

WRITING *HAIKU*

A Language Experience of Invention and Precision

by

Victor C. Pellegrino

for

**Institute for Excellence in Writing
Writing Educator's Symposium
July 28-31, 2008**

Victor C. Pellegrino is a professor *emeritus*, University of Hawai'i, Maui Community College, where he taught courses in Eastern and Western Literature, British and American Literature, and composition and advanced composition. He was chairperson of the Language Arts Division and served on the editorial board of *Makali'i*, a journal representing Hawai'i's community colleges. He has authored nine books, six of which focus on writing.

Pellegrino studied Japanese literature at Sophia University in Japan and was a Fulbright Scholar in India. He is the recipient of two Excellence in Teaching awards.. He first began to write *haiku* in 1973, and he hasn't stopped. He is the author of *A Slip of Bamboo: A Collection of Haiku from Maui*, which contains selections of his *haiku* written between 1973 and 1996.

HAIKU: A JAPANESE VERSE FORM

A BRIEF BACKGROUND OF *HAIKU*

Tanka were 5-line poems of 5, 7, 5, 7, and 7 syllables. The *haiku* drops the last two lines of 7 syllables each. Thus, it contains 3 short lines: the 1st line is 5 syllables; the 2nd line is 7 syllables; and the 3rd line is 5 syllables = 17 total

The *haiku* form (called *hokku*) is based on shortening of the *tanka* during the *Edo* Period (1603-1867) by *Matsuo Basho* (1644-1694).

Basho was named after a banana tree in 1681 when he moved into a hut with a banana tree alongside.

Basho is considered the most famous Japanese *haiku* poet. His *haiku* below is his most well-known poem:



*Old pond,
frog jump in:
water sound...*

The term *haiku* was created and popularized during the *Meiji* Period (1869-1912) by *Masaoka Shiki*. (1867-1902). His *haiku* were simple, direct, and reachable in understanding by the masses. His *haiku* below illustrates this:



*I want to sleep
Swat the flies
Softly, please.*

FOCUS AND CONTENT OF *HAIKU*

The power of a *haiku* lies in what it suggests.

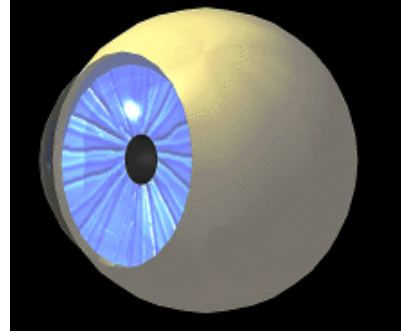
Meanings or interpretations are based on one's

age, experience, etc.... Often a poem read in

high school is interpreted differently when read

later on in life. This is because an understanding of *haiku*

or an interpretation of a poem is based on one's own background, experiences, and observations.



A *haiku* reflects human experience—*kokoro*—from the heart. Poems should center on emotion, stir feelings, and stimulate thought. As Japanese say—*kokoro*—from the heart or the heart of the matter.

Haiku should reflect daily life experiences, situations—from the mundane to the sophisticated.

Brevity or minimalism, characteristics of *haiku*, creates a sense of directness, immediacy or freshness.

Nature and its beauty are important elements of the *haiku* (e.g., cherry blossom).

Haiku try to capture concrete images, often with both time and place mentioned or suggested.

Haiku contain *kigo*, or season word that “suggests” a season, and creates an association with at least one other element in the poem. The *kigo* is used in a *haiku* to place the poem in a particular context. For example, rain would suggest spring or a twisted branch would suggest autumn.

A *haiku* contains little or no punctuation. Sometimes *haiku* poets use the dash (—), semicolon (;), colon (:), exclamation mark (!), ellipsis (...), or period (.)

STRUCTURING HAIKU

Create a visual image or snapshot

Keep it simple.

Play with words.

Allow it to suggest.

Make sure it focuses on emotion.

Avoid eliminating words that may make the poem grammatically incorrect or sound like “broken” English.

Find a *kigo* word for summer, fall, winter, or spring. A *haiku* should have a basis in nature, but not necessarily be about nature itself.

Eliminate any rhyming.

Avoid similes and metaphors.

Use punctuation for Japanese *kireji* or “cut” words. In English, punctuation such as the dash (—), semicolon (;), colon (:), exclamation mark (!), ellipsis (...), period (.) are used to divide or juxtapose images or redirect the flow of the poem. It is a way of indicating a transition or “thought-pause” in the *haiku*. The transitional point in a *haiku* both separates and connects two different aspects (see *renso*, below) of the poem, and this is what helps create its meaning.

Include renso, a loose association of unlike or different images. Two separate images can be created and then a third line can link them together in some unusual or even surprising way.



WRITING *HAIKU*



THE PROCESS

Writing *haiku* is a creative, self-exploration process that builds poetic and language skills. Writers use existing vocabulary, develop and expand vocabulary, appreciate the nuances of words and word combinations, learn syllabication, experiment with word order and word patterns, and develop grammar and punctuation skills. The fun and challenge of creating *haiku* is a nonthreatening and enjoyable approach to teaching language without the structure of textbooks and traditional lesson plan methods. In effect, students will be developing language skills in a natural way.

