

What is a Haiku?

Haiku can be traced back as far as the 9th century and is a type of short form poetry from Japan. Traditionally and ideally, a haiku presents a pair of contrasting images, one suggestive of time and place, the other a vivid but fleeting observation. Working together, they evoke mood and emotion. Matsuo Bashō was one of the top poets who wrote beautiful haiku with a sense of quiet sadness about life and his freedom from worldly human concerns. His poems followed a 5, 7, 5 pattern, with three short lines that did not rhyme, containing a kireji and a kigo.

Kireji: cutting words or verbal exclamations such as kana, keri, or ya. Japanese essentially has no punctuation. They punctuate and emphasise the end of a haiku section. It is a close equivalent to punctuations in English language.
Kigo: Seasonal reference.

Haiku is brief, compressed and suggests rather than explains.

Traditional structure of a haiku:

1. There are only 3 lines with a total of 17 syllables.
2. The first line is 5 syllables.
3. The second line is 7 syllables.
4. The third line is 5 syllables like the first.
5. A traditional haiku does not rhyme. It can include the repetition of words or sounds.
6. Haiku often captures a moment in time, implying what happened both before and after that moment. To help imply this context of time before and after the poem itself, many haiku poets start with a lowercase letter and avoid ending with a period.
6. Each punctuation mark is as important as each word. Some common punctuations in haiku are: ... (ellipsis); - (en dash); — (em- dash); : (colon); and in rare cases :: (double colon.) Very often, traditional haiku are written without punctuation and capitalisation.

Pause punctuations include the comma, semicolon, and period.

This is a modern haiku by Margaret Molarsky. The comma pauses for us the way she wanted it to be heard.

Old Indian trail
we too,
pause for the view

A second type of punctuation shows **relationships** as well as providing a pause. These marks include the colon, the dash, and the ellipsis. In haiku, both the colon and the dash show some sort of spatial relationship and the ellipsis indicates a quiet pause and also suggests the passage of time.

Example:

From a granite cliff
letting wind take his ashes . . .
some blow back to me

The ellipsis can also indicate **contemplation** rather than passing time. A good example is this poem by Jerry Kilbride:

fog . . .
just the tree and I
at the bus stop

Bald tire
still getting good mileage . . .
as a tree swing

Another type of punctuation indicates **tone or voice**. These marks include the exclamation mark, indicating surprise or emphasis, and the question mark, indicating questioning or doubt. Both are relatively rare in haiku but can be highly effective and interesting.

Look at these examples by Ebba Story and John Thompson:

jazz clarinet!
the tassels of one loafer
bouncing

which is the way?
the fallen pine needles point
in all directions

Certain punctuation marks show the **form** of given text. For example, quotation marks often indicate that words are spoken or quoted. Form punctuation marks include hyphens, single and double quotation marks, and apostrophes. Here are two haiku examples by Raymond Roseliep and Ty Hadman:

smoke leafy air,
the boy drop-
kicks the ball

The cold wind at dusk;
A coatless beggar asks me,
“Hey, how’s it going?”

Raymond used hyphen to emphasise what was happening. While many modern haiku do not follow the traditional elements, some modern poets prefer to follow the traditional style of not using any punctuation. Some use indents to suggest the relationships or pauses usually indicated with punctuation. Some examples of such styles are works by Jack Cain, LeRoy Gorman, and Elizabeth Searle Lamb:

an empty elevator
opens
closes

her long paper legs
smell
of the river

far back under a ledge
the ancient petroglyph faintly
water sound

Today, poets have the freedom not to follow the traditional structure of haiku. It is totally up to you so get your creative juice flowing and start writing. Matsuo Bashō, once wrote, *“He who creates three to five haiku poems during a lifetime is a haiku poet. He who attains to ten is a master.”*

Some Famous Works by Famous Poets

Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), a Japanese poet from the Edo Period. He perfectly reflected the spirituality of Zen Buddhism with his haiku.

Old pond
A frog jumps in –
The sound of water

The stillness of the pond represents a state of silence and oneness with nature. The breaking of the silence with the frog jumping in and the sound of water represents a happening, a moment of enlightenment.

The first cold shower
Even the monkey seems to want
A little coat of straw

This haiku reflects one’s experiences with the seasons. The first cold shower of winter is always the hardest even for the animals that we share the world with.

On a leafless branch
A crow comes to rest –
Autumn nightfall

This haiku expresses the thought that if we worry too much about problems or tomorrow, we might not take the time to notice the present.

Along this road
Goes no one,
This autumn eve

This haiku is about us on this path through life which eventually leads to death (autumn eve).

Hokushi (1603-1868) Japanese haiku poet during the Edo Period.

I write, erase, rewrite,
Erase again, and then
A poppy blooms

This haiku shows that all humans make mistakes and we must accept our common humanity – one of the steps on the road to transcendence. It also reflects spring and the fragility of the world that we live in.

Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828) a Japanese poet and Buddhist

A world of dew,
And within every dewdrop
A world of struggle

This haiku was written after the loss of his first-born child soon after birth and the death of his daughter. It is about one's pain and struggles in life.

Writing Activities

1. Think of haiku as a kind of 'snapshot' of experience—a means to capture a fleeting but memorable moment—a 'haiku moment'—on one's life's travels. Go outdoor and look around for interesting subjects. Nature is the subject of haiku. It is the subject observed in a single moment using primarily direct and concrete nouns to evoke, invite the reader to imaginatively recreate, the sensory experience (sight, smell, sound, taste and/or touch) of the subject and moment. Usually, we will take photographs to remember moments of our lives. Now, instead of taking pictures, capture the moments by writing a haiku.



2. Write a traditional or modern haiku that can be read in one breath.
3. Write a traditional haiku without using adjectives, adverbs, verbs or verbal phrases.

4. Write a non-traditional haiku with one of the followings:

- Alliteration.
- Personification.
- Qualifiers – adjectives and adverbs.
- Puns.
- Rhymes.
- Metaphor.
- Simile.

Submit to www.nutsaboutarts.com to be featured in the writers' corner and stand a chance to be a published poet. Have fun!