

Learn to Write Haiku: Mastering the Ancient Art of Serious Play



Unit 1: Why 5-7-5?

Workbook

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Unit 2: Practicing the Season

Unit 3: Crafting a Turn of Thought

Unit 4: The Sketch from Life

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The Essence of Haiku

These are the basic principles of haiku:

- the 5-7-5 syllable form
- the use of season words
- the creation of an original or captivating turn of thought.

This is what we'll be learning over the next six lessons. It's the pith of haiku, the essence of haiku. If all you remember is these three simple points, you'll be able to start writing haiku right away.



The secret of mastering haiku

The haiku form appeared organically over hundreds of years and was originally part of longer forms of collaborative Japanese poetry. Perhaps this explains why many people find haiku poetry so accessible and compelling.

The best advice is to not worry about whether you're writing good haiku or not. You need to give yourself permission to write a lot of haiku. My Zen teacher studied with Sōen Nakagawa Roshi—a very famous Japanese Zen master, but also a famous haiku poet, writer, and a student of Dakotsu Iida.

Sōen Nakagawa Roshi rarely mentioned haiku or taught haiku to his Japanese monks but occasionally they would ask him about haiku. Once my teacher asked Sōen, "What is the secret of mastering haiku?" And Sōen said, "It's easy. You just write 10,000 of them." Just write 10,000! That doesn't mean an actual number.

What it means is to write haiku constantly and don't get hung up on whether or not you're producing masterpieces. The way you write a haiku masterpiece is by writing hundreds and hundreds of haiku. So, this week, be sure to give yourself permission to write a lot of very, very bad haiku. You're just trying to imprint the 5-7-5 form on your mind. That's really your only task.

You can go outside and you may see season words lying around. A robin in spring. Maybe in summertime you attend a fireworks celebration. In fall, falling leaves; in winter, snow. If you see a season word incorporate it into your poem, but don't let that stop you. At this point, you're really just beginning to play with the form. Remember that the word "haiku" means "playful verse." As long as you maintain a spirit of play, you won't have any problem with the form.



Making ourselves at home within the form

Many of us understand a haiku to be a poem with a 5-7-5 syllable structure. We may also know about the use of season words. But imitating Japanese haiku isn't quite enough. Instead, we can enter into a dialog between the traditional Japanese form and our expectations of English language poetry.

Our object is to make that 17-syllable form sing. We want the syllables to fall naturally, gracefully, artfully, playfully, within the form. We're not just pouring them in like prose and making arbitrary breaks at the end of the first line or the second line. We are trying to achieve a poetic thought, poetic rhythm, poetic sound. So our object is to write a haiku that stands on its own as an English language poem.

The object is not to imitate the Japanese tradition. Obviously, we want to learn from that tradition, and we're going to spend a lot of time doing that over the next six units. But we have to remember that our object is to produce poetry and not just haiku. Haiku in English is just at the beginning. What will determine whether it works or not is people like you and me playing with the form, pouring our hearts into that form, using it to express our keenest observations, our deepest thoughts, and our most closely held emotions.



Poet Profiles: Basho, Buson, Issa

Let's meet three landmark figures in the history of haiku. Later in the course, we'll meet some of the women who have revitalized the form in the modern era.



Matsuo Basho

1644–1694. Perhaps the most famous haiku poet of all, Bashō left behind around 2,000 poems. He would write hokku, opening poems for collaborative haikai no renga sessions, and had a great ability to convey the essence of a scene in a few details. He was a seasoned traveler who often eventually left the literary world of Edo (Tokyo) behind for the remote wildernesses where he found inspiration.

**Just as a clam parts
from its shell I, too, will part...
autumn will depart**

—Matsuo Bashō

This is the last haiku in Bashō's masterwork *Oku no hosomichi*, "Narrow Road to the Deep North".

Yosa Buson

1716–1784. Buson was an accomplished painter and poet. His painting provided his main source of income. Buson believed haiku should be natural and light, with a distinct personal style. His refusal to follow contemporary poetic trends meant that his work was somewhat under-appreciated during his lifetime. That is no longer the case and today he is considered one of the greatest haiku masters of the Edo period.

**Moon of midwinter—
the pines have shot their needles
deep into the rocks**

—Yosa Buson

The poem probably alludes to the story of a famous Chinese general, Li Kuang, known as General Stone Tiger because of a famous episode from his life. According to the Japanese Buddhist priest Nichiren (1222-1282):

The mighty warrior General Li Kuang, whose mother had been devoured by a tiger, shot an arrow at the stone he believed was the tiger. The arrow penetrated the stone all the way up to its feathers. But once he realized it was only a stone, he was unable to pierce it again. Later he came to be known as General Stone Tiger.

Kobayashi Issa

1763–1828. Known simply as Issa, meaning "cup of tea," Kobayashi Issa was a haiku poet, diarist, and lay Buddhist priest. He was a prolific poet, writing more than 20,000 haiku. His poetry is often recognizable for its irreverence and humor, in spite of the tragedies he experienced in his life and recounted in his poems, including the deaths of three children and his first wife, the loss of his home in a fire, and periods of penury. Today, he is one of the most beloved Japanese poets.

**Everything I touch
tenderly—alas, it pricks
me like a bramble!**

—Kobayashi Issa

This poem, written after the deaths of his wife and children, is sometimes referred to as a summation of Issa's tragic life.