TIME

Don't rush creativity. Most poetry is written when one is "moved" or in a creative mood of sorts. No one really knows just how an idea becomes poetry, but be sure that the process is not artificial. That is, art just frequently happens. It's not forced. Of course, a teacher's time and lesson needs some structure, but one should not be "bent out of shape" when a student meets a blank wall, simply can't get started, or does not know how to finish. Try patience.

FROM IMITATING TO CREATING

Writing *haiku* should be based first on imitation. Explaining the *haiku* is best done by reading, studying and analyzing *haiku* by other writers. Then students will be able to write their own *haiku* by following the form and idea of *haiku*, develop their own voice, realize an appreciation and understanding of poetry, and improve both their writing and "confidence" skills.

WRITING ENVIRONMENT AND TOOLS

The writing environment should contain essential tools of language: sources for the rules of punctuation and syllabication, a thesaurus, word finders, dictionaries, dictionaries of synonyms, antonyms and homonyms, and foreign language dictionaries. Outside the classroom environment, essential, abridged versions of the above should be handy.

RESPONDING TO STUDENTS' CREATIVITY

Never be overly critical of students' *haiku*. Poetry deals with creating. Creating is not synonymous with a perfect result. It is a reflection of self. If there is anything to do, "suggest" ways that another word or phrase might change the meaning or focus on the emotion being suggested. Provide information about structure, such as "Can you think of a *kigo* word for summer instead of using the word itself?" The same philosophy should be established with students when poems are shared. Have them point out the good aspects of the poem. Finally, there is little room for negative criticism during the early writing of *haiku*.

ACTIVITIES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING HAIKU

The key to writing *haiku* lies in the process of its creation and in its reading. Students can work individually or in groups to create a *haiku*—or do both. In groups, each can create a line or work together to create each line.

Ask students to follow the 5-7-5 pattern and check their syllabication in a dictionary. They can also demonstrate their understanding of syllabication by using a slash to separate the syllables for each line of *haiku*: On / a / win / ter's / night

Ask students to write about the same season and the same image or theme. (E.g., spring: rebirth, joy). Compare poems and discuss similar and different ideas, images, feelings, etc... Ask students why the same subject conjured up different or similar content.

Locate places to write *haiku* outside the school, preferably a natural environment outside the city.

Have students read others' poems. Ask them to talk about what they think the *haiku* poems suggest or mean.

Have students identify the elements of the *haiku*.

Ask students to list kigo that suggest each of the 4 seasons: spring, summer, autumn, and winter.

Ask students to list words that relate to emotions: love, passion, hate, loyalty, vanity, joy, etc...

Ask students to list words that suggest a time: morning, night, birth, death, flag day, holiday, etc....

Teach the uses of punctuation: dash (—), semicolon (;), colon (:), exclamation mark (!), ellipsis (...), and period (.)

Exchange *haiku* and ask students to write a short literary analysis. For older students, teach the process of writing a literary criticism, including aspects such as content or idea, form, correct use of Japanese elements, etc...

Read and discuss *haiku* by well-known Japanese authors such as *Basho*, *Shiki*, *Issa*, *Ikkyu*, and *Buson*.

Students can illustrate their *haiku* on large sheets of paper and write their *haiku* adjacent to the illustration. Students can also use photographs, cutouts from magazines, ink stamps for borders, etc...

Create a book of *haiku* based on travel experiences and observations. Include photos or drawings.

Write *haiku* based on days in life that deal with emotions: sadness, happiness, excitement, etc...

Use an illustration, painting, or photo as a springboard for writing a *haiku*.

Because *haiku* present just a snapshot of personal experience, ask students to take some digital photo snapshots and select one or more as a springboard for creating their *haiku*.

Use art, music or both (e.g., music and photos of *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky) to stimulate, inspire imaginative images and ideas for composing *haiku*.

Write a list of words on the blackboard and ask the students to choose from the lists to create their *haiku*.

Have students organize a live poetry reading.

Ask students to record their poems on video for a poetry reading. Creative students can use a MAC for recording sound (poems and music) and for creating special visual effects.

SOME HAIKU
by
VICTOR PELLEGRINO

SPRING

Miniature pinks
A pebble falls in my shoe
I am here and now

Darkness closes day
Frightening black moon shadows
I hear my son cry

SUMMER

Viewing azure waves
Serene Buddha's patience
Kiawe thorn!

Antarctic sun-hole
Life force stealing us away
Bitter melon seed

AUTUMN

Kamakura visit
Buddha's lap overflowing
Gold autumnal gift

Madam Pele spurts
And churns out her bleeding heart
Oh! Good-bye Queens's bath

WINTER

Winter invasion
One dead and other scurry
Surely ants must scream

Bright winter blossoms
Storm-ripped bauhinia
But, oh! Purple snow