



JAPAN INFORMATION
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在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

HAIKU

Haiku poetry developed in the Heian period of Japan, but was not originally considered its own style of poetry. In the 9th century, the most common form of Japanese poetry, the waka, was refined into a structure called a tanka, which featured a very specific 5-7-5-7-7 sound form. These in turn inspired renga, an elite parlor game between two or more writers, where poets would alternate between writing 5-7-5 stanzas, called a hokku, and 7-7 stanzas. These renga were often hundreds of lines long. As the hokku would set the mood and scene for the poem, hokku authors were often admired for their skill, and in the 19th century, the hokku began to be written and read as an individual poem, the haiku.

Haiku can be written about almost anything, but there are some specific techniques that make a poem a haiku. One of the most important structural elements is the kigo, a season word, which indicate in which season the haiku is set. The season is fundamental to haiku, otherwise it can be mistaken as another type of poetry. A haiku also often uses the technique of “cutting” (kiru 切る), where two independent images or ideas are juxtaposed by using a kireji 切れ字 (“cutting word”) between them. In English, this is usually done using a colon, long dash or ellipsis.

Traditional Japanese haiku consist of 17 *on* (音), or phonetic sounds, arranged in lines of five, seven, and five. *On* is sometimes translated as “syllables” in English, but as Japanese kanji can often condense more sound and meaning than the English Roman alphabet, the 5-7-5 structure is not considered a strict rule. Therefore, in English, modern haiku focus on the essence of the haiku, defining it as a short poem using imagery to convey the essence of nature or the season in connection with human life.