

BARE BONES

School of Haiku

Jane Reichhold

As result of my working with the Mendocino County teachers and the Poet Laureate Committee of Ukiah, California, I have seen that though my book, *Writing and Enjoying Haiku*, has been very helpful to many people, in this new work I am discovering that there needs be a better way to teach haiku writing in schools. Before the folks at Kodansha asked me to write a how-to book for haiku in 2001, I had started preparing a series of lessons for what I then called the "Bare Bones School of Haiku." With the invitation from Kodansha the project was abandoned and the materials I had written were poured into the book. Now I am thinking that the idea of giving haiku writers interested in improving their skills a lesson plan may even be an easier way of finding just the subject matter they need, when and how they need it. Maybe the old idea of posting lessons had its advantages. So this is a return to the original idea. I sincerely hope it will prove helpful to you and to many others.

Jane Reichhold, April 2011

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Lesson One

Haiku Basics

Haiku (HIGH-COO) is the Japanese word invented by Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902). He made it by combining the word hokku (HOC-COO) which was the name for the first stanza in a renga (REIN-GAH) with the word haikai (HIGH-KIGH) taken from haikai no renga or the links within the renga. So Shiki, in effect, combined the stanzas in the renga with the first one to have a new category of poetry.

Since the beginning of English translations we have adopted the Japanese word built from hai = with various kanji changes can be "ashes," "a cup," "be defeated," "a fellow or young people," "an embryo," "certainly or very well!" "anti (as a preface)" and ku = verse or stanza. Because Japanese words have no plural (like our sheep or deer) it is commonly agreed that we should not attempt to make a plural of haiku by adding the 's' as we normally do. Therefore we have learned to use haiku for one or for many haiku - it is also a way of honoring the origin of this word we have borrowed.

The Japanese haiku and the English language haiku have several critical differences. In Japanese the haiku is composed of 17 sound units divided into three parts - one with 5 units, one with 7 units and another with 5 units. Since sound units are much shorter than English syllables, it has been found that following the Japanese example results in a much longer poem often filled up to make the count with unnecessary words.

The Japanese write their haiku in one line, in order to see clearly the parts of the haiku. In English each part is given a line. This allows the reader time to form an image in the mind before the eyes go back to the left margin for more words. The line breaks also act as a type of punctuation. The kigo, or season word, is a vital part of the Japanese haiku, but in English it is often ignored and not well understood. Therefore, a great number of English haiku do not have a season word and yet are considered to be haiku. The Japanese, because of their longer history of reading haiku, understand that there are two parts to the poem. In English these are called the phrase and fragment. One line is the fragment and the other two lines combine grammatically to become the phrase. Without this combining the two

lines together the haiku will sound 'choppy' as the voice drops at the end of each line.

Now let us take each of these aspects one at a time to explore each more carefully. I would like for you to explore how differently a haiku becomes when you write it using the 5,7,5 count for syllables. Either write one or find one written by someone else that is based on this pattern.

Now rewrite the haiku by using as few words as possible and setting your new poem in three lines with one short, the next one a bit longer, and the final one approximately the same size as line 1.

Do you see what happens? Adverbs and adjectives are dropped. In doing this the poem becomes slightly more ambiguous, but this is a good thing as it allows the reader a wider choice of images.

Can you make the poem even shorter?

When does the poem lose its original meaning and when does it become a new poem – perhaps yours alone?

Lesson Two

Before Writing Your Own Haiku

Learn to Read Haiku

Before you can learn to write haiku, you need to be able to read haiku. That sounds fairly simple, but like everything else concerned with haiku, levels are buried under levels and archeology seems child's play in warm sand. To uncover some of the mysteries of haiku, let us begin by digging below the surface of this haiku:

moving into the sun
the pony takes with him
some mountain shadow

The first line, if taken literally, sets up an impossibility – nothing of our earth can truly move into the sun. However, earthly things can move into an area where the sun is shining. Already the brevity of haiku demands that the reader tries to find a meaning since the line is a fragment which lacks an object. The reader, wanting to be able to form a mental image needs an object, and so, rapidly moves his or her eyes to the second line. Ah, “the pony takes with him” there is the answer – the pony, but already the rest of the line “takes with him” sets up the desire for more information. The reader is now unable to stop reading the haiku in an eagerness to find out the rest of the story. The answer – “some mountain shadow” – now, what does that mean?

The reader then goes back to the first line. Now it is understood that it is the pony that is moving into the sun and it is taking with him some of the shadow of the mountain. It is fairly common to speak of the shadow of a mountain and the shadow of a pony, but to see that the shadow of a pony has moved away some of the mountain's shadow for itself is a new way of viewing a natural phenomenon. All of these steps and the further pondering of what it means is the very active participation of the reader.

Experienced haiku readers will automatically follow and understand this process and the journey. Sometimes beginning readers need to have additional information to completely understand the haiku. For them, it might help to know about the situation that gave rise to the inspiration for this haiku.

I was sitting at the window of a hotel at a mountain resort watching some ponies grazing early in the morning on a valley meadow that was still partially covered with the shadow of the near-by hillside. As the grazing pony moved slowly into the sunshine, I happened to be focused on the edge of the shadow and actually saw some of the mountain's shadow follow the pony. The line of shadow seemed to break off and reshape itself to become pony shadow.

At a philosophical level, the haiku can also be expressing the idea that when something – like a person, moves into the light, there will still be, not only the slender shadow in person shape, but also a remnant of our greater shadow from which we have come.

It can also be thought that the pony, by eating the grass of the mountain becomes the mountain in the same way the shadows of these things move between the objects. When the boundaries disappear between separate things it is truly a holy moment of insight and it is no wonder that haiku writers are educated to latch on to these miracles and to preserve them in words.

Read Many Different Haiku

There are many different styles and methods of writing haiku and because you will be picking the one that is best for you, you will need to sample the works of many assorted writers.

It seems the wisest way to study haiku would be to study the Japanese Old Masters who are considered to be Basho, Buson, Issa and Shiki. The works of each of these revered gentlemen have been translated by several persons. Part of the problem with using these works as an example for your own haiku occurs when you realize that many of these translations are made by scholar/translators – most of whom are not poets. Though they can often bring across an accurate sense of the poem, in many cases the way they do it is not consistent with our current ideas of how a haiku should be written.

If you must buy a book, you will probably get the most for your money if you get an anthology. Then you can have a sample of the work of many writers and see which ones resonate with you or whose works grab and inspire you.

Reading though a haiku magazine can also show you the work of many writers which allows you to pick and chose your favorites.

Then buy the books of the authors you admire. It is so hard to sell books, the least you can do is to support your author and his or her publisher by buying a book.

The Internet also offers a bewildering array of haiku styles and writers. In just a few hours of searching, you will find sites or magazines that appeal to you where you can then spend days researching deeper.

My Experience

When I first discovered haiku, in the Peter Pauper books I wrote my haiku in the style Peter Beilenson, the translator used which was 5, 7, 5. Later in the early 1980s when I discovered Frogpond and Modern Haiku, I started keeping my favorites in a leather-bound book. To this day I get great pleasure in leafing through those yellowed pages to read again the poems that first showed me what haiku could do. It was not long until I realized that I found the work by Ruth Yarrow to be the most interesting. I felt she truly understood linkage between the images in her haiku and I wanted to learn how to do it. I bought her books and I began to write in them. I would take a haiku that I admired and then rewrite it.

To Ruth Yarrow's poem found in Wind Chimes #10:

jagged cry:
across the rock face
a raven's cry

I would try:

jagged cry:
across the rock face
a raven's voice

or

lightning
shattering the rock

a raven's cry

or:

rock face
lines etched deeper
by the raven's cry

or

lightning
etched into the cliff
the raven's cry

Just one such poem could give me days of pleasure. Looking back at the poems I can see how certain phrases or images would catch me, hold me, release me and allow me to move on to other images and combination. While I did this, there were others who tried the same thing and slowly these exercises were given the pejorative title of "desk" haiku because they were not written as the result of a "haiku moment or experience" but were practices of using words and images. However, I feel this kind of exercise in haiku writing is very valuable.

For Your Experiences

Find a haiku that you really admire and write it in here. It would be kind to the author to record his or her name and where you found the poem.

Then begin to rewrite the poem. Maybe start by just changing one word. Or changing one line. Or take a phrase or image you greatly admire and see how many ways you can make it work with other images.

Lesson Three

Finding Haiku

If you have not already found haiku popping up in your mind, here are some thoughts that may help you let the haiku find you.

Each of us will have our own personal reason for wanting to write haiku, but for me the way I live in order to be prepared to receive haiku inspiration is more valuable to me than the poems I finally do write. You see, in order to be open to being given the haiku (and I do believe they are given to us as gifts) we need to go through life with a certain attitude. People actually speak of living The Way of Haiku. This does not mean you must become a Zen Buddhist, or live on a remote mountain wearing one robe, sit with your legs crossed or try to be anyone but yourself. But there are distinct attitudes that will increase and enrich the haiku you write and your life.

Being aware – This means just being in the moment, using your senses to test each environment anew all the time – noticing what is around and how each part relates to the other. Instead of thinking thoughts, you use your mind to check out what is. This is also called ‘centering’ because when you can shut down the voice within that nags, complains, and irritates, you reach a state of equilibrium.

out of earth
the flower shape
of a hole

By actually seeing that the hole dug for the seed already has the shape of flower, one has a new awareness of dirt and flowers and their relationship.

2. Being non-judgmental – most of our lives and much of our inner dialogue with ourselves concerns saying, “This is good.” and “That is bad.” This kind of thinking about ourselves feeds and supplies that nagging voice within that is so disruptive to our peace of mind. The more we can view everything and everyone as being neither good nor bad but as simply being what it is, the easier it is to shut down that inner voice and open ourselves up to the majesty of the world around us.

a mouse and I share
her nest in the sock drawer
a house in the woods

Instead of freaking out over finding a mouse in the drawer, one accepts that living in the woods, where mice live, means that living spaces are going to overlap.

3. Being reverent – to appreciate the smallness which is the grandness of haiku one needs a reverence for life. This means not only a kindly feeling for other persons, and a gentleness with other living beings but also for the things that we normally do not think as living – rocks, rivers, mountains, houses, rooms, and utensils. When one lives as if everything is sacred, which it is if you really think about it, we relate to the things in our environment in a much more responsible way. When one really understands the marvels in a square inch of earth – its history, its journey, its purposes, the vast richness of its being, how can one pollute it, desecrate it or demean it?

There is a story told of Bashô and his favorite student, Kikaku. One day Kikaku, who was very impulsive and the wit of the group, came running up to Bashô with his newest and most wonderful verse. Probably dancing and gesturing broadly Kikaku read:

pulling off
the wings of the dragonfly
a red pepper

You see what his thought was, don't you? In Japan there is a species of large dragonflies with bright red bodies. If you pulled off the wings, the curving, pointed body, what remained would look like a small red pepper.

Very quietly, and with a gentle smile Bashô offered a correction:

adding wings
to the red pepper
a dragonfly

4. Having a sense of oneness – the above example also exhibits the idea that all things are in all things. There is a red pepper in the dragonfly. Often the reality of this thinking comes in an experience known as “satori” or enlightenment when the person comprehends the completeness, the oneness of all existence. Instead of looking at the world for differences, if one searches for the common ground, it becomes easier for us to get along with each other as humans and in the world of nature. Some of the techniques of haiku are built on the idea that even very dissimilar things have a common bond. Finding this fulcrum point is the basis for many, many haiku.

starfish
all the days of a life
going into a gull

One aspect that pulls the things of the world together is the food chain. Life, and the passage of the time of a life, is taken from one to be given to another. Even the material of stars is exchanged between us.

5. Having a sense of simplicity – haiku, as no other poetry form, demands simplicity. Not only are the subjects of haiku the simple things of life, but the way of writing must be in the most simple with a succinct and exact use of words. In paring down our words, as well as our view of the world, we come to understand that in this age of increasing commercialism, it is beautiful to adopt simple ways, simple things – to have in life only the necessities. To surround ourselves with the beauty of form instead of ornamentation, with the patina of the well-used instead of the shine of new, with the genuine thing instead of a copy, is a way to profoundly change one’s inner being.

slender coolness
a finger-wide waterfall
into cupped hands

Having humility – the writing of haiku is a practice in humility in many ways. First of all, you will be humbled as you begin to explore the majesty of even the most common things around you. As you learn to look more deeply into each aspect of the universe, the reason, the intelligence, the glory of it will fill you with awe. Secondly, contemporary poetry is based on what the author feels or thinks – which is extremely ego-inflating. Haiku is based on what the author observes. Thus, the focus is not on the inside world, but on that of the outside world. Often this is a step that is very hard for some beginners to take – to stop wanting to tell others what they think, feel, believe or wish to have be reality. For them it is a major advancement to put these goals aside and to simply report on what is. The putting away of personal pronouns is the witness that this step has been taken.

