

## WRITING HAIKU IN ENGLISH

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### 17-Syllable Form Not Necessary in English

There are no strict rules about writing haiku in English. Of course in Japanese the form is clearly determined—17 syllables divided into three parts of 5, 7, 5; *go shichi go*. However, Japanese, with its monosyllabic phonetic system, allows for a flowing 17-syllable exhalation that captures a moment of heightened experience. Any attempt to carry over the 17-syllable structure to English tends to lose its impact due to the different phonetic system. So when writing haiku in English, one should not be concerned about a 17-syllable form. It's important, however, to be brief and direct.

### Three-Line Form

Most English haiku use a three-line form, roughly replicating the three-part Japanese structure. When these three parts intuitively connect, the sum total of the haiku far surpasses the individual parts. English haiku sometimes appear in one line, and even, on occasion, four lines, but the three-line form is widely considered to be the staple of English haiku. So unless a different line form is somehow demanded by the message, the three-line medium seems to be most effective.

### Simple Yet Profound

It is generally agreed that the most important element of an English haiku is to catch the spirit of haiku: the terse, yet profound, expression of truth. While this might seem like an extremely vague guideline, when an English haiku works it is crystal clear that there is no unnecessary baggage. The language of haiku should not dazzle and distract from the haiku epiphany. It is in this respect that haiku has been described as Zen poetry. An excellent example of this simple, “unpoetic” quality is the winning haiku of Ryukoku University's Fourth Annual Haiku contest:

A new school uniform  
a little too large  
for my daughter

Akiyama Kenryu

### Season Word (*Kigo*)

Traditional Japanese haiku have a seasonal reference that pinpoints the time of year. These *kigo* do not merely indicate the season but more specifically which part of the season—early spring, late autumn, mid-winter, etc. However, modern haiku sometimes do not contain season words. So it might be suggested that when writing haiku in English, a season word should be used if it organically supports the truth of the haiku moment. Otherwise, it should not merely be stuck in as a mandatory requirement.

### Any Subject Matter

No subject is too high or too low for haiku. Historically, haiku was, at least in part, a reaction to the elitist, lofty *waka* that had been the poetic mainstay of the Japanese court. Haiku became a genre to express the world of Everyman, including both the “high” and the “low.” So on the one hand, we can see Basho’s exalted statement (with *kigo*) from his classic travel journal, *Oku no Hosono Michi*, of the futility of ambition:

summer grass  
remains  
warriors’ dreams

On the other hand, we can see J. W. Hackett’s expression (without *kigo*) of the wonder of life in this haiku from his collection entitled “30 Zen Haiku”:

Puppy stops playing  
and looks around with wide-eyed  
surprise—her first fart.

### Universal Themes

The English haiku has evolved into a cross-cultural medium used around the world to share experiences at the core of the human condition. Thus, it is best to avoid culture-specific content that excludes any members of a global audience. Haiku that dwell on the customs, geography, holidays, food, etc. of one ethnic group or country tend to limit its universality. When a haiku works, it speaks to all.

### Haiku Eyes

Haiku is perhaps more about carefully observing the world around us than composing poems. It is necessary to work at developing, through diligent practice, “haiku eyes,” the

ability to observe both the subtle and grand wonders continuously in front of us but which we often overlook in our hectic lives. Haiku eyes allow us to maintain a sense of excitement, wonder and freshness. It is truly astonishing how many of us are not aware of the full moon, not to mention the ant trekking across the moss, or the sweat on the mailman's brow.

If we carefully observe the environment around us, we will be increasingly aware of concrete images present in the here-and-now that are the essential ingredients of haiku. The haiku poet (*haijin*) sees the most subtle signs and commutes them into haiku that make us shudder from their bare but profound truth. Nothing should be taken for granted or be considered too trivial: There is a potential haiku in every moment. So many things around us create surprise and heightened awareness drawing a joyous gasp of "Wow!" Haiku should be loaded with this Wow factor.

#### Mask of Objectivity

These concrete images will find their way naturally into haiku--haiku that will virtually write themselves without undue artifice. These images will convey an impact without the haiku poet directly explaining or revealing his or her feelings. In the following haiku, Basho presents us with such an objective, concrete image:

as it falls  
spilling water  
the camellia

#### Haiku Wisdom from R. H. Blyth

In conclusion, I would like to offer several short quotations from The Genius of Haiku by R. H. Blyth that can serve as basic haiku guidelines:

"Haiku does not aim at beauty.... it aims at significance, and some special kind of beauty is found hovering near."

"Haiku shows what we knew all the time, but did not know we knew; it shows us that we are poets in so far as we live at all."

"...haiku demand the free poetic life of the reader in parallel with that of the poet."

“...the art of haiku is as near to life and nature as possible, as far from literature and fine writing as may be...”

“...haiku must express a new or newly perceived sensation, a sudden awareness of the meaning of some common human experience of nature or man....and more importantly, it must, above all things, not be explanatory, or contain a cause and its effect.”