

Happy Haiku Day!

By Linda Butler

Today (April 17) is National Haiku Poetry Day!

Haiku is a Japanese poetic form that consists of 17 syllables divided into three lines of 5 then 7 then 5 syllables. Haiku usually focus on nature and seasons. Flowers, weather, clouds, trees, water, wind are often the subjects of a haiku.

Haiku is written in the present tense. Because it is so short, haiku is a snapshot of a particular moment or mood. Haiku often answers the questions “what?,” “where?,” or “when?” but rarely answers the questions “why?” or “how?” Those answers are for you, the reader, to ponder.

Let’s look at a few haiku. The first is by a contemporary writer.

This Autumn midnight
Orion’s at my window
shouting for his dog

--Carol A. Coiffait

What little story is told in this haiku? Can you see this person being awakened by something—perhaps it’s the starlight of the constellation of the mighty Greek hunter Orion. Or perhaps it’s her neighbor quieting his dog and it makes her think of the hunter Orion. Or perhaps.... What do you think?

Here is one by the 17th century Japanese haiku master, Matsuo Basho. Notice how he paints a picture and tells a story in three short lines:

An old silent pond
A frog jumps into the pond—
Splash! Silence again

First, can you see the old silent pond? The water is probably still, and still water reflects. What does it reflect? Vibrant green daytime leaves? Dormant winter branches? The full moon on an autumn night? What happens to the reflection/surface of the water when the frog jumps in? The observer stays and continues to watch. Then what happens at the pond?

Some people feel that haiku lines of 5-7-5 syllables are vital to this form, others feel the structure should be flexible. In Japanese, the structure of 5-7-5 sounds (slightly different than syllables) in three lines is the core of what haiku is; more or less than this is not truly haiku. However, this tight structure is often lost when the poem is translated to English. For this reason, many English-speaking poets do not feel it necessary to follow the seemingly rigid structure of 5-7-5. I feel that it is important for beginning haiku poets to keep to this structure; it presents a doable challenge.

Japanese haiku is generally limited to nature and the natural world. However, I offer young children flexibility about the subject of their haiku—nature haiku should be encouraged, but if they want to write a haiku about a favorite toy, or an experience with a friend, that’s great. But the number and arrangement of syllables in the 5-7-5 format is important.



Young children can be guided and coached to find words that express their thoughts and fill the pattern correctly. Help young children understand and remember what syllables are by having them clap the number of syllables in common words. Then help them clap their lines as they read/say them. There is a sweet feeling of accomplishment when a young child writes his/her own haiku.

Preschoolers who are too young to understand the syllable concept can come up with three short statements about something they love or see in nature. Haiku can be phrases, in fact the lines are usually not complete sentences.

Discovering inspiration for a haiku is part of the fun! Go out into nature. Take a notebook. Record phrases or make sketches of things you see, hear, feel, smell, even taste! Look closely (maybe even with a magnifying glass) at a tree, a flower, an insect. What is it doing? What does it make you think of? What does it represent? Start writing pieces of haiku, then go back to edit and refine them.

The last line of a haiku often brings a bit of a surprise, a leap--in Japanese, it's *kareji* or cutting word. This word (or phrase) turns the haiku in a slightly new, often unexpected direction, perhaps adding a touch of irony. Here's an example.

Tired cat sleeps all night
He needs lots of rest for a
Long day of napping
--Kenn Nesbitt

Haiku are the tiny homes of the poetry world. They are small yet cozy, maintaining only the most essential things. Haiku is concrete and concise, capturing just a moment in a mere handful of words. Because you have only 17 syllables, every word must be carefully chosen to say exactly what you want to communicate. A thesaurus can help you find synonyms for a word that has more or less syllables that will better fit into a line of your poem.

Many children will enjoy illustrating their haiku.

Post your poems on a board or wall as a haiku gallery. Or gather them and make them into a family haiku book.

Pleasant Grove Library has some fun haiku picture books: "Dogku" by Andrew Clements, "Won Ton: A Cat Tale Told in Haiku" by Lee Wardlaw, "the Year Comes Round: Haiku through the seasons" by Sid Farrar, "Hi, Koo!" by Jon J Muth, "Guyku: a year of haiku for boys" by Bob Raczka



"Haiku has consistently appealed to me as a means of centering, focusing, sharing, and responding to a life and world bent on excess. As the layers of my own life have accumulated, I've often felt overwhelmed by both personal changes and the mass of news, information, and survival requirements that come with being human today. Haiku are for me a way of honoring and celebrating simple yet profound relationships that awaken in us, with a gentle and silent inner touch, a spiritual relevance that adds meaning to our lives."

—Tom Clausen, haiku poet