Another factor of humility that haiku teaches is that you are not the author of any of the haiku. They are gifts given to you by your spirits. They come through you but are not yours. Thus, there is no way the greatness of any of your haiku can add to your estimation of yourself. As soon as you understand that you are already great, wonderful and magnificent, as you truly are, you are on the way to loving yourself and will not need the adulation of others. If someone likes your haiku this tells you much about that person and adds nothing to your own value. Because the haiku only come through you, you can be genuinely proud of them. In the same way you would show a marvelous gift which your closest friend has made and given to you, you bring a basket of the most perfect apples from your tree to your neighbor.

Being in this state or even having a flash of inspiration will not guarantee that the haiku is good, great or even a haiku. For that, one must know how to write and even more specifically, how to write a haiku. There has been a myth passed around the haiku scene that if one has a worthy, deep or lasting “haiku moment” the resulting poem will be a great haiku. This, as all myths, is partly true and fraudulently false. If one knows how to write haiku, the

inspiration may seem to write itself in a haiku by itself. Even if one is only barely acquainted with haiku this moment may bring the greatest haiku of all. It can also be that the experience is so mind-blowing that one never really finds the one best haiku to convey the feelings. What surely will happen is that the glory of the moment of inspiration will be so fantastic that no matter whether the resulting haiku is seen as good or weak and poor by others, it remains as a touchstone for you and your special moment.

Since it takes only a little training to become an excellent haiku writer (believe it or not!) there has to be another factor in determining whether work will appeal or not. In addition to being about to write, and to use words effectively, I believe the author's other most important job is spiritual training. I find that I most easily appreciate the haiku of the most developed souls – the persons who have attained a certain emotional and spiritual maturity.

So how do you know something you are looking at is full of haiku material? One signal I recognize is when I have the urge to turn to someone, even if no one is actually there, to say, "Look at that!" Then I begin to let myself into the thing and from that center, observe what is around it.

I look for images that associate, contrast or compare with the thing that caught my attention and seemed to want to speak with me.

If I am attracted to a wild iris some associative images would be its leaves, the other plants supporting its life, the weather, the season, or the sea meadow.

A contrasting image for the iris could be the unseasonably warm or cold weather, a yellow bug on a purple iris, or a person who plucks the flower, or, or.

A comparative image could be the length of the grass (wild iris are very short here on our seas meadows because of the strong winds) or the great joy a simple flower gives, or, or.

As exercise, pick a thing – a flower or tree you can see – and find an associative, contrasting and comparative image to put with it.

May this little exercise inspire you with many haiku!

Lesson Four

Writing Haiku - The Form

As you have seen, the inspiration for a haiku is one job that may be more complicated than you had expected. Still if you are reading this, it means you have figured it out.

Now comes the next big job - writing your inspiration into a haiku. Before we get to actual pen and paper there are a few things I want you to understand about haiku.

The haiku in Japan and the haiku of the rest of the world are almost two different genres. Though the haiku written in languages not Japanese have various common aspects, the Japanese haiku has a set of parameters not possible in other languages and cultures.

In Japan, the haiku is composed of three parts containing five sound units in the first section, seven sound units in the second part and five in the final part or line. There have been a few experiments by Japanese ancestors to change this pattern but the feeling for the rightness of this is so engrained in their literary history that as a folk, they seem unable to give up counting the sound units (on or kana) in their haiku.

Counting Syllables

Many people, when they learn even the most basic information about haiku, believe it should consist of seventeen syllables divided into three lines. You can take up this rule as one for your work if you wish, as a great number of people have done, but the method has several major problems with it for us which you should carefully consider.

English syllables are much longer than Japanese on or kana - sound units. Thus, the English haiku with seventeen syllables will contain about a third more information than the Japanese haiku. This situation can be acceptable unless one tries to translate any of these seventeen-syllable English haiku into Japanese or wishes to write a modern haiku. Because when reading accurate - not padded out

translations from the Japanese, contemporary writers have seen that the original haiku, put into in English, look and sound much shorter. Thus, we have adopted the method of using less than seventeen syllables in our haiku. You cannot have it both ways. You have to decide if you wish for your haiku to equate with the process – counting parts of the poem, or the product – the shorter haiku.

The Japanese do not use punctuation marks as we do with a dot for a period but have words called “cutting words” – kireji – KEY-RAY-GEE, which is similar to our speaking or writing out "dash" or "comma". These words of punctuation, some as verb or adjective suffixes, are also used as emphasis and carried various emotional messages as well. Often these are translated as alas! or oh! This is the same situation as when we use the exclamation point to indicate the author feels emphatically about something. The employment of cutting words uses up one or two of the sound units, shortening the factual information package of the haiku by up to twelve percent.

The Japanese author can pick from a variety of sizes of cutting words in order to make a too-short line fit the counting scheme without adding information. The non-Japanese writer has no help which is similar.

The English language, though it has many five or seven syllable phrases, has even more that lack a syllable or two. Thus, to make the phrase fit to the rule, the author adds extra words – usually unnecessary adjectives and adverbs. In a form where brevity rules, this is a sure way to add a distraction the haiku does not need.

There have been authorities who have advanced various theories on guidelines we should follow in English that involve counting the beats in the haiku or the stresses so that we are all using the very same arrangement. If you wish to investigate this method (and if you understand beats in language and how stresses are viewed) you can follow a system of two beats / three beats / two beats.

The real goal of all this counting is to use as few words as possible to set the signposts which lead the reader to follow the inspiration of the author. Therefore, it seems counterproductive to follow any set-up that induces the use of extra words or images just to fill up a preconceived quota.

One of the major markers of an English-Lanuage haiku are the three lines. If we do not count syllables we still need to show this form. I feel the use of the guideline to have one short line, one longer line and one short line does keep the haiku shape. It is interesting to note how many 'haiku' published these days fail to

keep the shape.

If you can, find one (or more!) and then rewrite the haiku back into the haiku shape. I feel that the haiku becomes stronger, in looks and meaning when this is done.

For example one of my haiku::

a home
the invisible heart
of wood and stone

I wish I had written this with the correct form as:

an invisible heart
made of wood and stone
a home

Find other haiku, either yours or those written by someone else, and began switching the lines around. See which version pleases you, or not. Later when we get into the techniques of haiku you may find the names for what you are feeling.

Before I finish with this lesson, I want to say a word about what are often called "one-line haiku." Because the Japanese often write their haiku in one line, some English writers try to emulate this practice also.

One can write any haiku in one line:

an invisible heart made of wood and stone a home

but I feel that we are so used to reading a sentence with one swoop of the eyes, that we tend then to read the haiku as a sentence when it really is not. When the lines are broken up (they do this in the same way a Japanese person recognizes the phrases in their haiku), the reader can form an image of the first phrase in the time it takes for their eyes to swing from the right margin to the left. Also having

each image on a line invites the reader to move them around just as you did in the previous exercise. Often this changing the relationship of images will cast new or other conclusions or messages from the haiku.

One-line haiku are 'dangerous' to new haiku writers because it is still too easy just to write a sentence. A haiku must be made of two parts and we will discuss that next.

Lesson Five

The Phrase and a Fragment

First and foremost, and certainly the guideline which has been followed the longest, is the one that a haiku must be divided into two sections. This is the positive side of the other rule that haiku should not be a run-on sentence. There needs to be a syntactical break separating the verse into two distinct divisions. From the Japanese-language examples this meant that one line – 5 sound units, was separated from the rest by either grammar or punctuation.

For purposes of this discussion, I would like to call the shorter portion, the fragment, and the longer portion, or two-line rest of the poem, the phrase. The need for distinguishing between the two sections of the haiku takes on importance when one begins to discuss the use of articles – a, an, & the, because it is possible to have different rules concerning these two parts. Before getting into that, let me state that the fragment can be, or usually is, either in the first line or in the last one – either of the short lines. Here is an example for you to test your ability to distinguish the two parts of a haiku.

rain gusts
the electricity goes
on and off

Even without punctuation the reader can hear and feel the break between the fragment – “rain gusts,” and the phrase – “the electricity goes on and off.” The second line break could occur after “goes,” yet, another author may find merit in continuing the line to read “the electricity goes on” and then let the final line bring in the dropped shoe – “and off.” Here the goal was to establish an association between “rain gusts” and the way they go “on and off.” One can write of many qualities of “rain gusts,” but in this verse, the “on and off” aspect is brought forward and then reinforced by bringing in the power of electricity.

An example of the fragment found in the third line is in the next haiku.

the cemetery fence
is unable to hold back
white lilies

If the fragment read as “the white lilies” the haiku would have been a run-on sentence. By dropping the article, the fragment receives its designation, and causes the proper syntactical break.

Sometimes the reader is allowed to designate which is the phrase and which is the fragment as in this example:

gardenias
no matter where they are
dancing jazz music

One can feel the connectedness of “gardenias no matter where they are” as a phrase or combine the last two lines to have: “no matter where they are dancing jazz music.” Yet the sensitive ear will hear the tiniest comma after “gardenias,” thus making this the fragment.

This brings us around to the articles and you may have already guessed the next guideline for using them. In the fragment you can often dispense with the use of an article to leave the noun stand alone.

Sometimes you can even erase the preposition from the fragment, especially if you are feeling that are tired of reading haiku which begin with “in the garden.” This guideline asks for sensitivity. It is not a hard and fast rule. But during the revising stage of writing your haiku, it is something to try. Cover up, and consider deleting, the preposition and the article in the fragment and see if the haiku holds together. Perhaps it will even get stronger! If you feel the article and preposition are needed, then by all means, use them. Do whatever works for your voice.

But if you are seeking to shorten the poem, look first to the fragment as you begin to cross out unneeded words.

However, one cannot follow the same rule in writing the phrase portion of the haiku. Sometimes critics make the comment in a workshop that a haiku is choppy.

also green
the spring-flooded meadow
a snowy egret

What they are referring to is the feeling that at the end of each line the break in syntax is final. The two lines of the phrase are not hooked together in a flow of

grammar and meaning. Reread the above haiku while adding 'in' to the second line. Can you feel how the words smooth out the trip of the tongue?

low winter sun
raspberry leaves
red and green

If to this 'grocery list haiku' we add a preposition and an article we get:

low winter sun
in the raspberry leaves
red and green

It pays to be aware of which two lines you wish to make into the phrase. It helps to read the two lines of a haiku which are to become your phrase out loud to see how they sound in your mouth and ears. If there is a too-clear break between the lines, ask yourself if you need an article or an article plus a preposition to be inserted. If you do, forget brevity and allow yourself the lyric pleasure of a smooth shift between these two lines. If I had chosen to make the first line the fragment I would write the haiku as:

low winter sun
raspberry leaves glow
red and green

Here, adding a verb gives the proper grammatical flow between lines two and three. If one added 'in the' to the first line, the poem would read as 'in the low winter sun raspberry leaves glow red and green' which, to my ears would be a run-on sentence.

One other variation on this subject is the haiku in which the break occurs in the middle of the second line. Often one finds this in translations of Basho's haikai (links taken out of a renga) which are two-liners set into three lines. Occasionally one will find an English haiku written in this manner. Again, it is often the result of being 'rescued' out of a renga or written by people using 5-7-5 syllable count who end up with too many images.

Often these haiku will have a comma in the middle of the second line because

grammatically the author is feeling that break. An example would be:

meeting

in her eyes, the technicolor

world

Now is the time to read back over the haiku you have written so far and see if you can establish the fragments and the phrases.

Is it clear that two of the lines make a phrase?

Do your phrases make a graceful connection between the lines?

Are you feeling you need punctuation to make the phrase separate?

Do the fragments have unnecessary articles – a, an or the?

Does the fragment have an unnecessary preposition – on, in, at?

