

Haiku in English

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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.

Clark Strand • Becka Chester • Clifford Rames •
Susan Polizzotto • Suzanne Tyrpak