

Haiku: Lesson plan for teachers, grades 6–12

Read aloud sample poems. Attached is a page of award-winning haiku written by young poets (see Winning Poems from the Nicholas A. Virgilio Memorial Haiku Competition). If possible, project the poems and have the students take turns reading poems out loud. Read slowly!

Ask the students what they notice about the poems. What characteristics or common features do they see? List these common features on the board as the students say them. Fill in any additional features so there will be a list for later use. The list might look like this:

- Short:** Haiku are very short poems! They are usually written in three (or fewer) lines. Haiku can be written in the traditional pattern of 5-7-5 syllables but they do not have to be. Most haiku in English have fewer than 17 syllables.
- One moment in time:** Haiku generally describe one brief moment in time. For example, “one tombstone with a crow” tells us only about the moment of noticing the crow; we do not need to know what happened before or after.
- Images:** The poems contain sensory images (not only visual, but involving other senses as well). For example, “echoes of laughter” and “metallic taste.”
- Seasonal references:** You can often tell what season it is by the references in the poem. For example, “the coarse wool of my blanket” tells us it is probably winter.
- Juxtaposition:** This might be difficult for students to notice, but the strength of successful haiku often comes from placing one image next to another. Without explicit metaphor, haiku often elicit powerful reactions in the reader by use of juxtaposition. For example, “harvest moon” resonates with the image of coins in a homeless man’s cup. Placing the images of the moon and the coins in the same poem suggests a relationship between the two and sparks a response in the reader.
- Everyday language:** Haiku generally contain common everyday words. Nothing fancy or complicated!
- Surprise:** There is often a break or shift in the poem which creates a moment of surprise or sudden awareness. This is often called the “aha” moment.

Brainstorm for ideas before writing complete haiku. This step can be done individually by each student or as a group exercise on the board. Ideally, images can be collected by taking notes “on location” at an art exhibit or outdoors, but it can also be done in the classroom. Ask students what they saw, heard, felt, etc... at a particular moment in time at a specific place. By making a list of images, emotional responses, and seasonal references, there is no pressure at this point to produce complete poems. Let the ideas flow.

Write haiku. Have students choose words and phrases from among the images, emotional responses, and seasonal references to create haiku. Encourage students to write several poems and share any they feel comfortable sharing. Provide positive feedback and encouragement.

Haiku: Lesson plan for teachers, grades 1–5

Read sample poems aloud. See attached sheet of “Haiku for Beginners.” Let the kids absorb the poems without much introduction or explanation. Read slowly and leave space between poems. Missing one word can mean missing the entire poem.

Ask the students what they noticed about the poems. Which poems did they like best? Why? Ask how they felt when they heard specific poems. For example, did they feel surprised by the frog about to belch a cloud? Or did they feel lonely when they heard the poem about a crow on a bare branch? Were they excited by the ticket to a ballgame tucked in the math book?

Talk about images. Ask the students if they know what the word “image” means. They may offer something like “pictures with words.” Point out that images can involve all of the senses. Images can come from experience in the present moment (for example, a pen on their desk or a bird outside the classroom window) or from memory or imagination. Images can make us feel emotions. Instead of saying, “I feel happy” in a poem, we can show how we feel by which images we choose to include.

Take an “Image Journey.” Have the kids imagine they are at the beach (or in the woods, on a mountain, etc...). Ask what they see, what they hear, what they smell, etc... If they can remember a specific moment on a particular day, this will help add detail to their images. Write their words on the board and point out that these are images. Ask them to also think of images that show us what season it is. For example, “a hole in my sweater” tells us it is cold outside and probably winter. Remind the students to be *specific* and use as many different senses as they can! Note: When writing in response to an art exhibit, have the kids tell what they remember seeing, hearing, feeling, etc... while viewing the exhibit.

Have students try writing poems. Ask the kids to select words from among the images to form poems. For example, a child might write the following while doing the above brainstorming exercise: “I see sea gull tracks all over the wet sand. I smell salty air. My feet are cold. The beach is deserted because it is winter.” Ask which words are most important and most interesting. We can leave out some words, such as, “I see” and “I smell,” and write a poem something like this:

sea gull tracks
in wet sand
my cold feet

In the above example, the words “deserted beach” and “salty air” are also good sensory words, but the poem would be too cluttered if we tried to include everything in one poem. The job of a poet is to select from everything around us just the few things that make the most powerful poem. Instead of trying to fit too much into one poem, write more poems!

Have the students share their work. Have students say what they liked about their classmates’ poems. Keep the comments positive!