Remember the fragment can stand alone.

Lesson Six

Verbs in Haiku

Another universally agreed upon aspect of the haiku is that it is written in the present tense so the reader has the feeling that the observed event is happening right now. Because, in truth, one cannot write about the present, since one is always the observer setting down something that occurred in the past, even if it was only a few seconds ago. The feeling is so strong that all we truly have is the present, this very moment, that when one begins to think about the past, the present and the future, one either comes to the conclusion that “now” does not exist (because it has already become the past) or that there is no past nor future but only a continuous ‘now’. Still our language offers us several possibilities of time placement for what we write.

When most of our poetry was involved with the retelling of past events or even legends and stories, it was accepted that one spoke of them as having happened in the past. Yet, at some point, it was discovered that a tale was more gripping if the story-teller made the audience feel the events were unfolding in that very moment.

And since haiku is an interactive collaboration – the writer is attempting to lead the reader to experience a past event in this moment, it makes perfect sense that the poem places the action in the present tense.

In addition to the option of using the present tense of verbs, English also has a continuing present form which is called a gerund that is formed by adding ‘ing’ to a verb. A strange little prejudice has built up against the use of this verb form. Because the Japanese language does not have a similar verb form, early Japanese haiku authorities spoke out against the use of the gerund in English. Thus, one of the early ‘laws of haiku’ is that we should restrict our use of it.

The only real problem that the gerund causes in English haiku is when more than one is used. The ‘ing’ sound is so strong that when two or more verbs have it (raining, shining) , along with perhaps an adjective (dazzling, amazing) added to a noun that accidentally ends in ‘ing’ (morning, evening) the haiku can seem over burdened with the strong, repeated sound.

Some people have a natural tendency to use gerunds more than others. For them, part of the rewriting chores is to count the occurrences of ‘ing’ in the verse. It has developed that some authors tend to use the gerund when the verb in the haiku refers an action taken by a human – perhaps because in their

vision of the incident they were doing and not just observing.

Many cultures have developed their languages without the form of “to be.” Thus, they would not think of saying, “I am sad,” but would reduce the importance of self while at the same time elevating the importance of the emotion with a more picturesque speech by saying, “Sadness comes to my doorstep.” It is only with the increased emphasis on the individual in a society and an increased self awareness that the verb form of “being” was formed. The advantage of the ‘be’ form (I am, you are, we are, I have been, I will be) is that it allows a shortcut to an accurate accounting of a report of an individual. But in a poetry form like haiku, that minimalizes the importance of humanity, and emphasizes the outer world, dropping the ego-centric mode of expression automatically places the poem closer to the realm of eternal nature.

The writer should always understand that the verb carries the emotional packet in a haiku. In naming an action the author, who is normally supposed to be non-existent or at least invisible, shows what he or she is feeling. This is a way of checking out what you are feeling about life in general.

One friend of mine, who was kept at home taking care of her husband who had a stroke, noticed how many of her haiku used the verbs "capture," "caught," and "held down." From this she was able to ask for more hospice help.

Just to check yourself, make a list of the verbs you have used in your haiku.

Are they all in the present tense? BTW all of Basho's 1013 haiku poems are in the present tense except one -

on a bare branch
a crow settled down
autumn dusk

So, if you break the rule, know why and what you are doing.

Do you tend to use too many gerunds?

What is the emotion your work sends out to others?

Lesson Seven

Nature–Nature and Human Nature

In descriptions of what a haiku is, there is usually the mention that it is a poem about nature. This idea seems so innocent and easily understood that one is almost incapable of comprehending the furious ink battles which have raged over this facet. In trying to draw a clear line between humanity and nature, the authorities have discovered that there is none. It is fairly obvious that trees, clouds and flowers are ‘nature’ and thus, apt subjects for haiku.

For the Japanese, with their built-in humility and inborn self-effacement, it was easy and comfortable for them to place the emphasis of the poem outside of themselves in the glories of nature. We all must face the idea that we as persons will die, but nature, because it is able to renew itself, is everlasting. Therefore, to place the emphasis of one’s poem within the larger picture of the on-going world of nature is to assure that the subject matter of the poem lives and remains viable for the reader even in the future.

But even for the Japanese – a very large portion of modern Japanese haiku do contain human activities and even feelings. For those writers without the classical sense of humility, it was hard to keep the happenings of humanity out of haiku. Today one can barely understand the furor that rose when Yamaguchi Seishi dared in 1933, to write a haiku with such a modern and un-nature image as a locomotive in it in spite of the sentiment that praises nature.

Some English writers, though they have more easily accepted the products of humanity into their haiku, still have a hard time accepting a haiku that mentions humans in it. These people seem to want to draw a line between nature and humankind as if we were not a part of nature, but something outside of it or on the opposite side of it. So ingrained is the idea that a haiku is a poem about nature alone that some magazines automatically and autocratically separate the poems according to whether a reference to humanity appears in it or not.

The reason for doing this is a mistaken belief that they are following a Japanese ideal. From somewhere they have learned about the Japanese genre called senryu – SEND–JEW or SEN–REE–YOU, and have the idea that senryu are satire about the foibles of human experience – which they are. What they forget is the fact that Japanese haiku also do have references to humanity in them. The thing they do not understand is that there is a difference in tone between senryu

and haiku. Since judging something as abstract as 'tone' can never be completely agreed upon, and since English haiku have no other indication of being something else other than haiku by their form, some persons try to confuse the matter by clinging to a terminology that has no meaning for us.

These persons, who use the term senryu in conjunction with haiku, attempt to create a barrier between what they view as different kinds of haiku instead of accepting that a haiku can have as many 'tones' and 'voices' as there are writers. For a time, in English haiku history, it was thought that a senryu was a failed or inadequate haiku. Combined with this was the practice by some persons of labeling other authors' work in a pejorative manner by calling it senryu.

In Japan, it is clear to anyone that a senryu is a haiku-looking verse that lacks a kigo or season word. Because the senryu grew out of the practice of the maekuzuki – a game of poetry in which bar patrons attempted to write a response link to a poet's hokku based on vulgarity and saloon humor, the genre is yet today seen as being much less a high art than haiku. Haiku are signed with the author's name; senryu are not – for obvious reasons.

Because, when haiku was brought to English, we were not given the guideline that haiku had to always have a seasonal reference, we considered that whatever was written in three lines was considered a haiku whether it contained one of the regulation season words or phrases or not. And because of English's huge literary history of poetry from and about humanity, it was very hard for the non-Japanese to write without a focus on persons, their activities and the implements of their existence. Thus, from the beginning, many English haiku have focused on the actions of humans – sometimes to the exclusion of a mention of nature and still, the proper name for the work is haiku.

Using sensual images

Your five or six senses are your basic tools for writing haiku. Haiku should come from what you have experienced and not what you think. Haiku depend on words that create the images the reader can see in his or her mind's eye. You might think that all words stand for something – and this is true – but many of our most-used words in poetry stand for ideas: wisdom, love, desire, fear, anger, longing, knowledge, beauty. These are also called abstractions because they are concepts – products of intelligence and not names of actual things one can verify with a sense.

Not only do haiku use mostly nouns to work with the names of things, it works best with what is lamely called the 'thing-ness' of things. This is a

real abstraction! But what it means is: instead of presenting the idea of a thing, or using the concepts of what something means to us, the author simply presents the thing as it is. Seeing the world in a grain of sand is not in haiku territory. Seeing sand as sand is. Instead of using things to talk about ideas or fantasy or imagination, the writer just writes about the thing as it is.

An easy way to get to this point is to avoid using adjectives and adverbs. There is a proverb: “calling a spade a spade.” This works for haiku, also. Haiku do not tell the reader what to think but shows the things that will lead the reader to the path the author’s mind has traveled.

This does not mean that there are no abstractions in haiku. They do use the abstract of time: morning or evening; the abstract of space: near and far; the abstract of size or measurement: large or small and the abstract of memory or thinking. But any of these aspects should only constitute one-third – or one line, of the haiku. The other two-thirds of the haiku should be names or images of things the reader can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or perceive.

Simplicity of Language

With this goal of directness in haiku is included the practice of saying things simply. At various times in our poetical history, it has been fashionable to find tropes or figures of speech to make poetry more lyrical. Instead of using the common noun as name of thing, the poet uses a new appellation such as calling the ocean – “mother of us all” or writing of the wind as the “messenger of the gods.” As charming as this practice can be in small amounts, in large doses in poetry it can seem pompous and over-blown. By speaking simply, the reader is allowed to form his or her own associations, memories and ideas instead of being corralled into a narrow path someone else’s wit has made.

Personalization of things

In this same vein, it is said that haiku also avoids the use of the Western poetical device of personalizing non-human things. To say a brook ‘smiles’ would be seen as personifying a stream of water and therefore presenting the thing for more than what it is – just a stream of water.

This is a very tricky rule because we so easily accept that a brook

runs, leaps and even has a mouth! Our language has been personifying things for so long it is practically impossible for us to rid ourselves of this concept. How easily we speak of the 'leg of a chair' or the 'head of the bed' so nouns, as well as verbs, can personify objects. How does one decide when the author has committed the sin of personification? It depends on language customs and personal vision. If the verbs are customarily shared by humanity and a thing, you as author cannot be accused of personification.

If, however, you make up a new way of speaking of a thing – 'the sun eyes the earth', the jolt of this creativity will interrupt the normal low-key delivery of haiku. You are no longer speaking of the thing as it is but as how it is perceived by your intelligence.

For the lyrical poet, trained and charmed by the creation of figures of speech haiku can either seem plain and painfully bare or delightfully simple and refreshing.

Lesson Eight

To Question Caps and Punctuation

Those persons using punctuation in their haiku, will often find themselves making a dash after the fragment and hopefully nothing, not even a comma in the middle of the phrase, even if there is a breath of the possibility of one. Sometimes, the haiku will sound like a run-on sentence because the author is too lazy to rewrite the fragment clearly and thus, has to add a dash forcing the reader into the obligatory break.

For me, this is a red flag that the writer didn't stay with the rewrite long enough to solve the problem properly. Frankly, I see most punctuation as a cop-out. Almost any haiku written as a run-on sentence, with or without its dash, can be rewritten so that the grammar syntax forms the one necessary break. Or the author forms places where the reader can decide where to make the break and thus, give the haiku additional meaning. From this philosophy, I view haiku with punctuation as haiku which fail to fit this basic form.

You may find a haiku written in one line as imitation of the Japanese method as previously mentioned. The author will then add in punctuation in substitution of the natural pauses and breaks at the end of the lines.

Occasionally a haiku is written that is so full of possible divisions into what is the fragment or the phrase that writing it in one line is the only way that offers the reader the complete freedom to find the breaks. And with each new arrangement the meaning of the poem varies. An example would be:

mountain heart in the stone tunnel light

Over the years I gradually gave up, and easily abandoned, the dashes, semi-colons, commas and periods in order to incorporate ambiguity in the haiku, but it has been hard for me to let go of the question mark – which is rather silly, as it is so clear from the grammar that a question is being asked. Still, and yet . . . I mention this, so new-comers to haiku understand that rules are not written in stone, but something each of us has to work out for ourselves. It is an on-going job and one I hope, will never end.

The Use of Capital Letters

As writers have become more comfortable and knowledgeable about composing haiku, they have seen that a haiku is not a sentence and slowly come to the realization that it perhaps should not be treated like a sentence. In an effort to simplify the written poem, many have abandoned the initial capital letter that usually begins a sentence. Thus, at this time, the continued use of caps has become an indication of either a beginner with the form who carries on the practice from previous poetry writing or someone who refuses to rethink the changes the form has made.

Most people have been able to give up the period at the end of the poem rather easily because they see so clearly that the haiku is not a sentence and should not close down. Still, there are persons who are unable to stop using the initial capital letter. It seems more a reflex out of habit than a carefully thought through technique.

Some persons, believing that the use of ‘i’ for the personal pronoun ‘I’ represents the proper haiku humility, have adopted this practice. It may work for them, but for others, the jerk and jolt feeling when seeing the wrong use of ‘I’ seems to add importance of the human element by deliberately calling attention to the mistake. Others have taken the need for commonness to the point that all words within the haiku are written without caps, including days and months and proper names and places.

Writers who do retain the caps of proper names are often confused about whether to capitalize the names of the season – usually they are not, and of species of animals and flowers (again, usually not).

