid way to meditate through nature.