

Ninth Annual ukiaHaiku festival 2011

UKIAHAIKU FESTIVAL WORKSHOP

Because everyone cannot attend this workshop, given by the Poet Laureate Committee of Ukiah for teachers in Mendocino schools, I have written up the points in the outline so others can read the material covered. —Jane Reichhold

SIX MISCONCEPTIONS PEOPLE OFTEN HAVE ABOUT HAIKU.

1. A haiku has to have 17 syllables.

This is true only if one is writing in Japanese. Since we write in English, our haiku end up being too long if we follow this rule when counting syllables. A syllable and the Japanese sound unit (what they are counting) are not the same size. We think of Tokyo as having three sound units (toe-key-oh) but for the Japanese the same word has four sound units. This ratio of difference holds true fairly consistently.

So we can write haiku in 17 syllables, but these poems will have more information in them than a Japanese haiku. If being succinct and brief is one of the goals of writing haiku, the idea of adding adjectives and adverbs just to fill out a line count is counter-productive. If we want our haiku to approximate a Japanese haiku translated into English, we need to find another way of indicating the form. One way is to make the lines short, long, short – in a relationship to each other. This keeps the form and allows the author to pick and use the best words for the poem.

Still there are reasons to use the 17 syllable line count as a form construction device. When teaching children about syllables, it is an excellent way to get them to recognize these parts of speech. Also, even I, when working on a poem will occasionally count the syllables to make sure I have not gotten the line too long. There is a great difference between checking to see how long a line is and forcing the poem to fit into the syllable count.

The harm with the too-handy idea that a haiku is a 17 syllable poem is that it implies that a haiku must have this count to be considered. This belief forces the author to ignore the more important guideline that the haiku be as brief as possible. Since it encourages “padding” – adding unnecessary words just fill a line – the resulting haiku often loses its punch and freshness. It is time for our thinking and our teaching about haiku to reflect our increased knowledge and understanding.

2. A rigid form is harmful to beginning writers.

One of the reasons many of us so admire Japanese poetry is for its discipline. Even before they had a written language, 1,400 years ago, the Japanese composed their poetry in sound units with a five or seven count. And in spite of rebels and revisionists, most of their poetry today is in a firm form. Since our Western poetry has nearly completely tossed out all the rules with our interest in free verse, for some it is very comforting to return to a poetry form – even a borrowed one.

3. Haikus is the plural form.

“Haiku” is a Japanese word made of two parts. The *hai* can be translated as yes!, ashes, a cup, lungs, people, an embryo, funny, joke, crippled, and *ku* can mean verse or poem. Since the

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Japanese do not have a method of making plural nouns, haiku can mean one or many – like our words for deer, sheep and fish. Since we are borrowing their word, it feels wrong or somehow disrespectful to use our method of creating a plural by adding an ‘s’ to haiku.

3. Haiku is only for second graders.

There is the idea that since haiku lend themselves to being the earliest poetry form taught to children, that haiku are only for children or that they are not a serious poetry form. This is like saying because one is taught addition in grade school it has no purpose for mathematicians or adults in their daily lives. I think learning how to write haiku is more like the basic building blocks of other knowledge we learn early. Therefore it is even more important that teachers introduce it correctly. Another reason to teach haiku and haiku writing at all grade levels is that there is so much to learn. In contrast to free verse, haiku, and its related forms, offer avenues for exploration that can build on one another. I am still learning after all my years.

4. Haiku are jokes or stories.

Haiku are about one moment in time. That is the beauty of the genre that it lifts one second or instant of observation into importance. Jokes and stories need a narrative sequence of ‘this happened’ and then ‘that happened.’ Because some haiku are funny it is tempting to try to put jokes into haiku.

5. Haiku is an aphorism or a sentence.

Since the sentence is such a basic element of our speech, it is most easy to write a poem as such. But haiku is poetry and the haiku actually has two parts and if one is aware of them, and uses them correctly, the haiku will not come out as a sentence.

One part is called the ‘fragment’ because it is a fragment of a sentence. The second part is called the ‘phrase’ and usually consists of two lines that are grammatically connected. An example would be:

breakfast coffee
the excitement of an ocean
in my cup

One can tip the verse over to have:
in my cup
the excitement of an ocean
(is) breakfast coffee

You can see how one must add ‘is’ to make the connection within the phrase. But you can also see how this haiku is now a sentence!

However, if you add the ‘is’ thus:
in my cup
(is) the excitement of an ocean
breakfast coffee

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Then you have the two parts showing clearly. This is an important part of haiku writing – more vital than counting syllables to indicate the genre.