Because haiku is a form genre – a kind of poetry that is built on certain rules, one must adopt some rules in order to write it. There are several methods of figuring out which rules to use to write haiku.

One can join a group whose leader proposes a set of rules that is agreeable to you. If you follow this person, you will have a ready-built audience who agrees with you completely about what a haiku is. It can be very comforting to share agreement with a group which is united under one goal with a loyal attachment to a leader. Often these masters are rather autocratic, but for some persons, this kind of leadership lends credence to their goals. Often the leader of these groups also publishes a magazine so that the members of the group could be assured fairly easy publication, which is sometimes not easy with haiku. In this way, the ‘student’ is competently led along a certain path and the leader could take some

pride in having a certain number of writers who not only agreed with his or her rules but also extended haiku literature in this chosen style – which was very ego gratifying. In these days of the Internet, it is possible to find web sites lead by persons who expend a great deal of energy and time to promoting their idea of what a haiku is. They are willing to teach beginners their methods, defend them against all other theories and offer a system of sharing the poems among the like-minded.

Because, at some level, haiku is related to a spiritual practice, some of these masters espouse their theories with a religious fervor and the groups take on many of the aspects of a church. In the same way some persons are most comfortable within an organized religion, the same is true for haiku writers.

Another way to find out the rules one wants to follow is by reading the work of others and deciding which poems one admires the most. Then consciously or unconsciously, the new writer begins to imitate that style which was created by a certain set of rules.

Very often persons feel that if they are going to learn a new genre they will study first the old Japanese masters and follow their example. In many aspects this is a wise decision except for the reality that most translations are transliterations – not the words of the original.

This results in a stilted style similar to that of persons who write poetry based on inspiration of the Bible so that those poems result in using King James grammar such as “thou” and “hath”. Yet today many translations follow the archaic rules of poetry which the translator learned in grade school instead of offering the haiku as they truly are, in word-for-word cases or in the context of modern poetry.

For the person just learning haiku in today’s world, doesn’t it seem advantageous to follow the form as defined by today’s usage and in your own language? To do this one needs to read what other poets are doing with the form by purchasing an anthology to study and serve as inspiration. Out of this, your own set of rules will evolve. That does not mean this is the only way to write a haiku but should be seen as a starting place for your own thinking and exploration.

This brings us to the next job you may have – picking your own rules of haiku.

Lesson Nine

Finding your own rules of haiku

There is, thank goodness, no one way to write a haiku. Though the literature has haiku which we admire and even model our own works on, there is no one style or technique which is absolutely the best. Haiku is too large for that. Haiku has, in its short history (just over 400 years) been explored and expanded by writers so that now we have a fairly wide range of styles, techniques and methods to investigate.

Usually writers stay with a rule until a new one is found to replace it. Because there are so many rules, we all have a different set with which we are working. You need to make the decision: are those rules, goals or guidelines some I want for myself? This thought is much more gentle to the Universe than saying some haiku are good and others are bad.

You've heard Robert Frost's saying "that poetry without rules is like a tennis match without a net" and this is true also for haiku. If you are at that stage, a starting set of rules could be:

Write in three lines that are short, long, short without counting syllables.

Make sure the haiku has a fragment and a phrase.

Have some element of nature.

Use verbs in the present tense.

Avoid capital letters or punctuation.

Avoid rhymes.

As soon as you get proficient with these, you may feel your haiku all sound and look alike, it's time to raise the tennis net by picking a new rule or so, either from this list at the end of this chapter or one you've made up from reading and admiring other haiku, or, and this is possible and not treason – from other poetry genre.

Now you might be ready for this oft-published article:

HAIKU RULES THAT HAVE COME AND GONE

Take Your Pick

Jane Reichhold

Haiku, which seem so light, free and spontaneous, are built on discipline. If you've

a desire to write haiku, you are manifesting a desire for a few more rules in your life. And rules aren't bad as long as they are your rules for your work.

You've heard Robert Frost's saying poetry without rules is like a tennis match without a net and it is true also for haiku. And Basho had his motto: "Learn the rules; and then forget them."

But first he said, "Learn the rules." If you are at that stage of the game (we are all, at all times, students), here are some old and new rules. You can't physically follow all of these, because they conflict, but among them I would hope you'd pick a set just for you. Then write down your thoughts, impressions, and feelings while following your own rules.

As soon as you get proficient (you will notice your haiku all sound alike) it's time to raise the tennis net by picking a new rule or so, either from this list or one you've made up from reading and admiring other haiku, or, and this is possible and not treason, from other poetry genre.

Here we go:

1. Seventeen syllables in one line.
2. Seventeen syllables written in three lines.
3. Seventeen syllables written in three lines divided into 5-7-5.
4. Seventeen syllables written in a vertical (flush left or centered) line.
5. Less than 17 syllables written in three lines as short-long-short.
6. Less than 17 syllables written in three vertical lines as short-long-short.
7. Write what can be said in one breath.
8. Use a season word (kigo) or seasonal reference.
9. Use a caesura at the end of either the first or second line, but not at both.
10. Never have all three lines make a complete or run-on sentence.
11. Have two images that are only comparative when illuminated by the third image.
Example: spirit in retreat / cleaning first the black stove / and washing my hands
12. Have two images that are only associative when illuminated by the third image.
Example: fire-white halo / at the moment of eclipse / I notice your face
13. Have two images that are only in contrast when illuminated by the third image.
Example: two things ready / but not touching the space between / fire
14. Always written in the present tense of here and now.
15. Limited use (or non-use) of personal pronouns.
16. Use of personal pronouns written in the lower case. Example: i am a ...
17. Eliminating all the possible uses of gerunds (ing endings on wording).
18. Study and check on articles. Do you use too many the's? too little? all the same in one poem or varied?

19. Use of common sentence syntax in both phrases.
 20. Use of sentence fragments.
 21. Study the order in which the images are presented. First the wide-angle view, medium range and zoomed in close-up. (Thanks to George Price for this clarification!)
 22. Save the "punch line" for the end line.
 23. Work to find the most fascinating and eye-catching first lines.
 24. Just write about ordinary things in an ordinary way using ordinary language.
 25. Study Zen and let your haiku express the wordless way of making images.
 26. Study any religion or philosophy and let this echo in the background of your haiku.
 27. Use only concrete images.
 28. Invent lyrical expressions for the image.
 29. Attempt to have levels of meaning in the haiku. On the surface it is a set of simple images; underneath a philosophy or lesson of life.
 30. Use images that evoke simple rustic seclusion or accepted poverty. (sabi)
 31. Use images that evoke classical elegant separateness. (shubumi)
 32. Use images that evoke nostalgic romantic images. Austere beauty. (wabi)
 33. Use images that evoke a mysterious aloneness. (Yugen)
 34. Use of paradox.
 35. Use of puns and word plays.
 36. Write of the impossible in an ordinary way.
 37. Use of lofty or uplifting images. (No war, blatant sex, or crime)
 38. Telling it as it is in the real world around us.
 39. Use only images from nature. (No mention of humanity.)
 40. Mixing humans and nature in a haiku by relating a human feeling to an aspect of nature.
 41. Designation of humans a non-nature and giving all these non-nature haiku another name.
 42. Avoid all reference to yourself in the haiku.
 43. Refer to yourself obliquely as the poet, this old man, or with a personal pronoun.
 44. Use no punctuation for ambiguity.
 45. Use all normal sentence punctuation
- : = a full stop
; = a half stop or pause
... = something left unsaid

, = a slight pause

-- = saying the same thing in other words

. = full stop

46. Capitalize the first word of every line.

47. Capitalize the first word only.

48. Capitalize proper names according to English rules.

49. All words in lower case.

50. All words in upper case.

51. Avoid rhymes.

52. Rhyme last words in the first and third lines.

53. Use rhymes in other places within the haiku.

54. Use alliteration. Example by Calvin of Calvin & Hobbes: twitching tufted tail / a toasty, tawny tummy: / a tired tiger

55. Use of words' sounds to echo feeling.

56. Always end the haiku with a noun.

57. Write haiku only from an "ah-ha" moment.

58. Use any inspiration as starting point to develop and write haiku. (These are known as desk haiku.)

59. Avoid too many (or all) verbs.

60. Cut out prepositions (in - on - at - among - between) whenever possible; especially in the short 1/3 phrase.

61. Eliminate adverbs.

62. Don't use more than one modifier per noun. This use should be limited to the absolute sense of the haiku.

63. Share your haiku by adding one at the close of your letters.

64. Treat your haiku like poetry; it's not a greeting card verse.

65. Write down every haiku that comes to you. Even the bad ones. It may inspire the next one which will surely be better.

Here is space for you to actually write down the rules you wish to adopt for your haiku. Do date them and notice how soon you need to change one or another. The order in which you list them is also important. I wish I could peek into everyone's list right now!

MY HAIKU RULES

Date: _____

Lesson Ten

Haiku Techniques

In the early years of English haiku writing, the accepted prevalent credo being espoused on how to write haiku was, sometimes implied and occasionally expressed, as being: if the author's mind/heart was correctly aligned in the "proper" attitude, while experiencing a so-called "haiku moment," one merely had to report on the experience to have a worthy haiku

.
One reason for rejoicing in the acceptance of this view, was that it by-passed the old 5-7-5 barrier crisis. Another advantage of this system of defining a haiku was that it bestowed near-religious honor on the author of an acceptable haiku. No one knew exactly why a particular haiku was good but it was clear from the haiku that the author had experienced a moment of enlightenment (or satori for the Zen inspired). If the moment was holy and the form fit in with the group's philosophy publishing the verse, the haiku was said to be an excellent one.

Another plus for this viewpoint was it allowed endless articles to be written for magazines on the Zen aspects of haiku writing, and even fuzzier articles of how to prepare for, find, recognize, and advertise one's haiku moments. Books were even compiled around this semi-religious idea.

However, many persons recognized that haiku moments were very much like other flashes of inspiration which, when transported into other media, became paintings, stories, dreams or even new color schemes or recipes.

And many others shared the frustration of having a truly life-altering moment of insight and then never being able to write a decent haiku that expressed the wonder and majesty of that moment. They would ask, what was wrong with me? Was I not spiritually prepared enough? Was I too common? Too inattentive? Too word-numb? Maybe too many of my own religious beliefs kept me from the Zen nirvana of haiku?

The truth is: probably all of the above can change one's ability to write good haiku. Ouch, that hurts. However, I felt a sense of rescue when I came across the little booklet, *Aware* – a haiku primer written by hand and illustrated by Betty Drevniok, who was at the time she wrote the book, in the early 80s I am guessing as it has no date in it, was president of the Haiku Society of Canada. Among the many great tips for writing haiku, and obtaining the questionable Zenniness of Zen, was her precept: "Write [haiku] in three short lines using the principle of comparison, contrast, or association."

On page 39 she used an expression I had been missing in all the other discussions of haiku when she wrote: "This technique provides the pivot on which the reader's thought turns and expands." Technique! So there are tools one can use! I thought joyfully.

And I practiced her methods with glee and relative, to me, success and increased enjoyment. Suddenly I could figure out by myself what was wrong with a haiku that failed to jell as I thought it should. I could ask myself if there was a comparison, a contrast or an association between the images and if this relationship was clear and understandable for the reader.

Slowly, over the years, I found by doing my own translations of the old Japanese masters and the haiku of my contemporaries, that there were more factors than just these three on which one could build a haiku. However, there seemed a disinterest in other persons wanting to study these aspects which I call techniques. Perhaps this is because in the haiku scene there continues to be such a reverence for the haiku moment and such a dislike for what are called desk haiku.

The definition of a desk haiku is a verse written from an idea or from simply playing around with words instead of a direct result or experience. The idea was that if you don't experience an event with all your senses it is not valid haiku material. A haiku from your mind was half-dead and unreal and very likely to be intellectual. An experienced writer could only smile at such naiveté, but the label of

desk haiku was the death-knell for a haiku declared as such. This fear kept people new to the scene afraid to work with techniques or even the idea that techniques were needed when it came time to write down the elusive haiku moment.

At the risk of leading anyone into the quasi-sin of writing dreaded desk haiku, I would like to discuss and illustrate some of the haiku writing techniques which I have recognized and used.

Bear with me, I know we covered these earlier, but they are so vital, allow me to present them again.

