

Syracuse Poster Project: Guidelines for Haiku

Keep it simple:

Haiku explores simple objects, places or experiences for what's special about them.

Draw on experience:

Like all good poetry, haiku should come from direct experience, instead of imagined or borrowed experience. Pay attention to the experiences that bring your life a moment of difference. Why did they strike you? Reconstruct the experience in words, so that your reader can see, hear and feel the same sights, sounds and physical sensations that you felt.

Write about things close by:

Write about downtown, your neighborhood, or the nearby countryside—not about places far away. Avoid writing about commercial establishments, or don't write about them in a way that sounds like advertising.

Pay attention to nature:

Traditional haiku draws strongly on the natural world. Our haikus, coming from the city, have less opportunity to take note of nature, but you can still try. Also, traditional haiku sets the scene with allusion to the season. For example, a poet setting a scene in summer might mention crickets (or, in the city, the sound of street sweepers) as a way of evoking summer without actually naming it.

Stick to the form:

Haiku has just three lines, no titles. The first line has five syllables. The second line has seven syllables. The third line has five syllables. The form challenges you to capture the essence of an experience in very few words. Use grammar (hyphens and colons) to substitute for prepositions and conjunctions. Avoid unneeded words. For instance, poems don't need the word "Syracuse." It's understood that the poems arise from Syracuse.

Use comparison and contrast:

Good haiku achieves depth by comparing two phenomena—something small and discreet with something vast, or something natural with something man-made, etc. The interplay between likeness and difference opens the reader to reflection.

Deliver a progression of effects:

Ideally, each line can stand alone. The poem should not read like a single sentence chopped into the required syllables. Finally, the last line should add a twist—a point that makes the reader wake up to your experience, and say, "Ah-ha!, yes, that's how it is!"

Read:

From our American perspective, haiku can seem foreign and limiting. To better appreciate haiku's history and effectiveness, go to the library and get a book on haiku. Two good choices: *An Introduction to Haiku*, by Harold G. Henderson, first published by Doubleday in 1958, and *Haiku: A Poet's Guide*, by Lee Gurga, Modern Haiku Press, 2003. Or visit our poetry blog for good examples from local poets:

<http://syracuseposterprojectblog.wordpress.com/>