

Haiku in English 17 Essential Points

- 1 A haiku is a 17-syllable poem written in three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables. That form is the basic DNA of haiku.
- 2 By longstanding tradition, most haiku contain a “season word” such as *dandelion* or *snowflake*. The season word anchors a haiku in our common experience of Nature.
- 3 Every good haiku contains a distinctive turn of thought. Also called a “twist” or “pivot,” that turn gives the 17 syllables MORE than 17 syllables of meaning.
- 4 In Japanese haiku, the turn of thought is often said to produce “haiku humor.” Haiku humor is extremely varied—it can be bittersweet, funny, philosophical, or even dark.
- 5 At its most basic, a haiku is “whatever you can get away with in 17 syllables.” There can be no fixed rule for producing the turn of thought in haiku.
- 6 Haiku exploded in popularity during the 20th century as it traveled around the globe. Haiku in each non-Japanese language has a unique identity of its own.
- 7 Over the last century, poets have experimented with various forms for haiku in English. However, 5-7-5 remains the form most recognized by the general reader.
- 8 Haiku in English most commonly fall under two broad categories: Formal Haiku and Popular Haiku. Formal Haiku observes 5-7-5 with a season word; Popular Haiku observes only 5-7-5.
- 9 Although distinctive, these categories are not mutually exclusive. Increasingly, we find poets using season words to produce haiku with broad popular appeal.
- 10 Both Formal and Popular Haiku aim to produce a distinctive turn of thought. In formal haiku, the turn of thought is inspired by the season word.
- 11 Poets the world over share haiku in groups that meet regularly—online or in person. When a group becomes influential, it is referred to as a “school” of haiku.
- 12 Our “17 School” is based on the idea that the 5-7-5 form for haiku is basic to its nature. Apart from that form, and a preference for season words, we do not set limits on haiku.
- 13 We believe that a haiku should function as a poem in English. Replicating Japanese haiku in style or technique is not our intended goal or concern.
- 14 We believe that the most essential aspect of haiku in any language is play. This is reflected in the word *haiku* itself, which means literally “playful verse.”
- 15 We see haiku in English as an invitation to play in 17 syllables. Haiku invites us to explore the unique sounds, nuances, and possibilities for poetic meaning in English.
- 16 We strive to produce haiku that are self-expressive. Even when we use objective images drawn from Nature, our best poems always have something to say.
- 17 We belong to a community of poets that includes our haiku ancestors and descendants. Writing haiku allows us to communicate with one another across time.

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