The Technique of Comparison - In the words of Betty Drevniok: "In haiku the SOMETHING and the SOMETHING ELSE are set down together in clearly stated images. Together they complete and fulfill each other as ONE PARTICULAR EVENT." She rather leaves the reader to understand that the idea of comparison is showing how two different things are similar or share similar aspects.

a spring nap
downstream cherry trees
in bud

What is expressed, but not said, is the thought that buds on a tree can be compared to flowers taking a nap. One could also ask to what other images could cherry buds be compared? A long list of items can form in one's mind and be substituted for the first line. Or one can turn the idea around and ask what in the spring landscape can be compared to a nap without naming things that close their eyes to sleep. By changing either of these images one can come up with one's own haiku while getting a new appreciation and awareness of the function of a comparison.

The Technique of Contrast - Now the job feels easier. All one has to do is to contrast images.

long hard rain
hanging in the willows
tender new leaves

The delight from this technique is the excitement that opposites

create. You have instant built-in interest in the most common haiku moment. And yet most of the surprises of life are the contrasts, and therefore this technique is a major one for haiku.

The Technique of Association – This can be thought of as "how different things relate or come together." The Zen of this technique is called "oneness" or showing how everything is part of everything else. You do not have to be a Buddhist to see this; simply being aware of what is, is illumination enough.

moving
a handful of moonlight
the owl's wing

The main association is between 'hand' and 'wing' with a minor one between 'owl' and 'moonlight'. The several 'o' sounds also add to the associations.

In addition to Betty's techniques I also have discovered and named these.

The Technique of the Riddle – this is probably one of the very oldest poetical techniques. It has been guessed that early spiritual knowledge was secretly preserved and passed along through riddles. Because poetry, as it is today, is basically the commercialization of religious prayers, incantations, and knowledge, it is no surprise that riddles still form a serious part of poetry's transmission of ideas.

where do they go?
these flowers on a path
by summer's passing

The trick is to state the riddle in as puzzling terms as possible. What can one say that the reader cannot figure out the answer? The more intriguing the set-up and the better the correlation between the images, the better the haiku seems to work. Here, As in anything, you can overextend the joke and lose the reader completely.

Oh, the old masters' favorite tricks with riddles were "is that a flower falling or is it a butterfly?" or "is that snow on the plum branch or

blossoms?” and the all-time favorite – “am I a butterfly dreaming I am a man or a man dreaming I am a butterfly?” Again, if you wish to experiment, you can ask yourself the question: if I saw snow on a branch, what else could it be besides blossoms? Or seeing a butterfly going by you ask yourself what else besides a butterfly could you have caught in the corner of your eye?

The Technique of Sense-switching – This is another old-time favorite of the Japanese haiku masters, but one they have used very little and with a great deal of discretion. It is simply to speak of the sensory aspect of a thing and then change to another sensory organ. Usually it involves hearing something one sees or vice versa or to switch between seeing and tasting. Some persons have this ability naturally – for them it is called synesthesia. The most famous example of this is Bashô’s “old pond” haiku:

old pond
a frog jumps into
the sound of water

Here, the frog does not jump into the water but into the sound of water. The mind puzzle this haiku creates is how to separate the frog from the water, the sound of water from the water, the frog from the sound it will make entering water and the sound from the old pond. It cannot be done because all these factors are one but the reader arrives at this truth through the jolt of having the senses scrambled.

The Technique of Narrowing Focus – This is a device the Japanese master, Buson used often because he, being an artist, was a very visual person. Basically what you do is to start with a wide-angle lens on the world in the first line, switch to a normal lens for the second line and zoom in for a close-up in the end. It sounds simple, but when done well it is very effective in bringing the reader’s attention down to one basic element or fact of the haiku.

the whole sky
in a wide field of flowers
one tulip

The Technique of Using a Metaphor – I can just hear those of you who have had some training in haiku, sucking in your breath in horror. There IS that ironclad rule

that one does not use metaphor in haiku. Posh. As you can see, Bashô used it, and used it perfectly, in his most famous "crow haiku".

on a bare branch
a crow landed
autumn dusk

What he was saying in other words, not with the brevity of haiku, was that the way darkness comes down on an early autumn evening is the way it feels when a crow lands on a bare branch.

I never truly understood this hokku until late one day I was leaning against the open door of my tiny writing hut. Lost in thought I was so still I excited my resident raven's curiosity causing him to fly down suddenly to land about two feet from my cheek on the thin, nearly bare, pine branch. I felt the rush of darkness coming close, as close as an autumn evening and as close as a big black bird. The thud of his big feet hitting the bare branch caused the tiny ripple of anxiety one has when it gets dark so early in the autumn. In that moment I felt I knew what Bashô had experienced. It is extremely hard to find a haiku good enough to place up against Bashô's rightly famous one, so I'll pass giving you an example of my haiku. But this is a valid technique and one that can bring you many lovely and interesting haiku. Haiku is poetry and it does use another of poetry's oldest tools – the metaphor. Feel free to use metaphor in your haiku – just use it the way the Japanese have taught us to do – by placing images next to each other..

The Technique of Using a Simile – Usually, in English, you know a simile is coming when you spot the words "as" and "like." Occasionally one will find in a haiku the use of a simile with these words still wrapped around it, but the Japanese have proved to us that this is totally unnecessary. From them we have learned that it is enough to put two images in juxtaposition (next to each other) to let the reader figure out the "as" and "like" for him/herself. So basically the unspoken rule is that you can use simile, which the rule-sayers also warned us against, if you are smart enough to simply drop the "as" and "like". Besides, by doing this you give the reader some active part that makes him or her feel very smart when he or she discovers the simile for him/herself.

strawberry

another red tongue
on mine

The Technique of the Sketch or Shiki's Shasei – Though this technique is often given Shiki's term shasei (sketch from life) or shajitsu (reality) it had been in use since the beginning of poetry in the Orient. The poetic principle is "to depict the thing just as it is." The reason Shiki took it up as a poetical cause and thus, made it famous, was his own rebellion against the many other techniques used in haiku. Shiki was, by nature it seemed, against whatever was the status quo – a true rebel. If older poets had over-used any idea or method it was his personal goal was to point this out and suggest something else. Which was followed until someone else got tired of it and suggested something new. This seems to be the way poetry styles go in and out of fashion.

Thus, Shiki hated associations, contrasts, comparisons, word-plays, puns, and riddles – all the things you are learning here! He favored the quiet simplicity of just stating what he saw without anything else having to happen in the haiku. He found the greatest beauty in the common sight, simply reported just as it was seen. And 99% of his haiku were written in his style. And many people still feel he was right. And there are some moments which are perhaps best said as simply as it is possible in his way. Yet, he himself realized in 1893, after writing very many haiku in this style, that used too much, even his new idea can become lackluster. So the method is an answer, but never the complete answer of how to write a haiku.

evening
waves come into the cove
one at a time

The Technique of Double Entendre (or double meanings) – Anyone who has read translations of Japanese poetry has seen how much poets delighted in saying one thing and meaning something else. Often only translators knew the secret language and got the jokes which may or may not be explained in footnotes. In some cases the pun was to cover up a sexual reference by seeming to speaking of something ordinary. There are whole lists of words with double meanings: spring rain = sexual emissions and jade mountain = the Mound of Venus, is just to give you a sampling. But we have the same devices in English also, and haiku can use them in the very same way.

hills
touching each other
at the river

Here the ambiguity of the haiku can be taken as the reality that “when hills touch it is at a river” or one can think “out in the hills at the river a couple are touching each other” or “on the hills of their bodies, a couple are touching each other in the wettest places.”

The Technique of using Puns – Again we can only learn from the master punsters – the Japanese. We have the very same opportunities in English but we haiku writers may not be so well-versed as the Japanese are in using these because there have been periods of Western literary history where this skill has been looked down upon. There are still writers whose faces freeze into a frown when encountering a pun in three lines.

a sign
at the fork in the road
"fine dining"

The Technique of Word-plays – Again, we have to admit the Japanese do this best. Their work is made easier by so many of their place names either having double meaning or many of their words being homonyms – sounding the same. Still we also have so many words with multiple meaning there is no reason we cannot learn to explore our own language. A good look at many of our cities' names could give new inspiration: Oak-land, Anchor Bay, Ox-ford, Cam-bridge. Especially the descriptive names of plants, animals and things have opportunity for haiku in them.

yellow sticks
writing a desert poem
pencil cholla

The Technique of Verb /Noun Exchange – This is a very gentle way of doing word play and getting double duty out of words. In English we have many words which function as both verbs and nouns. By constructing the poem carefully, one can utilize both aspects of such words as leaves/going away, spots/sees,

flowers/blossoms, sprouts/pushes out, greens/leafy vegetables, fall/autumn, spring/coiled wire, and hundreds more. You can use this technique to say things that are not allowed in haiku. For instance, one would not be admired for saying that the willow tree strings raindrops because it personifies something of nature, but one can get away with making it sound as if the strings of willow are really the spring rain manifested in raindrops. This is one of those cases where the reader has to decide which permissible stance the writer has taken.

spring rain
the willow strings
raindrops

The Technique of Close Linkage – Basically this could come as a sub-topic to association but it also works with contrast and comparison so I like to give it its own rubric. In making any connection between the two parts of a haiku, the leap can be a small and even a well-known one. Usually beginners are easily impressed with close linkage and experiment first with the most easily understood examples of this form. They understand it and feel comfortable using the technique.

winter cold
finding on a beach
an open knife

The Technique of Leap Linkage – Then as a writer's skills increase, and as he or she reads many haiku, either their own or others, such easy leaps quickly fade in excitement. Being human animals we seem destined to seek the next level of difficulty and to find new thrills. So the writer begins to attempt leaps that a reader new to haiku may not follow and therefore find the haiku to espouse nonsense. The nice thing about this aspect, is when one begins to read haiku by a certain author, one will find some of the haiku simply meaningless. Years later, returning to the same book, with many haiku experiences, the reader will discover the truth or poetry or beauty in a haiku that seemed dead and closed earlier. I think the important point in creating with this technique is that the writer is always totally aware of his or her truth. Poets of the surrealistic often make leaps which simply seem impossible to follow – an example would be the work of Paul Celan, where the reader simply has to go on faith that the author knew what he was writing about. This is rare in haiku. Usually, if you think about the words long enough and deeply enough, one can find the author's truth.

leaping

a fish opens a door
in the lake

The Technique of Mixing It Up – What I mean here is mixing up the action so the reader does not know if nature is doing the acting or if a human is doing it. As you know, haiku are praised for getting rid of authors, authors' opinions and authors' action. One way to sneak this in is to use the gerund (-ing added to a verb) combined with an action that seems sensible for both a human and for the nature/nature to do. Very often when I use a gerund in a haiku I am using a shorthand to refer to an action that I have taken. This device minimizes the impact of the author's person but allows an interaction between humanity and nature.

end of winter
covering the first row
of lettuce seeds

The Technique of Sabi – SAH-BEE – I almost hesitate to bring up this idea as a technique because the word sabi has gotten so many meanings over the innumerable years it has been in Japan, and now that it comes to the English language it is undergoing even new mutations. As fascinated as Westerners have become with the word, the Japanese have maintained for centuries that no one can really, truly comprehend what sabi really is and thus, they change its definition according to their moods. Some call sabi – beauty with a sense of loneliness in time, akin to, but deeper than, nostalgia." Suzuki maintains that sabi is "loneliness" or "solitude" but that it can also be "miserable", "insignificant", and "pitable", "asymmetry" and "poverty". Donald Keene sees sabi as "an understatement hinting at great depths". So you see, we are rather on our own with this! A split-rail fence sagging with overgrown vines has sabi; a freshly painted picket fence does not is how I think of it. As a technique, one puts together images and verbs which create this desired atmosphere. Often in English this hallowed state is sought by using the word "old" and by writing of cemeteries and grandmas. These English tricks wear thin quickly.

listening ears
petals fall into

the silence

The Technique of Wabi – WAH-BEE – the twin brother to sabi that has just as many personas can be defined as poverty or beauty judged to be the result of living simply. Frayed and faded Levis have the wabi that bleached designer jeans can never achieve. Thus one can argue that the above haiku samples are really more wabi than sabi – and suddenly one understands the big debate. However, I offer one more haiku that I think is more wabi than sabi because it offers a scene of austere beauty and poignancy.

