

# GUIDELINES FOR WRITING HAIKU IN ENGLISH

William J. Higginson

*Author of The Haiku Handbook, The Haiku Seasons, Haiku World, etc.*

## Background

Haiku are short, imagistic poems about things that make people feel connected to nature. Japanese people have written haiku for hundreds of years. For the past forty years or more, people around the world have been writing haiku. Many countries now have haiku clubs and magazines, including Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Croatia, England, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Pakistan, Romania, and the United States. In addition, people write haiku in China, France, India, Morocco, New Zealand, the Philippines, Russia, Senegal, South Africa, Sri Lanka, and many other countries. Today, haiku poets of over fifty countries publish haiku in books and magazines. Many more poets share their haiku in workshops with friends who live nearby, or by letters and electronic mail with other people around the world.

Why do all these people write haiku? They write haiku because they enjoy doing it, and because writing haiku gives them a new way to look at the world. It's also fun to share haiku you have written with others, and to hear or read other people's haiku. You too can write haiku and help others to join the fun. Here are some simple guidelines for writing haiku in English.

## Haiku Form

Japanese poets usually write a haiku in 17 *on* ("sounds", pronounced like "own"—but shorter, with no "oo" sound in the middle) in a short-long-short pattern of 5-7-5 *on*. These *on* are a good deal shorter than the average English syllable. (The Japanese language naturally includes 5-7 rhythms, but such syllabic rhythms usually sound awkward in English.) Haiku in English tend to be shorter than seventeen syllables; today they average 12 to 15 syllables. In English, 12 to 15 syllables closely approximates the time it takes to read or say a Japanese haiku and the amount of information included. A "traditional" form for English-language haiku might have a rhythmic pattern of 2-3-2 accented beats, since traditional poetry in English is based on stress accent.

Some teachers and students may have learned to write 5-7-5 haiku in English. Often such 5-7-5 haiku seem wordy and repetitive. Haiku poets try to avoid any unneeded words. For example, here is a rather attractive, near-5-7-5 beginner's haiku in English:

A cold winter wind  
the rolling hills of night  
frosty in starlight.

A Japanese haiku poet would say that this poem does not need words like "cold" or "frosty" for temperature. A "winter wind" is already cold. In addition to mentioning things connected with cold three times, this poem tells us twice that it is night ("night" and "starlight"). Watch what happens when we keep only the words that appeal most to the senses, omit repetitions, and rewrite the poem:

A frosty wind—  
the hills roll away  
into starlight.

This haiku now demonstrates another feature of traditional haiku form: a single break in the flow of meaning and rhythm (here indicated by the dash). The earlier draft had three lines that each sounded independent; the poem was choppy, and the lines didn't sound as though they belonged together. Although there is a slight pause as the poem now moves from line two to line three, the sense continues from line two to line three, so the only strong break comes at the end of line one. A well-written haiku usually has one, and only one, strong break in meaning. The break may come at the end of either the first or second line; sometimes it even comes in the middle of the second line.

### **Haiku Content**

Most haiku, though not all, reflect nature or one of the four seasons. In Japan nature appears as “season words”; almost all Japanese haiku contain one of these 16,000 different terms. These words or phrases may name the season directly (“spring day”), may tell the temperature or weather (“cold wind”), or may name something that typically happens at a certain season. For example, in Japanese haiku the moon usually indicates autumn, because then the moon seems largest and brightest (the “harvest moon”).

While a poem does not have to have a season word to be a haiku, we usually notice the cycles of nature, even in the midst of a city. You can enjoy the challenge of thinking up your own season words or other ways of showing the time of year in a haiku. Human activities may also be included. “Play ball!” might be a summer season word.

The temperate zones and their four seasons include most places where people speak Japanese or English, such as Japan, North America, England, Australia, and New Zealand. In other places, other natural cycles give a clear impression of the time of year. The tropics have wet and dry seasons, a monsoon in many places. Certain plants bloom at certain times. Others are planted, and harvested, at specific times of year. Even the polar regions have their seasons. And all countries and people have special holidays that come at the same time each year.

