

How to Write Haiku

By Dean Summers

hai-ku (hī'kōō) *n., pl. haiku*. A poem that evokes a resonance of feeling and insight in a few brief phrases that present two aspects of an ordinary occurrence set in one of the four seasons of the year. [Japanese 俳句: *hai*, recreation + *ku*, verse.]

*old pond:
that sound the water makes
when a frog jumps in*

Bashō

1. Notebook in hand, pen in hand, breathe easy. Look. Listen. Smell. Touch. Taste.
2. When something happens that sparks a moment of awareness (when you catch your breath and find yourself saying, "Oh!" or "Aah!" or "Huh?"), take note.
3. Then, take notes. Enter the moment. Find words that convey your thoughts and feelings. Don't describe your thoughts and feelings. Describe what happened in a way that will evoke similar thoughts and feelings for your audience.
4. Of all the details you might associate with your moment of awareness, identify two essential aspects—as background and foreground, or point and counterpoint.
5. Present those two aspects in a way that will invite your audience to pause, to wonder, and to make the connection that sparks the imagination. Most haiku comprise two statements, one about half the length of the other. Each statement is a brief, conversational remark—very rarely a full formal sentence.
6. Write in simple, direct, conversational English. Ordinarily opt for the present tense.
7. Check to see that you have indicated the season in some way—by naming the season, by naming an object or action commonly associated with the season, or by setting the right mood.
8. Check for a resonance of feeling and insight. Every effective haiku produces in the imagination of the listener a ripple of associations.
9. Read your haiku aloud. It has to work vocally. Haiku is poetry, and poetry is performance art.
10. Don't worry if you don't get it right the first time. Keep at it. A well-written haiku will sound spontaneous, but you may have to make several revisions before you find the words that produce the right effect.

In Japanese, haiku are written to a set metrical pattern (often described as a 5-7-5 syllable count). The Japanese haiku meter does not fit the English language, and no standard meter has ever been established for English-language haiku. Even so, if it's haiku, it has a pulse. And, if it's haiku, it's very brief. A haiku is a poem in one breath.