



Lesson: Haiku History, Form & Creation

OVERVIEW

Letter from Sado was inspired, in part, by a **haiku** written by the Japanese poet, Matsuo Bashō. Students will recall what they already know about haiku or learn about this Japanese poetry form by examining existing haiku. After reviewing (or learning) three basic criteria, students will try their hand at writing original haiku. Music educators might collaborate with language arts teachers for this lesson.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will learn about and write a reflective poem in haiku form

RESOURCE & MATERIALS

- Samples of existing haiku including those by Matsuo Bashō
- Paper and pencils
- Prompts for poetry writing – images, events, etc.
- Teacher Resource page: [The Beginnings of Haiku](#)

BACKGROUND

Haiku is an ancient form of Japanese poetry that is often about nature and the seasons. The haiku form used today was formalized in the late 19th century as a three-line poem with a 5-7-5 pattern of syllables across the three lines. Haiku written by students in the United States typically follows this syllabic pattern. However, the Japanese classical haiku masters were never strictly bound by the 5-7-5 pattern.

Here are examples of classic haiku by Bashō (1644-1694).

An old silent pond...
A frog jumps into the pond,
splash! Silence again.¹

Temple bells die out.
The fragrant blossoms remain.
A perfect evening!²

Western poets also write haiku. Late in life, African American author, Richard Wright, embraced the discipline of haiku and wrote over 4,000 poems in that form.

¹ Translated by Harry Behn. Retrieved from Poem Hunter.Com, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-old-pond/>

² Retrieved from *Haiku for People*, <http://www.toyomasu.com/haiku/#basho>. Permission for use granted with mention of the site.

Learn more about Wright, (the highly acclaimed author of *Black Boy* and *Native Son*) at <http://www.terebess.hu/english/haiku/wright.html>.

PROCESS

NOTE: Consider enlisting your students' Language Arts teachers for support with this project.

1. Reinforce the point that *Letter from Sado* was inspired by an ancient haiku poem written by Matsuo Bashō (1644-1694). Haiku is a popular poetry form used in Language Arts writing curricula across many grade levels. Ask students to share any prior experience they recall about poetry writing, especially in haiku form.
2. Review the haiku form with students as presented in the Haiku Background above. Write a haiku that follows the 5-7-5 syllable pattern on the board:

First Light
The ebb and flow of
Silver moon to golden glow;
Ta-da! A new day

- Ask for individual readers or read as a group. Encourage expressive voices.
- Ask students to count the number of syllables in each line (5-7-5) and write the numbers beside each line.
- Read it again and ask what they were able to “see” or imagine with these words.
- Compare this haiku with one of Bashō’s most famous poems:

An old silent pond...
A frog jumps into the pond,
splash! Silence again.

- Ask for comments regarding:
 - The similarities and differences they notice
 - The setting or place; is it in the natural world? The human-made world?
 - The syllable pattern; does it follow the 5-7-5 pattern? (Count the syllables together.)
- 3. In addition to the pattern of syllables, creating haiku requires another important characteristic – the “twist” or “cutting.” The twist is the change in the subject of the haiku; the spot where there is a slight difference in viewpoint, perspective, or in substance. But both parts of the haiku relate to each other. The twist or cut can come after the first or second line. A colon, dash, or period is used to show its place. Look at the two poems on the board and note where the **twist** or **cutting** is located. Read the poems again with a slight emphasis or pause at the cutting.
- 4. Tell students that they will work with a partner to write a haiku inspired by some aspect of nature – one of their choosing. (OPTION: The original haiku can also be written in Language Arts Class or be assigned as homework.)

Remind students of the three criteria for their work:

- a. Follow the traditional haiku form, usually a 5-7-5 syllable pattern for the three lines, but small variations can be written if it better fits their idea.
 - b. The natural world and/or a special place should be the focus of the poem. The poet is “noticing or seeing” something in a more focused way.
 - c. Remember the twist, or cutting – a place where there is a shift or change.
5. After a short writing period, ask each pair of students to join with another pair. They will read their work to one another and provide specific feedback on whether the poem met the format criteria as well as what the poem conveys. Allow some time for revisions based on input from the partners.
 - Reconvene and ask for volunteers to read some of their haiku out loud.
 - Post student work on the board or wall.
6. Display the band’s original haiku at the concert where *Letter from Sado* is performed.

EXTENSIONS

- The original haiku could be used as the basis for original compositions by band students. Students can create music that grows out of the images in a student haiku. (See Lesson Plans for Creating Music)
- BONUS POINTS: David Landis Barnhill’s translation of Basho’s haiku deviates from the traditional form of 5-7-5. Bonus Points to any student who notes the difference.

TEACHER RESOURCE: THE BEGINNINGS OF HAIKU

Before Matsuo Basho's time, in 15th century Japan, a poetry form called *renga* blossomed. *Renga* was created by a group of poets working together cooperatively. Those in the group alternately added verses to the work until they completed the poem which usually consisted of 100 verses.

The long poem unfolded in this way:

One member started with one verse. Then others in the group of poets created additional verses. The verses alternated between those with 17 syllables and shorter verses of 14 syllables.

In the 17 syllable verses, the breakdown was:

A line with 5 syllables – A line with 7 syllables – and one with 5 syllables

In the 14 syllable verses, the breakdown was:

7 syllables and 7 syllables

The poem continues until it reached 100 verses.

Renga was considered a rather academic and noble form of poetry. By the 16th century, interest in the formal *renga* declined and a more humorous poetry form became very popular. It was called *haikai*. Poets found poetry in the things and events of daily life and loved the humor of the play on words. It still followed the 17 syllable and 14 syllable format, but it was no longer stately sounding poetry.

Now both the first verse of the *renga* poem and the *haikai* poem was called "hokku." And eventually poets began to present these short opening poems as independent works outside of the longer poetic forms. These were the first haiku poems.

For more information see **History of Haiku** <http://www.big.or.jp/~loupe/links/ehisto/eavant.shtml>