Basically, a haiku gives the reader a sense of something happening at a specific moment in time—an event, an object—something that caused the writer to pause and take notice. Often the time of the year and the time of day both enter a haiku.

### **Haiku Spirit**

A haiku should share a moment or experience of awareness with the reader. Peace, sadness, mystery—these are only a few of the emotions that evoke haiku and which we can feel when we read a haiku. The things and events that the poet recorded in a haiku give us feelings. When we write a haiku we include the names of the things that produce emotions in us.

In haiku we have to give the reader words that help recreate the experience, the image or images that gave us the feeling. Telling the reader how we feel does not make the reader feel anything, and does not make a good haiku.

For example, here is a haiku by Nicholas A. Virgilio:

one wild apple  
ripples the rain puddle:  
evening sun

The “wild apple” contrasts sharply with the calm of that rain puddle. The mood of calmness deepens in the reflections on the ripples, pulling the poet's eye and ours to the setting sun. Virgilio creates a calm mood from what he sees.

Notice that the haiku has two parts: first, “one wild apple / ripples the rain puddle” in the first two lines; then “evening sun” in the last line. Virgilio uses a colon (:) to separate the two parts, but sometimes we don't even need punctuation like dash or a colon to make the separation. Often it is the combination of the two things mentioned in a haiku—just putting them side by side—that gives a haiku its emotional power.

Even though some haiku come from memories or things made up in the mind, each haiku should sound as though it is happening as we read it, in a specific place and a specific time. So write your haiku in the present tense, as if they were right here and now. This also helps to make a haiku more powerful and immediate.

### **Capitalization and Punctuation**

As the following examples of published haiku show, there are no absolute rules about punctuation and capitalization in English-language haiku. The same applies to indenting lines or arranging them flush left. Nor does a haiku have to be a complete sentence. Poets usually think about such things as they are writing, on a poem-by-poem basis. These are also excellent examples of the content and spirit of haiku.

The breeze brought it—  
a moment of moonlight  
to the hidden fern.

Foster Jewell

After I step  
through the moonbeam—  
I do it again

George Swede

a plastic rose  
rides the old car's antenna---  
spring morning

Elizabeth Searle Lamb

autumn twilight—  
in the closed barbershop  
the mirrors darken

Cor van den Heuvel

The fog has settled  
around us. A faint redness  
where the maple was.

Claire Pratt

On the gray church wall  
the shadow of a candle  
. . . shadow of its smoke.

L. A. Davidson

In the hook  
of a wave---  
the tide.

Virginia Brady Young

### Thinking about Haiku

Often, the best haiku show us something the way a young child sees it—fresh, as if for the first time. Here are poems by three of the greatest Japanese haiku masters, first in romanized Japanese to show something of the sounds of the originals, then in English translations:

*furuike ya  
kawazu tobikomu  
mizu no oto*

old pond . . .  
a frog leaps in  
water's sound

Bashô (1644-1694)

*tsuki to ware to  
bakari nokorinu  
hashi-suzumi*

the moon and I  
alone are left here  
cooling on the bridge

Kikusha (1753-1826)

*kanariya wa  
nigete haru no hi  
kure ni keri*

the canary  
escaped—the spring  
day  
is gone to dusk

Shiki Masaoka (1867-1902)

Look over some examples of good haiku, like the ones included here. Think about each one. What makes the experience it talks about special? What word or group of words tells you the season? How does that affect the meaning of the haiku? Notice how many haiku create emotions by connecting two images (things you can see, hear, touch, taste, smell) together in a new or unusual way. Have you had an experience like any of these? How did it make you feel?

### Three Sources for Writing Haiku

It is fairly easy to begin writing haiku. Here are three classic ways to start:

**1. Here and Now.** Try looking around you. Many of the best haiku are written right after the author saw, heard, touched, tasted, or smelled something. Do you see anything that might be interesting to play with in words? Can you find words that will fit together to make other people see something the special way you see it? Sometimes haiku poets look outside or take a walk and try to put what they see into a poem.