parting fog
on wind barren meadows
birth of a lamb

The Technique of Yūgen – another of these Japanese states of poetry which is usually defined as "mystery" and "unknowable depth". Somehow yūgen has avoided the controversy of the other two terms but since deciding which haiku exemplifies this quality is a judgmental decision, there is rarely consent over which verse has it and which one does not. One could say a woman's face half-hidden behind a fan has yūgen. The same face half-covered with pink goo while getting a facial, however, does not. But still haiku writers do use the atmosphere as defined by yūgen to make their words be a good haiku by forcing their readers to think and to delve into the everyday sacredness of common things.

a swinging gate
on both sides flowers
open – close

The Technique of the Paradox – One of the aims of haiku is to confuse the reader just enough to attract interest. Using a paradox will engage interest and give the reader something to ponder after the last word. Again, one cannot use nonsense but has to construct a true – connected to reality, paradox. It is not easy to come up with new ones or good ones, but when it happens, one should not be afraid of using it in a haiku.

waiting room
a patch of sunlight

wears out the chairs

The Technique of The Improbable World – This is very close to paradox but has a slight difference. Again, this is an old Japanese tool which is often used to make the poet sound simple and child-like. It demonstrates a distorted view of science – one we know is not true, but always has the possibility of being true – as in quantum physics.

evening wind
colors of the day
blown away

The Technique of Using Humor – This is the dangerous stuff. Because one has no way of judging another person's tolerance for wisecracks, jokes, slurs, bathroom and bedroom terminology, one should enter the territory of humor as if it is strewn with land-mines. And yet, if one is reading before a live audience nothing draws in the admiration and applause like some humorous haiku. Very often the humor of a haiku comes from the honest reactions of humankind. Some people will find you have left the realm of haiku to enter the questionable gutter of senryu if there is any hint of humor. So choose your terms carefully, add to your situation with appropriate leaps, and may the haiku gods smile on you.

dried prune faces
guests when they hear
we have only a privy

The Technique of “As Is Above: Is Below” – Though this seems to be using a religious precept, yet this technique works to make the tiny haiku a well-rounded thought. Simply said: the first line and the third line exhibit a connectedness or a completeness. Some say one should be able to read the first line and the third line to find it makes a complete thought. Sometimes one does not know in which order to place the images in a haiku. When the images in the first and third lines have the strongest relationship, the haiku usually feels balanced. For exercise, take any haiku and switch the lines around to see how this factor works or try reading this haiku without the second line.

rain

the horse's head bowed
straight down

The Technique of finding the Divine in the Common – This is a technique that seems to happen mostly without conscious control. A writer will make a perfectly ordinary and accurate statement about common things, but due to the combination of images and ideas and what happens between them, a truth will be revealed about the Divine. Since we all have various ideas about what the Divine is, two readers of the same haiku may not find the same truth or revelation in it. Here, again, the reader becomes a writer to find a greater truth behind the words.

smoke
incense unrolls
itself

Lesson Eleven

Basho's Haiku Techniques

While writing the book *Basho The Complete Haiku*, I was aware of the techniques that Basho used. This is taken from the the back of the book and the numbers are the ones given the poems.

1. The Technique of Association – This method of linking can be thought of as “how different things relate or come together.” In many societies a similar technique is known as parallelism – the method of setting ideas into similar syntaxes with slight variations in information which reveal a connectedness. The Japanese borrowed this principle from the Chinese, who had made it their dominate device, and moved the parallel built on syntax to a new level with an association of images. The Zen of this technique is called “oneness” – showing how everything is part of everything else. An association that has been over-used so often that it is a called a cliché, is the Japanese association of dew and tears. One of Bashō’s major objectives was to find new and apt associations that made the reader rethink reality and the connectedness within. Of all the techniques, this is the one Bashō used most.

#43

hating flowers
the mouths of talkative people
the wind bag

Here Bashō is saying that the mouths of people who talk too much and the bag of winds, a fanciful expression of the place where the spring winds come from, have something in common. They both must hate the cherry blossoms because they, each in their own way, reduced a person’s pleasure in enjoying the flowers. The talkative person distracts from one’s appreciation of the beauty of the scene and the wind blows the petals off the tree. Because of the perfection of this association, the reader can then think of many other associations between these two images.

Other poems that are prime example of Bashō using this technique are: 7, 22 106, 236, 246, 324, 325, 329, 353, 358, 375, 397, 402, 406, 446, 454, 465, 466, 675, 676, 678, 683, 692, 694, 695, 716, 720, 820,

846, 881, 891, 948, 949, 951, 957, 958, 960, 1000, and 1004. A quick glance at this partial list shows a certain clumping of the numbers. By seeing all of Bashō's poems in a chronological order, as much as that is possible, it suggests that when the master was practicing the use of a technique, he tried it out on several poems.

2. The Technique of Comparison – This technique is so close to the technique of association that it may seem they are the same. However there is a vital difference. All comparisons are associations, but not all associations are comparative. Here is a fairly clear example.

#47

rabbit year iris
how much it looks like
its image in water

3. The Technique of Contrast – Identifying this technique is much easier. The reward from this technique is the excitement that opposites create. Thus, a common haiku idea can gain added interest. Because many of the surprises of life are the contrasts, this technique is a major one for haiku in our times, but less so in Bashō's life.

#423

clear at the lake
yet it rains on Mt. Hiei
departing May

Other poems clearly containing the use of the technique of contrast are: 34, 803, 840, and 843.

4. The Technique of Close Linkage – Basically this could come as a sub-topic to association but since it also works with contrast and comparison it deserves its own category. In making any connection between the two parts of a haiku, the leap can be a small, or even a well-known, one. Usually beginners are easily impressed with close linkage and experiment first with the most easily understood examples of this form. They can quickly understand it and feel comfortable using the technique almost without realizing what they are doing.

#44

when planting it
handle it like an infant
baby cherry tree

5. The Technique of Leap Linkage – Bashō was, due to his renga writing skills, a master at making wild, wide leaps in the linking of the images of his poems.

#461

ladder bridge
first one thinks of
meeting horses

Here the linkage leap is so wide that it may need a footnote of explanation for readers four centuries and thousands of miles away to follow it. This is one of the problems of making an innovative or wide leap; how to get the reader's mind to track it over the abyss without getting lost. The important point in creating with this technique is that the writer is always totally aware of his or her truth. Usually, if you think about the words long enough and deeply enough, the reader can find the author's truth, or better still, a new one.

6. The Technique of Using a Metaphor – Until recently haiku teachers taught that haiku do not employ metaphor. They came to this wrong conclusion because the Japanese state their metaphors differently. As you can see, Bashō used metaphor.

#148.

the gay boy
a plum and the willow
a woman

7. The Technique of Using a Simile – Usually, in English, the reader recognizes a simile when seeing the words “as” and “like.” Occasionally in Bashō’s poems will be found a simile with these words still wrapped around it, but the Japanese writers, for the most part, have proved to us that this is unnecessary. From them we have learned that it is enough to put two images in juxtaposition – next to each other – to let the readers figure out the “as” and “like” for themselves. So basically the unspoken rule is that one can use simile, if you are smart enough to simply drop the “as” and “like.” Besides, this allows the readers an active part in creating the poem within as they discover the unspoken simile. Other poems where Bashō used this technique are: 343, 428, 839, 893, 979, and 1007.

#265

sprouts of horsetail
as if a legendary person is wearing
a pleated skirt

8. The Technique of Rhyme – This is a major component of Western poetry, and in Japanese, the way the sound units are built, rhyming is something that almost happens naturally. Yet, haiku translated into rhymed lines often need so much padding to make the rhyme work that the simplicity of the poem gets lost. However, if the reader takes the time to read the romaji version of Bashō’s poems, one can see how often the old master employed the linkage of sound in his work.

#664

nebu no ki no / hagoshi mo itoe / hoshi no kage
a silk tree
even through the leaves weary
of star light

The rhyme occurs here with hagoshi = through leaves, and hoshi = star, and the seven “oh” sounds.

9. The Technique of the Sketch or Shiki's Shasei – Though this technique is often given Shiki's term shasei = sketch from life, or shajitsu = reality, it had been in use since the beginning of poetry in the Orient. The poetic principle is “to depict the thing just as it is.” There are some inspirations for haiku which are best said as simply as it is possible in this way. Most of Shiki's haiku were written in this style. Yet, he himself realized in 1893, that the over-use of this one technique that he admired could produce many lackluster haiku. So the method is a technique, but never should it be the only method used to write a haiku.

#101

a rainy day
the autumn world
of a border town

10. The Technique of Narrowing Focus – This is a device the Japanese master, Buson used often because he, being an artist, was a very visual person. But Bashō was, as well as earlier poets were, completely comfortable using this technique.

#111

morning of snow

only onions in the garden
blaze the trail

Basically the poem starts with a wide-angle lens on the world in the first line, then switches to a normal lens for the second line and then zooms in for a close-up in the end. The technique sounds simple, and when done well it is very effective in bringing the reader's attention down to one basic element or fact of the haiku. Bashō, as was typical for him, added another element to the technique with the idea that the close-up image – the trail at one's feet – is covered up with snow so it cannot be seen.

11. The Technique of the Riddle – It is apt that the very first of Bashō's saved poems employs this technique. The riddle is probably one of the very oldest poetical techniques as well as a device to preserve and transmit spiritual knowledge. Zen Buddhists retain this lineage with the koan. It takes some explaining of culture and time-keeping to figure out the riddle in Bashō's poem, but the clarification is in the note. The trick in using this technique is to state the riddle in as puzzling terms as possible. What can one say so that the reader cannot easily figure out the answer? The more intriguing the set-up, and the closer the correlation between the images, the better the haiku seems to work. The old masters' favorite tricks with riddles were: "is that a flower falling or is it a butterfly?" or "is that snow on the plum branch or blossoms?" and the all-time favorite – "am I a butterfly dreaming I am a man or a man dreaming I am a butterfly?" Sometimes the riddle is not actually set up as a question but makes a statement of improbability. At times the author supplies the answer of how this other reality can be and other times the reader is left to find the solution.

#1
has spring come
or the year gone away?
second last day

#78

from a tree top
emptiness drops down
cicada shell

12. The Technique of Using Paradoxes – One of the aims of haiku is to confuse the reader just enough to attract interest and engage the mind in thinking. Using a paradox will give the reader something to ponder after the last word has been read. Again, the author cannot espouse nonsense but has to construct a truthful paradox – connected to reality or even a higher reality. It is not easy to come up with new ones or good ones, but when an author discovers one, it is perfect in a haiku because the haiku's briefness adds to the excitement of figuring out the paradox.

#183

black forest
whatever you may say
a morning of snow

13. The Technique of Double Entendre – Anyone who has read translations of Japanese poetry has seen how much poets delighted in saying one thing and meaning something else. Often only translators knew the secret language and thus, got the jokes which may, or may not, be explained in footnotes. In some cases the pun was to cover up a sexual reference by using a euphemism or images with double meanings.

#16

the rainy image
of the bottom-shining princess
the moon's face

14. The Technique of using Puns – Again we must study the master punsters – the Japanese. We have many of the same opportunities in English but contemporary haiku writers may not be as well-versed as the Japanese are in using this technique because there have been periods of Western literary history when this skill

has been reviled. Bashō did not use the technique much because he was against the over-use of the method by the two other haikai schools of his time. Translators shy away pun verses because they rarely work in the target language and long explanations can be tiresome to write and to read. Fortunately this verse, by Bashō, works in both languages.

#39

come and see
in-vest yourself in
a flowered robe

The type of robe was a sleeveless version which can be called a vest.

15. The Technique of Wordplays – Again, one has to admit the Japanese do this best. Their job of finding wordplays is made easier by the custom of their place and object names having a double meaning as well as many of their words being homonyms – sounding the same. Still we also have scores of words with multiple meaning so there is no reason we cannot learn to explore our own language for such literary gifts. A good look at some of our cities' names could give new inspiration: Oak-land, Anchor Bay, Red Bluff, Ox-ford, Cam-bridge. Especially the descriptive names of plants, such as cone flower or Sweet William, and the other named things have opportunity for haiku in them. Bashō was careful in using this technique for same reason he avoided puns. Yet he did employ the technique for 781, 924, and 933.

