

How to write a haiku poem

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Haiku

Haiku poetry was originally developed in Japan. Now it is used by poets all over the world.

Photo: Shin/Getty

A haiku (pronounced high-koo) is a short three-line poem that uses sensory language to capture a feeling or image. Haiku poetry was originally developed by Japanese poets. They are often inspired by nature, a moment of beauty, or an important experience. To write a haiku, start by getting ideas for the poem. Then, write the poem with strong details and detailed imagery. Make sure you polish the haiku and listen to how it sounds out loud so it is at its best.

Getting Inspiration for the Haiku

1. Look to nature.

Many haiku are inspired by objects in the natural world, such as trees, rocks, mountains, and flowers. To get ideas for your poem, spend some time in nature and observe it so you can get ideas for the poem. If you can't go outside, try looking at nature photographs and art in books or online. Find a particular scene or object in nature like a tree or flower that inspires you.

2. Focus on a season or seasonal event.

Haiku can also be about a season, such as fall, spring, winter, or summer. Seasonal haikus often focus on a specific detail about the season, naming the season in the poem. Writing about a season can be a fun way for you to describe a particular detail you love about that time of year.

3. Choose a person or object as your subject.

Haiku do not all have to be about nature or the seasons. You can also choose a particular person or object as an inspiration for the poem. Maybe you want to write a funny haiku about your dog. Or perhaps you want to write a thoughtful haiku about your childhood toy. Try to only focus on one person or one object in the poem. Haiku are short. You may not have enough space in three lines to write every thought you have about the person or object.

4. Read examples of haiku.

To get a better sense of the genre, read haiku that are well known and considered good examples of the form. You can find examples in books or online. Some of the most famous Japanese haiku poets are Matsuo Basho, Yosa Buson, and Tagami Kikusha. Richard Wright and Robert Haas are two American poets who have also written many haiku poems.

Writing the Haiku

1. Follow the line and syllable structure of a haiku.

Haiku follow a strict form: three lines, with a 5-7-5 syllable structure. That means the first line will have five syllables, the second line will have seven syllables, and the last line will have five syllables. The poem will have a total of 17 syllables.

To count syllables in a word, place your hand under your chin. Then, say the word. Every time your chin touches your hand, this is one syllable. A haiku does not have to rhyme or follow a certain rhythm as long as it adheres to the syllable count.

2. Describe the subject with sensory detail.

Haiku are meant to give the reader a brief sense of the subject using the senses. Think about how your subject smells, feels, sounds, tastes, and looks. Using your senses to describe the subject will make it come alive for your reader. For example, if you are writing a haiku about a particular subject, such as your dog, you may describe the "clacking of its nails on the tile" or the "damp fur of wet dog."

3. Use concrete images and descriptions.

Avoid abstract ideas. Instead, go for concrete images that are easy for the reader to see. Describe the subject with details that are particular and unique. Avoid wordy descriptions or elaborate language. Try using simple language so you can stick to the syllable count required for a haiku. Do not use cliches, or phrases that have become so familiar they lose their meaning. Instead, go for images and descriptions that feel unique. For example, you may write, "Fall leaves brush the road" or "Dog chases a bright bluebird."

4. Write the poem in the present tense.

Give the haiku immediacy by using the present tense, rather than the past tense. Using the present tense can also make your lines simple and easy to follow.

5. End with a surprising last line.

A good haiku will have an ending line that is intriguing and leaves the reader hanging. It may leave the reader with a surprising last image or reflect on the previous two lines in a surprising way. For example, the haiku by Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa has a surprising last line: "Everything I touch/with tenderness, alas/pricks like a bramble."

Polishing the Haiku

1. Read the haiku out loud.

Once you have a draft of the haiku, read it aloud several times. Listen to how the haiku sounds. Make sure each line flows easily into one another. Make sure the lines follow the 5-7-5 syllable count. The haiku should sound natural when read aloud. If you notice any awkward or choppy lines, adjust them so they sound smooth. Replace any words that are too long or complicated.

2. Show the haiku to others.

Get feedback from others about the haiku. Ask friends, family members, and peers what they think of the haiku. If you wrote a haiku about a particular subject or object, ask others if they think the haiku does a good job of exploring it.

3. Format the haiku.

Choose how you want the haiku to look on the page. Many place the haiku in the center of the page and center the lines so it forms a diamond shape. This is how haiku are traditionally formatted. You can also add a short title at the top of the haiku, such as "Autumn" or "Dog." It is not absolutely necessary that you title your haiku poem. Many haiku do not have titles.

Respond to the writing prompt on Google Classroom:

Write a short paragraph that explains the central idea of the article. Use at least two details from the article to support your response.

Also write your very own Haiku to demonstrate your understanding of a Haiku.