

HAIKU

A traditional Japanese haiku is a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. Often focusing on images from nature, haiku emphasizes simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression.

History of the Haiku Form

Haiku began in thirteenth-century Japan as the opening phrase of *renga*, an oral poem, generally a hundred stanzas long, which was also composed syllabically. The much shorter haiku broke away from *renga* in the sixteenth century and was mastered a century later by *Matsuo Basho*, who wrote this classic haiku:

*An old pond!
A frog jumps in—
the sound of water.*

As the form has evolved, many of its regular traits—including its famous syllabic pattern—have been routinely broken. However, the philosophy of haiku has been preserved: the focus on a brief moment in time; a use of provocative, colorful images; an ability to be read in one breath; and a sense of sudden enlightenment.

Haikus by Willie Perdomo:

24.

A virus walk break
Twilight stroll to compost bin
Two rusty leaves rap

29.

Draw her some roses
The before times are ending
Lost my love letters

33.

This evening's Black sound
Walks like a cat on grass blades
Your nickname two-steps

40.

Pandemic fashion
The maples need to speak up
Detroit Reds all day

58.

Can't rock your hoodie
Your cliques of affinity
Might lead to arrest

77.

Go 'head, bro, dance
There are no mirrors in this joint
You used to love her

How is a haiku structured?

One of haiku's defining characteristics is its concise structure. In English, the structure is:

Line 1: Five syllables

Line 2: Seven syllables

Line 3: Five syllables

If a poem doesn't follow this structure, it's not a haiku—at least in the traditional sense.

Beyond this structure, there are a few more rules to writing a traditional haiku. One is that the lines **cannot** rhyme.

Another defining characteristic of haiku in Japanese is the inclusion of at least one kireji. A kireji, translated as “cutting word,” is a grammatical category of words that create a pause or sense of closure. There is no direct equivalent to kireji in English. Instead, the kireji is represented with a punctuation mark like an ellipsis or a dash.

As an English-language haiku writer, you can choose to include punctuation or onomatopoeia to fill the kireji role, but it's not a requirement. Many poets simply leave out the kireji if it doesn't work with their chosen theme.

A haiku also needs to contain a seasonal reference, known as a *kigo* in Japanese. Just like with a kireji, English-language haiku don't always include this component.

4 Steps to Writing a Haiku

Writing a haiku is similar to writing just about any other kind of poem or other piece of text: it follows the writing process.

Brainstorm:

The first step is to brainstorm to generate ideas. What do you want to write about? Do you want your haiku to explore traditional topics, like changing seasons and other parts of nature? Or do you want to explore something more modern, like your relationship, a trending story, or one of your hobbies or obsessions?

Prewrite

This part of the process is known as prewriting, and it involves building on your brainstorming and outlining. With a haiku, you probably aren't going to write a full-fledged outline, but you might note how you want to arrange your haiku or play with different word combinations to fit the syllabic structure. Also, think about the general rules of writing poetry, like avoiding clichés and writing from a place of honesty. These aren't requirements for your haiku, but they can be helpful guidelines.

Time to Write

Give yourself room to play with words. Group words according to their syllable counts and say them out loud to hear how they sound together. Do this whether you plan on performing your haiku aloud or not—a key part of any poem is its rhythm and flow, so make sure you've got a beat that complements your words and subject matter. Once you've written a draft, give it some time to cool off. You're a better editor when you revisit your work with fresh eyes, so with your first draft finished, take some time to do something else.

Revise

About twenty-four hours or so later, come back to your haiku. Read it aloud again and listen to how it sounds. You might catch an awkward string of syllables or a spot where you can substitute a stronger word that you didn't notice just after finishing the draft. Make these changes to shape your haiku into a stronger second, third, fourth... draft.