#41

so beautiful
the princess melon
already a queen

The wordplay comes from the name of the melon sort which is hime-uri – a princess melon, and the image of a queen. Another wordplay comes with urizane gao – a face like the fruit of a melon or an oval-faced beauty. Also, in some parts of Japan people would make a hime uri bana – a melon doll with face

powder and black ink similar to pumpkin faces.

16. The Technique of Using Humor – Bashō is often remembered as a rather dour old guy with god-like qualities, but this is not accurate. He was a party person who enjoyed the company of all classes and employments. There are no belly laughs in his haikai, but his quirky mind would occasionally be allowed to come up with a poem that would bring a smile.

#124

rice cake flower
stuck as a hair ornament
on Lord Rat

17. The Technique of Using Pseudo-science – This is very close to paradox but has a slight difference. This technique demonstrates a distorted view of science – one we think is not true, but it always has the possibility of being true, perhaps when we finally completely understand quantum physics or all become poets. When the “other reality” the author was using is explained, the poem becomes absolutely clear. Again, this is an old Japanese tool which was used to make the poet sound simple and child-like but also to confound the reader.

#6

a falling sound
that sours my ears
plum rain

#526

irises
I have tied to my feet
sandal cords

Other poems using the technique of pseudo-science are: 81, 304, 305, 728, 767, 897, and 898.

18. The technique of Sense-switching – This is another old-time favorite of the Japanese poetry masters, but one they used with a great deal of discretion. It is simply to speak of the sensory aspect of a thing and then change to another sensory organ. Usually it involves hearing something one sees – the color of a sound, or vice versa – the sound of a color, or to switch between seeing and tasting. Some persons have this ability naturally; for them it is called synesthesia. The most famous example of this technique is in Bashō's "old pond" haiku:

#152

old pond
a frog jumps into
the sound of water

Here, the frog not only jumps into the water but also into the sound of water. The mind-puzzle which this haiku creates is how to separate the frog from the water, the sound of water from the water, the frog from the sound it will make entering water, and the sound from the old pond. It cannot be done because all these factors are one, but the reader arrives at this truth through the jolt of having the senses scrambled. Other poems using this technique are: 733 and 963.

19. The Technique of the Frame Rhyme – kasuri. – This technique, used by the two haikai schools in vogue in Bashō's time, also was utilized in English poetry, where it was known as the para-rhyme or frame rhyme. An example would be back – buck. This rhyming device has, until now, almost completely fallen out of practice in poetry, but recently was revived in rap. An extension of this technique is still used in jokes. By taking a known phrase or cliché, and then changing one part of it, it is possible to express a new idea. Examples: "He, who laughs last, thinks slowest." or "Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine." Bashō, by changing only one sound unit, was using the frame rhyme.

#4

from Kyoto's many houses
a crowd of ninety-nine thousand
blossom-viewing

At the time there was a saying that Kyoto has 98,000 houses. Another phrase is kisen kunju = a crowd of rich and poor. Bashō changed the kisen to kusen to add another thousand to the number and including the concept of all classes of society.

20. The Technique of Making New Words – One of the reasons for becoming a poet, or writer, is for the joy of working with words. Fairly quickly one finds out, even in a language as rich as English, that there are not enough words to explain or name everything in all its variations. The writer must either find images for these unnamed states of being or make up a new word.

#14.

for the star festival
even when hearts cannot meet
rainy-rapture

The word uchūten is a compound word made by Bashō incorporating “rain in the middle of heaven” and ecstasy.

21. The Twist Technique – This is one of the most used methods in writing waka poetry. It was also the basis for the maekuzuki – capping verse. It works by setting up a situation, and leading the reader to believe the author is going to relate a certain situation. In the middle of a verse the writer's thinking makes a turn or twist, and forces the reader's mind into a completely different situation. Since Bashō had studied the old waka anthologies, he was very familiar with the technique.

#137

folly in darkness
grasping a thorn
instead of a firefly

Because fireflies appear in the time of the evening when lovers meet, they have the connotation of helping lovers find each other. Thus, the reader is led to think “thorn” is a euphemism, but the addition of the third line swings the poem back around into another situation.

#245

at a kale farm
the face viewing the flowers
a sparrow

Kale, a leafy green vegetable, has a sharp mustard-like flavor. Many people find it to be too sharp or almost sour. Therefore when one mentions a face with kale, the reader is led to believe the author will say something about a frowning or distorted human face. Bashō flips the image around so the reader sees only a common little sparrow gazing at the plant with no indication of sourness or spice – just quiet observation.

22. The Technique Of Pivoting – This technique, also carried over from waka, is a variation on the twist. In the pivot however, the middle line acts as a gate that can swing in either direction. This results from having a middle line that can have two meanings. The reader is flipped from one way of thinking to another, but here the device is made clear. The reader can make two conclusions using the same common information in the middle line.

#864

first snowfall
almost finished

on the bridge

To be completely understood, perhaps this poem also needs its title: “When the new Great Bridge at Fukagawa was almost finished.” Here both the snowfall and the work on the bridge were “almost finished.”

23. The Technique of Using Literary References or honki-dori – One of the ways writers had of elevating their status was to link their poem with that of a more famous person. Also, by making a reference to a facet of literary history, the writer could silently advertise how well-read and knowledgeable he or she was. If the reference was obscure, the reader could feel uneducated. In translation these poems require more footnotes and usually the help of a well-read native speaker to figure them out.

#105

pinning for flowers
or a tune from Gichiku
on Mount Yoshino

Gichiku, known as Tōzaburō, was a popular flute player in Bashō’s time whose hit-song had the title of “Yoshino” – the mountain most famous for its cherry trees and deep snows. The idea was that when the flowers bloomed there would be parties under them, and at the parties would be flute playing at its best.

24. The Technique Of Response to Another’s Poem – This is a variation on the technique of a literary reference only here the reference is to a usually well-known poem by someone else. Again this demands that the reader has the same literary history or competent footnotes. This device is a good one to get poetic inspiration flowing by reading the works of others and then finding something else or new to say. In this example Bashō was referring to a waka he had read in the imperial anthology, Shin Kokin Waka Shū: “along the way / where water is running / in the willow shade / I have stopped to rest / for a little while – michi no be ni / shimizu nagaruru / yanagi kage / shibashi to te koso / tachidormari tsure .”

#515

one patch of rice field
when it was planted I left
the willow tree

25. The Technique of Narrating an Admirable Act – This is another very old method of choosing subject material for a poem. Surely the old Chinese poets were the first experts, but the Japanese ran a close second. In the imperial collections of waka, some of these poems with this attribute were categorized as “laments.” Usually it is plainly polite bragging of ones own goodness or elevating one’s poverty to an achievement.

#331

burning dried pine needles
to dry my hand towel
such coldness

Bashō made use of this device in the poems: 98, 467, 473, 482, 581, 866, and 940.

26. The Technique of Hiding the Author – Often poets used ambiguity to hide the fact that they were writing about themselves. They would refer to “an old man” or “the traveler” when in fact it was the author having the experience. By doing this, the technique moved the poem from the individual into the universal. Then readers could fit their thinking into the experience. Another reason for using ambiguity was to mix up the action so the readers do not know if nature is doing the acting or if a human is doing it. This device minimizes the impact of the author’s person on the poem, and allows an interaction between humanity and nature.

#272

full moon
walking around the pond

all night

Is the poet or the moon walking around the poem all night? Or are they going together? There is also an association between the roundness of the moon, the pond, and the walked path.

27. The Technique Of The Hidden Subject – Another variation on the above technique was to write about a subject that could not be sensed, but only imagined. Often Oriental poets praised most highly a missing thing. Frequently this was done as a lament for a deceased person, but it was also a way of forcing the reader to think beyond the poem to imagine something that was not expressed in the words. Here is an example of Bashō experimenting with the technique.

#500

bell at sunset
also was not heard
a spring evening

#501

no bell ringing
what do the villagers do
on a spring evening

Bashō continued the exercise with: 518, 520, 521, 810, 811, 952, 953, and 1008.

28. The Technique of Sabi – SAH-BEE – It is questionable whether this is actually a writing technique, but the concept is so vital to Oriental poetry that it needs to be on a list like this. The word sabi has been given so many meanings over the innumerable years it has been in Japan, and now that it comes to the English language it is undergoing even new mutations. As fascinated as Westerners have become with the word, the Japanese have maintained for centuries that no one can really, truly comprehend what sabi really is and thus, they change its definition according to their moods. Some say sabi is “beauty with a sense of loneliness in time, akin to, but deeper than, nostalgia.” Daisetz T. Suzuki maintains that sabi is

“loneliness” or “solitude” but that it can also be “miserable,” “insignificant,” and “pitiable,” “asymmetry,” and “poverty.” Donald Keene sees *sabi* as “an understatement hinting at great depths.” So you see, we are rather on our own with this. One way to think of it is that a split-rail fence sagging with overgrown vines has *sabi* and a freshly painted picket fence does not. As a technique, the writer puts together images and verbs which create this desired atmosphere.

#125

dreaming rice cakes
fastened to folded ferns
a grass pillow

29. The Technique of *Wabi* – WAH-BEE – This concept is the twin to *sabi*. Again many persons have tried to find a perfect definition, but *wabi* can most easily be defined as the poverty or beauty that is the result of living simply. Frayed, faded, and worn Levis have the *wabi* that bleached designer jeans can never achieve. Because these two terms are so nebulous, deciding which of Bashō’s poems exemplify the ideas can be debated. However, as a reader and writer it is important to be aware of these concepts because their use can bring a deeper sense of life and living.

#139

a hibiscus flower
worn by a naked child
in its hair

30. The Technique of *Yūgen* – This is another of these Japanese atmospheres of poetry which is usually defined as “mystery” and “unknowable depth.” Somehow *yūgen* has avoided the controversy of the other two terms but since deciding which haiku exemplifies this quality is a judgmental decision, there is rarely consent over which verse has it and which one does not. One could say a woman’s face half-hidden behind a fan has *yūgen*. The same face covered with pink goop while getting a facial, however, does not. But still haiku writers do use the atmosphere as

defined by yūgen in haiku by enticing their readers to think and to delve into the mystery of common things.

#699

souvenir paintings
what kind of a brush first drew
the image of Buddha

31. The Technique of “As Above: So Below” – Though this idea seems to be using a religious precept, yet this technique works to make the tiny haiku a well-rounded thought. The idea is that reader should be able to read the first line and the third line to find it makes a complete thought. Sometimes an author does not know in which order to place the images in a haiku. When the images in the first and third lines have the strongest relationship, the haiku automatically feels balanced. For exercise, take this haiku by Bashō and switch the lines around to see how this factor works or try reading this haiku without the second line.

#224

snow on snow
this night in December
a full moon

32. The Technique of Finding the Divine in the Common – This is a technique that seems to happen without conscious control. A writer will make a perfectly ordinary and accurate statement about common things, but due to the combination of images and ideas about them, or in between them, a truth will be revealed about the divine. Since we all have various ideas about what the divine is, two readers of the same haiku may not find the same truth or revelation in it. Here, again, the reader becomes a writer to find a greater truth behind the words. This example from Bashō’s work may seem fairly clear.

#275

the one thing
that lights my world
a rice gourd

Perhaps it helps to know that rice was stored in a dried gourd. To keep it away from mice, the gourd was hung from a rafter above the room. Though electricity had not been conquered and light bulbs invented, Bashō already had this comparison. Yet there is a deeper meaning, also. The rice gourd's golden yellow color not only brightened the dim room, but the rice in it furnished the energy to maintain his body while endeavoring to reach the goal of enlightenment. One can also see this poem as a riddle. What is the one thing that lights my world?

33. The Technique of Lightness or karumi – This is the concept for poetry that Bashō discovered late in his life. His belief in this method of writing was so strong it compelled him to take trips his health was not capable of in order to bring the concept to a wider audience. Several students abandoned Bashō over their dislike of the method and others, even though they said they believed in it, found it very hard to define and emulate. Looking backwards in time, it seems Bashō was trying to write poetry that was less emotional, and therefore deemed lighter. Whether or not Bashō could have made the statement that it is the verb that carries the emotional baggage of a poem, at some level he must have known this. The poems he considered to exemplify the concept of karumi best are the ones with the least employment of verbs or even none at all. In our times this technique of writing a haiku without a verb produces what is pejoratively called “grocery list” haiku.