6. Haiku is not poetry.

When haiku were re-introduced in the States, in the late 1960s, the haiku gurus stressed that haiku were not ‘poetry’ and ever since haiku, haiku writers, and haiku poems have been shut out of the English poetry mainstream scene, except for brief interest shown by a few popular poets like T.S. Elliott, Amy Lowell, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder – none of whom were good haiku writers. I believe a study of haiku prepares the student of any kind of writing with greater proficiency. Understanding how differently haiku uses simile and metaphor, the attention to detail and exactness, and the focus on each little detail is the basis for excellent writing in any form. One of the reasons haiku is not seen as poetry is because it is very different to what we have come to know as Western poetry.

NINE WAYS HAIKU ARE DIFFERENT FROM WESTERN POETRY

1. Haiku are written in the present tense.

Haiku is not about telling a story, or relating an incident. It does not contain narrative, which is a departure for the way we talk to others and even to ourselves. This is always spoken or written or thought in the past tense. Haiku are written in the present tense so the reader gets the feeling that it is happening right now. No old news here. As the haiku is read or heard, what happens in the brain is what is happening – the situation is being recreated so it occurs right now for the reader. And that is the way our brains work when we read anything, even if it is written in the past tense. When we recreate the images in our brains, it is happening now in the nano-seconds of creation.

2. Haiku are written with as few words as possible – simple, easy to understand.

Though the haiku form is now over 400 years old, its briefness and compact size is perfect for Twitter and Facebook and text messaging. Practicing how say something quickly and accurately is certainly a skill the students of tomorrow’s world will need.

3. Haiku contain an image from nature.

This is an idea that often gets lost in the amount of information one can study about haiku. The Japanese people, perhaps because they have a mild climate and lived more outdoors, or because they had a religious system that saw spirits and gods in rocks, trees, sky, mountains, they used images from nature as the framework for their ideas and thoughts. They also had the feeling that linking their thoughts, so fleeting and changeable, to something as enduring as the elements of nature, gave added importance and permanence to the poem. Now, as we attempt to reconnect ourselves with nature and the environment, the haiku becomes an important tool. If one takes the idea that a haiku needs an image from the natural world (this was for hundreds of years a rule in Japan) one looks more closely to that world for inspiration.

4. Haiku use images not ideas – things not thinking.

One of the reasons haiku seem fresh and different to us is because we are, at some level, tired of poets telling us what they did, how they felt and how we should believe or think. Haiku

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present the reader/listener with images and let him or her decide what to feel or think or experience. How refreshing that is! However, this old pattern of poets is very strong in us so it takes some exercise to get use to not telling the reader our thoughts, our beliefs or judgments in our haiku. Keeping to the use of images and not using abstract ideas or thinking is the first step.

5. Haiku have a limited use of pronouns.

Another way to free the haiku from old poetry patterns is to avoid the use of pronouns. In the example above, see how much stronger the haiku is as:

breakfast coffee
the excitement of an ocean
in the cup

Why did I have to use 'my'? Yes, that is the way it happened, and accounts for my first version, but by removing the pronoun the haiku opens its meaning to include the reader's feeling in experiencing the situation. Many haiku can be improved by removing the pronoun one way or another. How much more telling is 'a tall woman' than "my mother"? Haiku should be inclusive and exclusive.

6. Haiku avoid expressing judgments.

Western poetry is built on the author telling the reader what to think. The rose is beautiful and the snail is ugly. But who needs that? Finding beauty in a snail is a perfect haiku exercise. But we do not tell the reader the snail is beautiful. No, the haiku writer finds something beautiful or interesting and shows that image in the poem and the reader discovers, "Ah, how beautiful is a snail." without being told what to do. Part of this side of haiku comes from the Zen Buddhist tradition that encourages us not to see anything as 'good' or 'bad,' but that it just 'is.' This 'is-ness' is celebrated in haiku.

7. Haiku have very little or no punctuation or caps

Traditionally the Japanese language did not indicate capitalization. Also, instead of dots or points to indicate punctuation, they had words. It would be as if we wrote:

breakfast coffee dash
the excitement of an ocean
in my cup period

This also explains how their 17 sound units made shorter poems – at least one or two sound units were used in punctuation.

Since we agree that a haiku is not a sentence, it does not make sense to use our punctuation system for it. We write sentence fragments and phrases without caps; why add them to haiku? Since haiku should be simple and direct, it makes sense to write them in the same way. Some writers will add a dash or ellipsis (. . .) to make the cut between the fragment and the phrase. However, if they have use the grammatical syntax properly, this is often not needed. The listener will hear the break without needing to see any punctuation.

