

How to Write a Powerful Haiku Poem

By Fran Santoro Hamilton

Haiku provides an opportunity to work with several important elements of poetry: visual imagery, pleasing sounds, line breaks, symbolism, and form. Because a haiku is short—only seventeen syllables—the writer has the opportunity to hone it to a highly polished state.

A form of Japanese poetry, haiku has existed for hundreds of years. A haiku consists of three unrhymed lines, the first having five syllables; the second, seven; and the third, five. Getting the content to fit the form can be a major challenge in any poem; because a haiku is so short, that challenge becomes both enjoyable and attainable.

Requirements of a Haiku

Simply distributing seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 pattern over three lines does not necessarily make a haiku, especially a good one. In addition to the syllable pattern, a haiku should have nature as its subject matter, and it should capture one moment in time. Very often the description of nature in a haiku poem implies a broader truth about life in general.

Tips for Making Your Haiku Powerful

1. To ensure that you describe one moment in time, use a photograph for your inspiration. Many calendars have nature scenes that would make excellent subject matter.
2. Spend some time thinking about the scene you're describing. Does it suggest a broader truth?
3. In order to make the most of your seventeen syllables, use nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs that are packed with meaning. Spend a minimum of syllables on articles, prepositions, and "to be" verbs. (Don't carry this to the extreme so that your poem sounds like a telegram with words omitted.)
4. Try to use words with sounds that reinforce your meaning. For example, words with short i's and t's might sound like raindrops; words with sh's might sound like wind or rushing water.
5. Try to have your lines break at the end of a phrase.
6. Have no more than two sentences in your haiku; one might be even better. Having one sentence per line is likely to make your haiku sound choppy—and is likely to leave you with too few words that are packed with meaning.

Crafting your content to fit within the seventeen-syllable framework is simultaneously an amusement and a challenge. Success can produce a unique feeling of triumph.

Example of a Haiku

Foamy tides erase
My legacy of footprints.
Was I ever here?

Biographical Information

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Fran Santoro Hamilton's thirty-five years as teacher, writer, and editor have enabled her to distill the English language to its essentials. Fran is the author of Hands-On English, an English handbook that makes grammar visual, and she cosponsors The Grannie Annie Family Story Celebration. Fran provides many free resources at www.GrammarAndMore.com.