#636

under the trees
soup and pickles
cherry blossoms

From Bashō's own comments on his work, he found these poems displayed the technique of lightness: 776, 819, 885, and 923.

Lesson Twelve

Writing Haiku

If you are feeling overwhelmed by this mass of guidelines, rules and theories of haiku, it is time to take a pencil in hand to get started writing your own haiku. So you stare at the wall and the pristine paper and nothing comes to mind? Here is an easy method of attaching training wheels to your haiku mind.

You simply start with a haiku someone else has written. Find one you really like, one that speaks to you, one that has an aspect you admire. Even if you already have written some haiku of your own, but admire a technique someone else is using, you can learn that method by trying this process. Or you can pick a haiku you feel is not quite right and needs some correcting or editing. Everyone loves to revise someone else's work! Go for it.

Take a sheet of unlined paper and turn it sideways so it is wider than it is tall. At the left edge, near the top corner, write the first line of the haiku you have picked to work with in bold print. In the center of the left margin, write the second line. Near the bottom of the sheet, above the lower left-hand corner, write the third line.

Now working one line at a time, see how many ways you can rewrite the information it contains by substituting other verbs and nouns. Write down whatever comes to your mind without thinking of whether your idea is good or not, relevant or not, fitting or not. Just let your inner self play with the words. If nothing happens, that is okay.

Go to the next line of the original haiku. Have you ever seen or experienced something similar? Can you write about this in a better way? Here you give yourself the satisfaction of scratching the itch to change what others have written. Enjoy it! Indulge yourself.

Sometime before the page is filled with the shine of your pencil, take a look at the last line of the original haiku. Does it fit with anything you have written? Or have you already found a better third line than this for one of your best ideas? Do you think that changing the last line of the original haiku could make it better? If so, write down the possibilities.

Then on a clean sheet of paper write the haiku as you have written them, because out of these various steps you have your own haiku hiding somewhere on the page. Try out all the combinations. Take one of your suggestions for a third line and place it in the beginning of your new haiku. Pick a second line,

from your many attempts, or if the idea comes to you, make up a new one.

Listening to your inner self is the most vital thing you can do at this stage. The haiku is there, you have already written it. You simply have to listen to your own directions in order to put it together the way it was inside of you. Do take the time to write down all the possible combinations of lines – even if that loud-mouthed inner critic tries to tell you not to. Because you are not yet done with this haiku.

Save these worksheets because days or months later, when you look at these again, I can almost guarantee you that some idea or phrase or image that is here, will be the starting point for another of your haiku. This exercise is too rich to waste.

In studying the existing works of Bashô, one can see that before he wrote his now-famous “old pond” poem, he had used that last line – “the sound of water” in two other verses in the previous months. In both of these cases the phrase was used in its usual sense. But still, something in him must have told him that there was more to be found in the line. So do not give up.

And think of trying this exercise again with another haiku. Anytime you are feeling blocked or want to write a haiku but have no moment of inspiration or ideas, this exercise will get your juices flowing. Exactly because haiku written in this manner do not come with the marvelous charge of inspiration, it is easier to test them, change them, rub out and polish them anew.

The results of such an exercise are called by some persons – “desk haiku” because they are not written in response to a moment of inspiration. But it can be that working in this method you have recalled a moment of your past which has formed the basis for your new haiku. Then technically, your desk haiku no longer deserves that name because it is the result of a delayed moment of inspiration. Learn to split frog hairs. Defend yourself.

A CHECKLIST FOR REVISING HAIKU

While learning to write haiku it can be helpful to have a list so you can quickly check the new work for common errors. Until you make up your own list, this is the one I use for my work. Along with the points are included ways of making corrections.

Can one clearly see or hear the two distinct parts? If not, check where to add a preposition.

Does the haiku read like a sentence? By changing either the order of the words or the verb structure one can usually solve this problem.

What is the shape of the haiku? If you are counting syllables, are you sure you have the right numbers in each of the lines?

If the first or last line is the longest, could it fit better in the middle so the haiku has the shape you wish for it to have?

Are there pronouns in it? Do I really need them or can they be written out?

Are all the verbs in the present tense?

How many gerunds or words ending in 'ing' have I used?

Are there adverbs in the haiku? Do I really, really need them to convey the sense of the thought?

Is there any word that could be removed without losing the sense of the verse?

Is there any word that could have another word substituted for it? There are so many similar words that one needs to check to use the one and only one that makes the haiku. Wiggle every word.

Poetry comes from exactitude. This means that instead of writing 'tree' the author tells whether the tree is an oak or a pine tree. Appreciate the additional information that comes from associations of certain names such as "oak" suggests strength and endurance, and "pine" can also mean "to yearn for or long for" and use these opportunities to enrich the haiku.

Does the haiku work at more than one level? Is it at once describing a scene and also a state of mind or being or philosophy?

Can others understand your poem? If you are not sure, this is the time to show your haiku to others – to see if they can understand it.

Have you read this haiku somewhere else? Have you unconsciously taken someone else's haiku for your own?

Does the haiku 'sing' to you? Do you love repeating it to yourself? Does it totally delight you?

If not, if something bothers you about it, go back to the moment of inspiration, when you were given the idea for the haiku, look around the scene to see if you have missed any vital details that need to be in your poem. Does the reworked poem still express your original feeling or idea?

Should this idea be expressed in a haiku? Does it need more than one haiku to say it all? Should there be a series of haiku on the subject?

Could the idea or inspiration be better expressed in a tanka or another genre of poetry?

Can it be stated in other ways? Take the time to write up all the variations that you think of. Save and honor them all.

Lesson Thirteen

Preserving your Haiku

Every writer needs a system of organizing their poems and stories. The smallness of haiku makes a workable arrangement even more imperative. Nothing is more frustrating than to know you wrote a certain haiku about a specific event and now be unable to recall the verse exactly or even find where it was written down. It is even more frustrating to work on a haiku in your head, get it perfectly right and then by neglecting to write it down, have it lost forever. Like dreams, haiku have a way of vanishing; especially those thought of in the dark of night.

So the first rule of haiku is to always have paper and pencil close at hand. For some of us, this means a pouch hangs from the mattress with pen, flashlight and assorted papers. Clothes with pockets should be equipped with at least a folded sheet of paper and the stub of a pencil. Many persons devise tiny notebooks – stapled sheets of left-over paper into a covered booklet that best fits your pocket, or you can make a science of finding the perfect companion for your haiku.

When out on walks consider whether to take a pencil (the lead can break in your pocket) or a pen (which can suddenly go dry or leak into a stain). I have had all possibilities happen and have ended up writing down a haiku with a bit of charcoal from a beach fire on a piece of driftwood or, writing the haiku on smooth rocks, and photographing them (because the camera was working and the pen was not). I have also sharpened broken pencils on rough rock and written haiku on my arm in ink when there was no paper.

Usually the process of rewriting and the completely realistic danger of the little pocket notebook going through the laundry, forces writers to also keep a more permanent record of their haiku.

Some people use index cards with one haiku per card. In this way all the versions of one haiku can be saved on a card or they can be separated out onto individual cards. These cards need a system of numbering and of organization by subject or time so you can find the one haiku you are looking for later.

You can organize your poems by the five seasons, divided by mention of the season or its attributes; celestial – all the haiku about skies, weather, stars, planets; terrestrial – references to parts of the landscape; livelihood – human activities common to a certain season including holiday activities; animals – ones associated with a certain season; and plants – that reflect the season. Within

these categories one can arrange the subjects alphabetically.

Some persons copy their haiku into books in the chronological order as they are written, giving each one a number and the date. Thus if you remember writing that great haiku last August at the beach, you only need to flip back to August's cache of haiku. Some persons use ready-made journals to make a small book of their haiku written on a trip or around a special event.

The use of computers is an excellent way of organizing haiku. It is possible to create a database so you can search for the haiku by subject, first word or date. Lacking those skills, one can always type up the haiku in series, title them and save them under various descriptive headings. Typing up haiku on a computer while using the copy and paste features makes it easy to revise while keeping the original version and still experimenting with new words from the thesaurus. Just don't get carried away by big words.

For those who are into journaling, nothing adds spice to the recounting of the day's activities like the haiku adding insight in the middle of the page. This is an excellent method of also detailing in prose the background to the haiku material. You never know when you will begin to write haibun and need all of this information you might have otherwise forgotten.

This talk about organizing your haiku cannot be complete without mentioning the ultimate way of organizing haiku – making your own book of haiku.

Lesson Fourteen

Sequences

True, there is not much that is lovelier than a haiku and there is a great charm in just those few words lifting one's heart in joy and ecstasy. However the very shortness of a haiku neatly lends it to be put with other haiku to form a series or sequence.

When making a book of haiku, one is, at another level making a sequence. Thus, when presenting your haiku to any audience, be it by book or magazine, it is wise to know a bit about the many ways of doing this.

A good sequence is built on an idea, or a scaffolding of an idea, so that the sequence becomes a long poem. Depending upon the material in the individual haiku, it is important to pick a theme or armature on which to build your poem.

Traditionally books of haiku were divided into the four seasons starting with spring with the haiku following through the year. Even the newest haiku writer could soon have enough haiku to make a simple sequence based on the seasons. Tiring of this though, one could arrange the haiku according to the months of a year or hours of a day.

Such an arrangement can suggest another – the tie of a common theme of subject matter. Collections of haiku and sequences have been built on animals, insects, poems about gardens, love poems and any facet of life that is common to all the poems. Unusually the title of the work is that common theme and these are more properly called a poem series instead of a sequence.

However, if your poems are about many subjects, you will need to find another method of arranging them. If you have worked with renga, and are comfortable with the subtle ways renga links are formed, this is an excellent method of aligning the poems. Not only do you demonstrate the marvelous methods of leaping and connecting within each haiku, but between them you offer the reader new delights of connection or even disassociation. This method offers you the greatest freedom and insures a greater richness of material than a simple series.

Unable to do this, one can always fall back on our own literary history and use the method of forming a poem sequence most familiar to us – the narrative. The order of the haiku follow the chronological arch of the event with beginning, middle and end. This is probably the easiest sequence for Westerners to follow and appreciate, but you will get less admiration from other haiku writers.

In addition to these methods is the use of the acrostic. Even Japanese poets have used this method of sending subliminal messages which has served as a framework for the poems. In some cases the first word of each poem added to the mysterious phrase; in others the first letter of each poem was used to spell out a word and occasionally, in tanka, some part of the beginning of each line combined to make the acrostic.

Sequences and renga – which are basically collaborative sequences, can be built on almost any idea or theme such as colors, animals, letters of the alphabet, an event or a trip.

These ideas only touch the skeleton of the sequence. What makes or breaks the whole poem is how you move your reader from one poem to the next. Not all haiku are equal. Some are 'better' than others.

Only you the writer can decide whether to start the sequence with your very best poem (to capture the reader's attention) or whether to start with a simple easy-to-understand haiku in order to ease the reader into the long work. No matter what your framework is, you do not want to put all the the best poems together where they will compete with each other in a clump. Often it is best, and if the subject matter allows, to have a wave-like movement with best poem, less good, even less outstanding and then build back up to another truly outstanding stanza with a group of somewhat ordinary haiku. In these designations of better and less good haiku, I refer only to the tone and method of handling the subject matter. Each poem stanza needs to be faultlessly composed and written. When you have the reader in the thrall of following your sequence you cannot afford to offend with a badly written haiku.

In the suggested book, *The Modern Poetic Sequence*, the authors make the case that the sequence is the best part of modern poetry and whoever can successfully create sequences will demonstrate genius. A worthy goal. How to reach it?

The pen and paper types can write the individual poems on cards or slips of paper. Then, like solving a puzzle, you can line the poems up in various sequences until you are satisfied with the flow of the longer poem. It is often good to walk away at this point and come back later. Often your eyes will be drawn immediately to the one poem that is in the wrong place and you can begin the shuffle again.

For computer types, it is even easier. Whizzing the poems around on the page at the control of a cursor is exciting and easy. You can even save a possible combination, open a new file and began to move the haiku around in a new configuration. Sometimes to make the poem flow better you will need to make minor changes in a haiku. This is good. You are enriching your haiku as they enrich you.

Before you congratulate yourself on graduating, I hope you will give yourself the enormous pleasure of building longer poems out of the haiku you have written.