8. Haiku are not rhymed.

Almost all the sound units in the Japanese language end with the sound of our vowels – a, e, i, o, u or the doubling of those same sounds. This means that one fifth of their words in a haiku

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could probably rhyme. How is that for easy? Some translations of haiku have tried making them into rhymed poems but that has another unwanted effect. Haiku work best when the images ‘open up’ or spread out so the reader is encouraged to work with them, to stay with them, to call up images from his or her storehouse of similar experiences. It has been found that we read a rhymed line, there is a feeling of ‘completeness’ or ‘finality’ or feeling that the poem line is ended and we do not need to think about it any more. This is good in other poetry but not for haiku.

9. Haiku avoid personification.

Part of the theory of ‘is-ness’ – a thing is what it is not the idea of something else – continues in the practice of avoiding the personalization of nature. This is such a fundamental and standard practice in our poetry that our language is peppered with examples of personalization that we no longer hear anything weird about:

the clock runs (without legs)

the sun smiles (without a mouth)

a breeze caresses (without hands)

Since studying Japanese poetry, we learn that we can use language differently – more directly and more accurately.

And this is only the beginning. There is so much more to learn about haiku I feel it could be taught every year, at every grade level and there would still be new aspects to explore.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF HAIKU

In the 1600s in Japan the first verse of the renga (then the most popular poetry form) was called a hokku but we would recognize it as a haiku. At that time poets began separating this very special first verse and collecting them as individual poems. Basho was the first rock-star popular writer and teacher of these short poems. Over the years the popularity of the form grew and waned. The highpoints came with the works of Buson, and Issa and some people would include Shiki – all called Haiku Masters.

In the late 1890s the first translations of hokku/haiku were done; first into French and shortly thereafter, into English. Though many poets explored the form, it did not catch on until the 1960s when haiku groups began to spring up around the country and the first anthology, *Borrowed Water* was published with the haiku of a group in Los Altos.

In Japan there are over a thousand groups of haiku writers with over a million members. There are very few countries that do not have at least a small group of haiku enthusiasts and the Internet has allowed them to unite and share their work in their own language and in English. Some have guessed that worldwide more haiku are written than any other kind of poetry.

BREAK

ELEVEN HELPS FOR TEACHING HAIKU IN THE SCHOOLS

1. MOST IMPORTANT: every child can be a poet

Poetry should be seen as being used by everyone in the same way that we all hum or sing songs even though we are not pop stars. We learn to sing by singing the songs we learn

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from listening to others. But the greatest joy in singing is when we make up our own songs. If a teacher can instill this idea in the students, give them the empowerment, and then the knowledge to also write their own poetry, think how much richer their later lives will be. And because haiku is short, and can be as simple as the person wishes to make it, truly anyone capable of thinking can make a haiku.

2. Poetry is learned by imitation.

Weeks before haiku comes up in your curriculum, begin writing a haiku every day or so in the upper corner of the whiteboard. Leave it there long enough for it to be read several times and pondered. You might consider finding a selection of haiku that reflects the current season. By changing these offered haiku frequently, you are more likely to find one that fits to each child's interest. Only when the student's mind becomes a part of a poem, will there be the interest in reading more and then writing haiku. Give a student the task of picking the daily haiku and he or she will learn a bit more.

3. The student needs to not only know how to write a haiku, but also how to read it.

Sometimes just hearing a haiku read, with inflections and/or gestures, the light of realization to appear. If not, then telling a story of your understanding of the haiku – putting the images into an extended language – will fill out the unspoken parts of the haiku. Then with a small step and a gentle twist, you can show them how to do this very same thing themselves. You can turn the tablets around so that they write as well as they read.

4. Establishing the form as short, long, short.

It has been so convenient to teach that haiku is a seventeen-syllable poem about nature, but as you can see this rule cannot always be applied in English – so drop it. The instruction that can be followed is the suggestion that the haiku contain three lines of short, long, short in a relationship.

5. Enlarging the concept of 'nature' images.

You do not have to limit the beginners with the range of subjects in nature either. Just encourage them to use images they perceive with their senses: hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching, because this is nature, too. Even six to eight words, not in a sentence, can be enough for a haiku. This gives a "can-do" feeling for even the least word-happy student.

6. Haiku help the students to think outside of and beyond themselves.

Part of growing up is moving off the self-centered life of babyhood. A good practice is to work with poetry from outside of the person – and haiku is perfect for this. If the haiku the class are writing is in the manner of "my hat blew off/ I chased it / down the street," help them to move the emphasis from themselves to the action they are observing. Put the action in the poem in the present tense and move away from memory with "March winds / rolling down the street / my hat," or something even better.

