

3Background

HAIKU TEACHING KIT - The British Haiku Society

Background for teachers: Exactly what is haiku?

We recommend that you **plunge your students directly into writing haiku**. See Section 2, Introduction, and Sections 4 – 6, Tasks and Helping Creativity. This brief background is for your information; you may at some later point wish to tell older and more able children about these aspects of haiku.

Haiku is a form of poetry that **began in Japan in the 17th century**. Haiku appeal to us through images and our sensual perceptions of things, subtly influencing the reader's mood and possibly his/her view of life. They came to the West early in the 20th century, translated and originated in French, English and eventually many other languages.

Pushing my reflection
this wheelbarrow
full of rain

-- Ken Jones

The essence of haiku is to convey a moment of sensing and awareness. In few and precise words the experience of the poet is perceived by the reader of the poem. Something seen or heard or noticed by the writer is shared and felt by the reader without any 'telling.' The combination or contrast of two different images provides a shift or small jolt that 'wakes up' the reader in the same way the poet felt the experience.

Not 5-7-5. Haiku in the English language has long been explained as a brief poem of 17 syllables, arranged in three lines of 5, 7 and 5 syllables. This was based on the Japanese language and is no longer true in English. For instance, in Japanese *onion* counts as 4 sounds, while in English it is 2. Using a Japanese model of 17 sounds creates heavy, wordy English haiku. Today, to capture the brevity and true poetic sense of haiku, 10 to 14 syllables in English does the job. Usually the first and last lines are shorter, and the middle is longer, though even this varies.

Haiku often reflect nature and seasons around us. Some modern haiku include human life and urban life. Haiku is used in singular and in the plural. Haiku do not have titles or use rhyme.

white cloud cover
each and every lamppost
gains a gull

-- Susan Lee Kerr

Two pages of haiku samples, from both old masters and 20th and 21st century poets, follow here as background and to use in teaching. Find more, prepared for display, in the Visual Aids section. And in Resources find lists of books, journals and internet links.

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CLASSIC HAIKU TRANSLATED FROM JAPANESE

on a barren branch
a raven has perched –
autumn dusk -- Basho

old pond...
a frog leaps in
water's sound -- Basho

the stillness –
soaking into stones
cicada's cry -- Basho

oh, don't swat!
the fly rubs hands
rubs feet -- Issa

how long the day:
the boat is talking
with the shore -- Shiki

summer grasses,
all that remains
of warriors' dreams -- Basho

with the evening beeze
the water laps against
the heron's legs -- Buson

all night I walked
round and round the pond
watching the moon -- Basho

The first four are from The Haiku Handbook by William J Higginson, c 1985. The next four are translated by RH Blyth, Lucien Stryk or Tsunehiko Hoshina with Adrian Pinnington from Teaching Kit, The British Haiku Society, c 1998. © Copyright The British Haiku Society 1997, 1998, 2017. Copyright for all poems remains with the poets. For teaching purposes all material within this kit may be reproduced without further permission.

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CONTEMPORARY HAIKU IN ENGLISH

bright sunny evening...
then the dark whiteness
of a million hailstones -- Frank Williams

ocean breeze
sweeping through
my dreams -- Gunita Zaube

spring sunshine
lighting up the peel
in the marmalade jar -- Phillip Murrell

back to school ...
mummy gives me
a spit wash -- Shrikaanth Krishnamurthy

off to who knows where
a curled leaf spirals
to the river below -- Mark Gilfillan

rising tide –
boats along the creek
lift from the mud -- David Bingham

as the clouds
evaporate – the sun
on a gull's wing -- Kate B Hall

the symphony of rain
drop by drop
the notes disappear -- Iliyana Stoyanova

In order, the haiku above have been published as follows: FW Blithe Spirit 26.3; GZ Blithe Spirit 25.4; PM 'The Haiku Calendar', Snapshot Press, 2007; SK Akitsu quarterly summer 2016; MG Blithe Spirit 26.1; DB Presence 52, 2015; KBH Blithe Spirit 27.1; IS Blithe Spirit 26:3. Copyright for all poems remains with the poets. For teaching purposes these may be reproduced without further permission.