Style of Haiku Poetry

What is a haiku? It is a three-line, beautifully descriptive, form of poetry, intended to be read in one breath. If read in Japanese, most traditional haiku would have five syllables, or sounds, in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the last. [The Academy of American Poets](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/haiku-poetic-form) asserts, "As the form evolved, many of these rules - including the 5-7-5 practice - have routinely been 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 and illumination."

[Michael Dylan Welch](http://www.graceguts.com/essays/traditional-and-modern-haiku-a-vibrant-dichotomy), Adjunct Poetry Professor for the Northwest Institute of Literary Arts shares this sentiment, stating, "Most Western literary haiku poets have rejected the 5-7-5- syllable pattern. ...The poem gains its energy by the intuitive or emotional leap that occurs in the space between the poem's two parts, in the gap of what's deliberately left out. ...The art of haiku lies in creating exactly that gap, in leaving something out, and in dwelling in the cut that divides the haiku into its two energizing parts."

Haiku poetry traditionally discusses abstract subjects or those from the natural world, including seasons, months, animals, and even the smallest elements of nature, down to a blade of grass or a drop of dew.

While a haiku does not have to cover natural subjects anymore, it is most often used as a celebration of nature. And although modern haiku still focus on simple yet sensory language that creates a brief moment in time and a sense of illumination, the structure can be looser and traditional rules ignored.

So whether you choose to play by the traditional rules for writing haiku or go freeform is entirely up to you.

Traditional Haiku Structure

The structure of a traditional haiku is always the same, including the following features:

1. There are only three lines, totaling 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. Punctuation and capitalization are up to the poet, and need not follow the rigid rules used in structuring sentences.
6. A haiku does not have to rhyme, in fact usually it does not rhyme at all.
7. It can include the repetition of words or sounds

Steps for Writing a Haiku

Even though there are specific rules for writing a traditional haiku, the process can still be fun and rewarding. And remember that a modern haiku can be more freeform.

If you are wondering how to write a haiku for the first time, consider the following steps:

1. Begin by reading examples of haiku - there are some below - to help you get inspired about the subjects and construction of haiku. A haiku is a beautiful form of poetry, so take time to appreciate it before you begin writing it. You can find more [examples of haiku poems](https://examples.yourdictionary.com/examples-of-haiku-poems.html) on YourDictionary or in your local library.
2. Create a list of possible subjects that you might write about, considering various aspects of nature that inspire you. Consider traditional subjects like animals, nature, and seasons, or something completely different. Even the smallest details can make for great haiku.
3. After you choose a subject, you may want to look at a few pictures of it, or go outside and admire it. Like all of the great poets before you, some of the greatest inspiration comes from simply admiring nature and the world around them.
4. Make a [list of words](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/word-lists/list-of-descriptive-words.html) that relate to the subject you have chosen. Be as descriptive as possible. Think about [feelings and emotions](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/parts-of-speech/adjectives/list-of-adjectives-to-describe-tone-feelings-emotions.html) too.
5. The last line is usually used to make an observation about your subject. It can be fun to add a surprise here. Looking through the list you wrote, can you create an unexpected relationship between the first two lines and the third?
6. Decide if you want to write using the 5-7-5 rule or branch outside the limits of this pattern. (If you have trouble determining the syllables in a word because you are not sure how to pronounce it, you can look up the word here on [YourDictionary](https://www.yourdictionary.com/dictionary-definitions/) for a count of the syllables.)

Examples of Traditional Haiku

The most famed traditional Japanese poets include Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson, Kobayashi Issa, and Masoaka Shiki. They are known as "the Great Four" and their work is still the model for traditional haiku writing today.

Let's take a look at two of Matsuo Basho's most famous poems. (Note: The 5-7-5 rhythm has been lost in translation, as not every Japanese word has the same number of syllables, or sounds, as its English version. For example, haiku has two syllables in English. In Japanese, the word has three sounds.)

An old silent pond,  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

On a withered branch  
A crow has alighted:  
Nightfall in autumn.

The traditional form of haiku has also been embraced by English-speaking poets. Here are two examples by [Kelly Roper](https://www.lovetoknow.com/member/40~kelly-roper) from our sister site LoveToKnow.com, both with a focus on nature.

The season gives way.  
Winter lays down her mantle,  
As spring bursts to life

Waiting in the marsh,  
The heron stands silently,  
Fish sense death is near.

Examples of Modern Haiku

Now, let's take a look at modern Western haiku. Here are two examples, also by LoveToKnow's Kelly Roper. Notice the difference in style compared to the traditional haiku examples above.

Foul ball  
Flys up through the air...  
Fan catches it with his face.

Giant, foul-smelling shadow  
Smashing through the forest.  
Sasquatch is on the move.

Although many modern poets don't follow the 5-7-5 pattern, you will still come across a few who remain true to the original form.

Process of Writing a Beautiful Haiku

Reading through examples of haiku can help you understand and appreciate haiku before you write one yourself. Reading haiku to children can also help them develop a sense of how to interpret poetry, and begin the process of writing their own simple poems.

Remember to be creative, not only with your use of words but also with your [punctuation](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/punctuation/what/Fourteen-Punctuation-Marks.html) and word order. A haiku is not designed to read like a sentence, so do not feel bound by normal [capitalization](https://grammar.yourdictionary.com/capitalization/10-rules-of-capitalization.html) and structure rules.

Kit Kittelstad

M.A. Education