**2. Memory.** Try remembering something that you noticed a day, a week, a month, or years ago. Do you remember anything that might be interesting to play with in words? Can you find words that will fit together to make other people see something the special way you saw it then or the way you see it now in your “mind’s eye”—or your mind’s ear, or mouth? See if you can recreate that experience in words.

**3. Imagination.** Try making up a word-picture that seems so real it gives you a feeling as if you had actually seen it in real life. Can you imagine an experience by playing with words? See if you can pick words and put them together to make an experience that other people think is real.

Try writing a few of each kind. Can you put some of these experiences into words that will make someone else feel the same way? Remember to name the things that give you the feelings, not the

feelings themselves.

Because haiku have that *alive now* quality, most do not have any metaphors or similes. For the same reason, haiku do not usually have end-rhyme, although some consonant and vowel sounds may be repeated within the poem (alliteration and assonance). Haiku usually present something in the most direct words possible. Haiku are about common, everyday experiences, and they avoid complicated words or unusual grammar.

### Revising Haiku

Much of the art of writing haiku comes in revising. A vague and trite beginning like this:

It is beautiful  
when white snowflakes are falling  
on the snowy world.

can become an interesting haiku like this:

snowflakes fall  
covering the sign of this  
dead-end street

Remember, you may have to rewrite your haiku several times to make it a really good haiku. (Hint: Bashô once said “On your lips a thousand times.” If you say your haiku out loud you are more likely to hear what it needs than if you just read it silently. You can do this very quietly.)

### Haiku Do’s and Don’ts

Here is a summary of haiku do’s and don’ts, using the revised haiku above as an example.

DO pick a particular place (“this dead-end street” instead of “the . . . world”).

DO write in the immediate present tense (present action of “fall” instead of the generality “when . . . are falling”).

DO show what really happens instead of telling how you feel about it (“snowflakes fall covering the sign” instead of “It is beautiful”).

DO use whatever punctuation, capitalization, and indentation you like, or use none at all—whatever suits the poem best. And remember, the poem need not be a complete sentence.

DO write the haiku in three lines, with the middle line longest, in seventeen or fewer syllables. If you would like to count something, count accented beats (2-3-2). This is a good guideline for most haiku, but sometimes the middle line will be shortest. Sometimes, the first and second lines will be about the same length. Here again, what suits the particular poem best is the real guide.

DO include nature, preferably something relating to a particular season, if you want to write a traditional haiku.

DON'T repeat words or ideas that give the same meaning (“snowflakes” are “white”).  
DON'T add unneeded words to fill out a strict syllabic form. Aim instead for the short-long-short rhythm of the typical haiku.  
DON'T use unneeded metaphors and similes (for example, don't say “a blanket of snow”).  
DON'T use rhyme unless it happens accidentally and is hardly noticeable.  
DON'T write a general statement about “the way things are”—instead present one particular event or experience.

### Some Examples by Children

Here are a few more examples, all written by school children, some originally in English, others translated from Japanese. (Thanks to Japan Air Lines for allowing me to include these examples from their international children's haiku contests.) After reading and talking about these with a friend, try some of your own. Good luck!

Soap bubbles!  
My face is flying  
too!

Masahiro Suzuki  
Japan, Grade 4

Mr. Ant,  
do you mind if I set you  
on my leaf boat?

Norimasa Oikawa  
Japan, Grade 1

Where I buried  
the little bird, only there  
the ground bumps up.

Norikako Miyashita  
Japan, Grade 6

A heron rises  
In the middle of the swamp  
Under the full moon.

Nahanni Stevenson  
Canada, Grade 6

The old withered stump  
Stands in the dusty paddock  
Collecting insects

Cindy Kunst  
Australia, Grade 6

Looking deeper  
The face and mirror  
Draw together

Ivy Reed  
USA, Age 10

A snowman  
turned into a shield  
snowball fight

Tôru Usui  
Japan, Grade 5

A little girl stands  
Holding her finger out and  
A butterfly comes

Reuven Freesman  
Canada, Grade 6

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