7. If some students simply cannot get started.

It can be helpful to give them a first line. Most appropriate would be a phrase appropriate for the current season: end of summer, falling leaves, first frost, pine tree, snow falling, melting snow, spring rain, daffodil, summer begins. It is always hard to get the first word of a poem

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down on that empty paper but by naming an element of the season, their minds will already have begun a journey through their own experiences.

8. If others simply cannot produce anything.

You might be prepared to offer them a haiku unknown to them with the last line cut off. By just giving them the beginning two lines could be enough to take them to an experience they may have had and permit them to finish the haiku in their own way. If their line is different from the original one, the poem is considered their own.

9. Be gentle and accepting of whatever the student writes with honest intent.

We all do not write the same nor do we experience the world in the same way. Whatever a person writes is the very best he or she can do with the skills and experiences which are available for writing a poem. Value this not only you're your comments but with your heart. Teach the students to treasure their experiences and their haiku.

10. Do display the haiku.

Replace your previous haiku examples by writing one of the student haiku each day on the board or by placing the haiku corner low enough that they can write their own haiku. Seeing the verse in their own hand-writing is a powerful connection for students and shows them their own worth and achievement. Think of displaying the haiku in any of the ways as listed in the following section.

11. When the class begins to accumulate enough haiku.

Teach simple bookmaking. The students can either make individual booklets of their own haiku or you can make a class project of an anthology so that everyone gets a copy of all the poems. The simple artwork of haiku writers in Japan, called *haiga*, encourages students to use brush and ink to make their own illustrations.

OTHER WAYS OF SHARING HAIKU

Here are some additional ideas of how others have shared their haiku.

1. It has long been a practice, when writing letters among friends, to include a current haiku, either as a date in the beginning, or as a closure. If the letter is well-written, and the haiku is well chosen, you have a perfect example of a *haibun* – (HI-BUN – a literary form combining prose and either a tanka or haiku). In this way, even letter writing can again be a true art form.
2. Haiku is a natural for the art form known as “mail-art” that is still practiced by a small group of artists. Instead of making pictures for a museum, these people use their envelopes as their medium of expression and commit their work and art to the vulgarity of the post office. Rubber stamps have played a part in this art form with carved block-print pictures and haiku. Others simply write a haiku on the backside of the envelope where it acts as blessing or prayer for the letter.

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3. People who make their own greeting cards have realized that haiku is a natural for this, and even some commercial companies are interested in using haiku for their cards.
4. Some make little booklets of haiku by saving the envelopes from daily mail. These are recycled by folding, punching, and hand-tying them into weird little booklets. The result being a cover and about eight or ten pages. Yes, there is writing and printing on the page, but the trick is to integrate this with the haiku or glue something over it – a stamp or a drawing – so each page is different. Sometimes the haiku is hand-written or one uses alphabet stamps.
5. Any gift is more personal if a hand-written haiku comes with it. There is an art to choosing the paper, the ink and even the scent so that all fit together and elevate the sense of the haiku, also.
6. Haiku are perfect for T-shirts – just the right amount of reading and worthy of being pondered.
7. Haiku have been written on tea bowls and even commercially on aluminum cans of tea. The Ochi Tea Company in Japan regularly has contests, open to English writers, to choose the haiku for their cans.
8. Haiku go to parties, especially ones held outdoors. It is a tradition in Japan to have a party on the seventh day of the seventh month (called *Tanabata* – TAN-NAH BAH-TAH) to write haiku on slender paper streamers and to tie them to a bamboo tree.
9. A variation on this is to write a haiku on a piece of paper and to tie it on a bell as wind-catcher.
10. Imaginative persons have written their haiku on banners and stood waving them on street corners, as the poet Paul Reys used to do.
11. Australia has adopted the practice from Japan of carving famous haiku on large boulders. These are placed in special places so passersby can walk from haiku to haiku.
12. Ty Hadman once told me that when his daughter was lying ill in a children's hospital, he dressed up in a tuxedo, and tied his haiku to strings attached to a stick with bells on it. He went from room to room jingling and making merry for each of the sick children. As a prize each child got to pull off a haiku to keep for his very own.

Links to more information:

Cobalt Crow Productions, a magazine about haiku for children ages 8–13:
cobaltcrowproductions.blogspot.com

Jane Reichhold's website devoted to short form poetry genres: AHApoetry.com

Jane is happy to correspond with anyone seeking help with haiku: Jane@AHApoetry.com