

Fitz's Top Three Haiku Techniques

To count or not to count? That is the question...

The writing of haiku is probably one of the most dumbed down exercises in our collective poetry curriculums around the planet. Every year I ask my students the same question: ‘What do you know about haiku?’ And invariably the entire room is shouting 5-7-5 as if it is the code that will stop a bomb from going off. It is almost like asking, “What is baseball?” and having everybody shout “FIELD” at the same time. Baseball is certainly played on a field, but the answer is a long way from the nuance, practice, and reality of the game. Haiku has survived as an art form for so many thousands of years because there is something quintessentially cool, fun, and thought provoking about the writing and reading of haiku—but too many of us teachers forget to keep that in mind and impose a creative rigidity at the start by insisting on a metrical structure that is as unquestioned as gravity.

- The writing of haiku has to be kept fun and thought provoking. In fact, the term haiku is derived from the word "Hai" which means "insightful," and the term "Ku," which means "fun." (Or something very close to that.)
- Haiku are poems of 20 syllables or less constructed in three lines using an images, actions, and a **cutting element** (usually a punctuation mark that sets up the **twist**) that separates the haiku into two sections. This might not be the definition you know, but it is the one we will use for the haiku I teach here. It is not a bad idea to stay close to the traditional 5-7-5 syllable scheme, but it is certainly not the end all be all of "effective haiku." Only a pedant is going to sit there and count syllables on you.
- A traditional haiku always has what is called in the Japanese language, a kigo, which is a seasonal reference of some sort, though for most western writers of haiku this has gone the way of the 5-7-5.
- A good haiku has neither too little or too much, and it just feels like a haiku when you read it or hear it. It makes you want to say, "Ahhhhh ku..."
- A haiku should be structured like a small cottage or hut: it is a small, familiar place that holds a secret of some sort—as well as the promise of great intellectual depth or emotional warmth.
- Write from your point of view from out of your own experiences.
- Never explain the meaning of what you say. Finding meaning is part of the joy and play of the readers

Here are my three three beginning haiku techniques that can help you write effective haiku.

Technique # 1: Image and action + cool twist: Using images and actions to create a vivid and visual experience for your reader is a powerful method for engaging and keeping your audience interested in what you are writing—and that has to be the primary goal of all writers. The most effective images and actions are created using specific nouns and verbs. I like to teach haiku as a way to practice this basic skill of writing because haiku not only use images and actions, they also add in a thoughtful element (the cutting) into each poem.

For example:

In the bog
the kid with the new sneakers
is getting nervous.
~fitz

Technique # 2: Image on Image + Cool Twist: Part of the powerful effect of black and white photography is the visceral response created by the contrasts between shades of black and white. For some reason, a black and white photo is more evocative than a color image—at least to me! For most of my assignments, I ask my students to include a black and white image to go along with their haiku.

For example:

Outside the bombed cottage
a snow-dusted soldier smiles
and flips the pancakes.
-fitz

Technique #3: Big to small, and small to big: "Give me a stone and I'll show you the universe. Show me the universe and I'll give you a stone." The technique of expanding or narrowing is common and effective in all types of writing. It is a way of amplifying or focusing attention. It helps us to see the universal meaning in small and specific images; and it allows us to see the unique and particular within the "big picture."

For example:

All that's left
of the long winter--
a mitten in the daffodils
~fitz

Now let's practice these three techniques!

Fitz's Haiku Technique #1

Images & Actions + Cool Twist

1. First create a series of **images and actions** and make the first two lines of a "potential" haiku.
2. Nature, and especially the seasons, is the best raw material for haiku. Go outside and watch nature. (Yes, move away from your computer and grab a notebook and a pencil!)
3. Find a place where you can just sit and observe what is happening around you.
4. Whenever you "see" something happening, write down that image and action using only nouns and verbs--and occasionally a necessary adjective, and rarely an adverb!

Don't look for what is "out of the ordinary." Look for ordinary things doing things in ordinary ways. The most commonplace images make for the best haiku.

For Example:

- In her nest of grass
The robin sleeps all day
- A single earthworm
Inches across the wet pavement
- Three painted monarchs
Dance around a single flower
- Lightening flashes
And distant rumbling

Next, take those images and actions and create a haiku by adding a short thought, question, or statement. In traditional haiku this is called the "**cutting**." The cutting adds a "**twist**" into the poem and lets your reader experience the image and action in a new (and often profound—and sometimes funny) way.

- A good way to set off this cutting is by adding a semi-colon, double dash or colon at the end of the first section.
- I generally use a semi-colon in place of a comma and conjunction (so, yet, and, or, nor, for, but).
- I use a colon to introduce a statement or a list.
- I use the double dash when I want to add a cool thought or sudden insight to complete the haiku. Try to keep this line between four and seven syllables.
- Notice that a haiku does not have a title, but the author name is always placed below in italics.

Here are the completed haiku using my examples.

In her nest of grass
The robin sleeps all day;
It must be Sunday.
~fitz

A single earthworm
Inches across the wet pavement:
Stop the speeding car?
~fitz

Three painted monarchs
Dance around a single flower—
Sweet waiting nectar!
~fitz

Lightning flashes
And vague distant rumbling:
Somebody's getting wet.
~fitz

These may not be the greatest haiku in the world, but I hope you get the basic idea of what I am trying to do. By adding the cutting I want you to see that even the most common of experiences can have profound and unique meaning.

Fitz's Haiku Technique #3

Image on Image + Cool Twist

The important part of this exercise is to practice creating images and actions using nouns and verbs and “essential” adjectives. (An essential adjective is something like: a “red” rose; whereas, a non-essential adjective would be a “beautiful” rose.

1. First you need to create juxtaposed images--especially if the images are "out of place"-- that are connected with a prepositional phrase.

For example:

- The rubber ball
in the new snow
 - A dark puddle
on the dry street
 - On a withered branch
the black crow
2. Now add an action of some sort to the beginning or the end that helps add a new dimension and twist to the images and so create a haiku:

The rubber ball
in the new snow
will soon be lost
~fitz

When will the kids find

the dark puddle
on this dry street?
~fitz

On his long grey branch
the black crow
waits all day.
~fitz

Fitz's Haiku Technique #3 *Narrowing & Expanding*

2. To use this technique to create haiku you simply need to start with either a big or a small image.

For example:

- The last oak leaf [small]
- The moon in the night sky [big]

1. Now expand upon the image

Yesterday's winds:
strong enough to carry away
the last oak leaf.
~fitz

2. →or narrow down the image:

The moon in the night sky
walks with me
Down this wet road
~fitz

Each of these three techniques should help you compose haiku that are cool, fun, and insightful, but like any form of writing, the proof is always in the pudding. It is up to you to practice,

experiment, innovate and use your own creative judgements while keeping in mind that traditions that evolved over the course of the last several hundred years. Don't break the rules because you can; break the rules only after you know them!