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Haiku translations by Clark Strand.

Bashō portrait by Morikawa Kyoriku.

Issa portrait by Muramatsu Shunpo at the Issa Memorial Hall, photographed by Yoshi Canopus, 1996.



How to Begin

So, practically speaking, where do you begin?

The notebook

You're going to want a notebook. It can be any size. Preferably something that you can carry around with you. Or you can just open the notes app on your phone if you're used to typing with fingers or thumbs. If you can write easily on your phone, do that. It doesn't really matter. But what you need is a lot of real estate. You need a lot of space. Don't use a notebook that's too tiny or has too few pages. You need to feel a very, very generous landscape of blank paper or blank digital paper spread out before you. You don't want to see the boundaries of that landscape anywhere in the distance because you're going to write as many poems as you can.

Choosing a subject

Go outside, look at something, a perception from nature. Or even anything in your house or apartment. Begin to write about that. **Write descriptively about what you see but don't write *just* about what you see.** A haiku is not a photograph, but a poem. So put some feeling into it. Try to stick as much as possible with objective description. Describe things. They can be invisible: things like the wind, or a sound; or visible, tangible things; or a scent, something very evanescent or fleeting. Focus your poem as much as possible on some kind of an image. But don't stop there. Give that image some sense of significance. Infuse it with meaning or emotion.

Keep writing

Don't stop after one poem and don't get stuck trying to perfect any single poem. Change subjects as often as you want. Your only aim this week is to begin keeping a haiku diary. **Every day, try your hand at writing at least a few haiku.**

If you're doing it right, you're going to find that once you start to play with the syllables, once you start to play with this form, you're going to get some juice from it. You're going to get some energy from it. You're going to enjoy the creative expression. It's like an old hand pump. The first few times you crank it the water trickles. But once you get into the rhythm of it, the water pours and pours and pours. So you want to turn on the tap of your haiku creativity.

Use your senses

Remember to use your eyes, your nose, your ears, your body, your mind. Use all the parts of you. All your senses.

Write the moment

Try as much as possible to stay grounded in a moment in time. If you write about a moment or a moment's perception, then you will always be able to look around you and find the subjects for haiku.

Keep a haiku diary

If you want to think a little bit toward the future, then you can join me in a project that I've been doing for some time now. This is a five-year haiku diary. When this one is finished, I have a ten-year haiku diary waiting for me. Each day has just enough space to write a three-line haiku. But obviously you're going to want to write more haiku than that every day.

I try to write one haiku I'm really pleased with every single day. That's my goal as a haiku poet. Because I post so many haiku on social media they get lots of likes and shares. People often say, "What's your secret? How do you do it? How do you produce good haiku day after day after day?" My answer is always the same: the haiku diary. I try to perfect one poem every day, even if I have to write 100 versions to get it just right.



Working at your craft

It is a myth that haiku are always written spontaneously, right on the spot. I'll let you in on a little secret. The poets who give the impression of writing haiku spontaneously have exercised that poetic muscle so thoroughly, and have learned to conceal their craft and make it transparent from studying haiku for so many years, that they can make it look like the poem fell right from heaven. But haiku rarely fall right from heaven. The more you write them, the more they will. But it won't happen every time. It won't happen every day. It may not even happen every week or month.

What you can be guaranteed of is that if you find an idea for a haiku that feels like it has some validity, some power—something that you really resonate with, something you want to say—if you stick with it and are willing to write 10, 15, or 20 versions of it, you *will* get it right. How do I know this? Because every successful haiku is a 17-syllable word puzzle looking for an optimal solution. You will know when the syllables have fallen precisely into the right slots for what you want to say because the form will teach you when you've reached perfection. It will teach you when the poem is done. This is what we learn from writing in 5-7-5 syllables. It becomes a pattern that gets imprinted on our hearts and our souls. We take it deep within us and it teaches us to speak our deepest thoughts and feelings. Good luck.



Reflect

1. When might be a good time of day for you to write haiku?
2. Where will you look for inspiration?
3. Who would you like to share your poetry with? Can you imagine a particular friend or family member who would appreciate your haiku?

You may wish to make notes in a journal.



Summary: Why 5-7-5?

In our first unit together, we've learned that the three basic principles of haiku are:

- the 5-7-5 syllabic line structure
- the use of season words
- the creation of an original or captivating turn of thought.

In particular, we have been focusing on the 5-7-5 structure of haiku. We learned about its history as the opening verse in a form of collaborative poetry known as *haikai no renga*. The opening three lines of these group compositions were known as *hokku*. It took a skilled poet to create a compelling 17-syllable verse to support these sessions.

We also explored the use of the 5-7-5 structure in English, and why it is not enough to simply imitate Japanese haiku in English: we should aim to write *poetry* that makes use of the resonances, traditions, and techniques available to us in English.



The Writing Task

The task of this unit is to internalize the 5-7-5 form. Count syllables on your fingers, write lots of haiku, and in time you'll find the phrases that come to you begin to fall naturally into a 5-7-5 structure.

Next up: Practicing the Season

Haiku is the only form of poetry in world literature that takes the four seasons—with their distinctive plants, animals, weather, and human activities—as its primary subject matter. This lesson (which features spring poetry) explores the roots of haiku in animism, the universal religion of homo sapiens during the upper Paleolithic and a tradition we can still practice today by writing haiku in community. Activities include a weekly haiku challenge.