

Haiku is an ancient and highly formal Japanese art form designed to create the most emotional impact in the fewest possible words. Reputedly originated by the poet Basho during the Edo period, which started around the end of Queen Elizabeth I's reign, it is taken very seriously in Japan, where its exponents are highly respected as high artists.

The formula is very simple but like all good games, creating a real gem of a haiku is very difficult. Let's not even think about the complexities in the Japanese language or - heaven forbid - Japanese characters, for the moment, and just look at the western form, the basics are the same. The key is in finding the very best words possible. Many haiku are about nature and the human condition, and each word has to be a jewel in its own right. The very best create images and empathy in the listener/reader and often hours if not days are spent perfecting them.

There are three lines to a classic haiku. They don't rhyme, but in total they add up to seventeen syllables. Anyone who's been on the music board will know that syllables are one of the most important elements in song-writing too. A syllable is the number of individual sounds in a word. 'Yes', for example, has only one syllable, whilst 'maybe' has two, 'possibly' contains three syllables and so on.

Now comes the fun. The first line of the haiku has a total of five syllables, the second seven and the final line has five. Forget how many words you use, it's the syllable-count that counts! So if you decide to use the word 'Indiscriminate' in your first line, you couldn't use any other words as it already has five syllables, but if you were to use 'Quiet night, full moon' you'd be using four words for the same number of syllables. It's totally up to you.

You could try using a 'kigo' which is a word that is associated with the seasons - in nature poetry this can be very symbolic. Kigo are often words for plants so maybe if you were writing about winter you could use holly or apple blossom in spring. Don't forget, too, that not all haiku are deadly serious. There is a tradition of comic haiku and popular haiku and if it touches the heart in any way then it has done its job!

One stylistic thing, which doesn't occur in Japan, is the issue of emphasis. In most instances in the Japanese language, equal stress is put on each syllable of a word, whereas Westerners will emphasize different parts of a word. It is worth bearing this in mind, a reader wants to be thinking about the subject, not the way they should be pronouncing a word!

Writing haiku is a very good discipline and can teach all of us to be more succinct, as cutting unnecessary words and repetitions helps in all writing.

I.

Cooling summer rains
slake the parched, thirsting landscape
whiptail blinks, then hides

II.

festive saguaros
show off creamy white blossoms
fragrant mountain sings

III.

rainbows leap over
sparkling juniper groves
arroyo wakes up

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