

# A Haiku Workshop

with Quendryth Young



# Welcome to a Haiku Workshop with Quendryth Young

Australian writer Quendryth Young discovered a passion for haiku in 2004, following a forty-year career as a cytologist. In 2005 she began her ongoing role as the coordinator of *Cloudcatchers*, a group of haiku poets on the Far North Coast of NSW, and edited the inaugural haiku section of *FreeXpresSion* (2007–2009).

More than eight hundred of Quendryth's haiku have been published, and she has received twenty major international awards, including a second in the Mildred Kanterman

Memorial Book Award (The Haiku Society of America) in 2008 for her haiku collection *The Whole Body Singing*, and a Touchstone Award (The Haiku Foundation) in 2010.

Published below for the first time are Quendryth's comprehensive and succinct guidelines to writing English-language haiku – backed up with examples from her own extensive and award-winning body of work. Quendryth has agreed to share these guidelines with our Sydney School of Arts & Humanities community to *spread the message, spread the joy, spread the elation ...* of living with senses wide open to the environment, in order to capture significant moments of observation with concision and resonance.

Everyone here at the school extends our warmest gratitude to Quendryth for her generosity and enthusiasm in creating such a valuable resource.



# Haiku Workshop

Quendryth Young 2016 ©



Haiku is a genre of Japanese poetry that has been practised and enjoyed for over four hundred years. English-language haiku, which has been evolving for over a century, continues to do so, and today flourishes worldwide. In Australia, while honouring the ancient haiku spirit, poets are exploring this succinct expression of experience with the authenticity of Australian themes. Of the many definitions offered for haiku, the most commonly held are that a haiku:

- captures the essence of a moment
- finds the extraordinary in the ordinary
- links nature to human nature

## Guidelines for Writing Haiku

1. A haiku captures the **essence** of a passing moment
2. It is written in the **present** tense, without a full stop
3. A haiku generally refers to **nature**
4. A haiku is tightly **focused**
5. It is **concise**, no more than seventeen syllables, with no minimum
6. **Juxtaposition** compares or contrasts two images
7. A haiku generally uses a **break** (pause) after the first or the second line
8. A haiku reports observations experienced through the **senses** (what is seen, heard, smelt, touched or tasted)
9. A haiku uses **simple** language, (without poetic devices such as simile, rhyme or anthropomorphism)
10. Haiku is **objective**, (without abstractions, judgements or conclusions)
11. A haiku leaves something for the **reader** to ponder
12. A haiku poet lives every day with a mind wide open to receive the '**ahhh**' moment

# Guidelines Explained

## No. 1 Essence of a Moment

A haiku captures the essence of a passing moment. This involves acute observation.  
SHOW – don't TELL.

|                |                     |                 |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| midday         | water's edge        | schoolyard      |
| a paddock full | the ocean overflows | ants swarm over |
| of dandelions  | his bucket          | the centipede   |

## No. 2 Present Tense

The use of the present tense gives the haiku a concept of immediacy. The reader becomes involved with the present moment, and perceives the object/ objects of which the poet writes. A series of events, one time frame after another, is a story; it will never make a haiku. The omission of a full stop leaves the haiku open, inviting further thought from the reader.

## No. 3 Nature

A **haiku** traditionally contains a reference to **nature** (a 'kigo') and/or the **season**. A haiku often relates nature to human nature, in that it captures an observation in the natural world, and this experience is linked to the human condition.

|             |                     |                   |
|-------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| hedge       | tiny frog           | toddler's bedside |
| a new shoot | a breaststroke kick | moonlight comes   |
| out of line | doubles its length  | and goes          |

A **senryu** is similar in structure, but does **not** require a natural/seasonal reference. It is more involved with **human foibles**, often humorous or satirical. Many English-language editors do not differentiate between haiku and senryu.

|               |                     |                     |
|---------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| tea ceremony  | sitting in church   | uphill ...          |
| my knees feel | the priest berating | the old man carries |
| western       | those who aren't    | his dachshund       |



## No. 4 Focus

Haiku are tightly focused, and the poet identifies and includes only those elements (rarely more than two) that are essential for conveying the essence of the moment.

This may be achieved by the use of:

- the **singular**

\*not a flock of birds, but one bird

\*not a tree with autumn leaves, but one leaf

This is a helpful guideline for focus, though it is not a hard and fast rule.

Compare the impact of these two versions of the same observation

|                       |                        |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1                     | 2                      |
| bottlebrushes –       | fast food stop –       |
| freeloading lorikeets | a lorikeet upside-down |
| guzzle fast food      | in the bottlebrush     |

The first haiku is very 'busy'. The second is much simpler, focusing on one lorikeet, and comparing the writer's stop for fast food, with that of the bird's. Simplify!

- a **change of focus** from distant to close, or close to distant

|                    |                         |
|--------------------|-------------------------|
| distant thunder    | wing beats              |
| a shadow flickers  | of a crested pigeon ... |
| on the locked shed | grey summer sky         |



## No. 5 Concision

A haiku is **concise** with an upper limit of seventeen syllables, and no lower limit. A Japanese poet does not count syllables, but counts each 'onji' (generally called 'on'), which is a 'sound unit'. For instance the word 'haiku' contains three sound units (ha-ee-ku). Tokyo (to-u-ky-ou) is four 'on', but two syllables. Thus the concept of 5-7-5 syllables in the structure of a haiku in English results in far more sound units than would be acceptable in traditional Japanese verse.

|                |           |              |           |
|----------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|
| banksia        | Sunday    | blackout ... | all eyes  |
| all the shades | a cantata | frogs and    | wide open |
| of dying       | of mowers | crickets     | aquarium  |

### HINTS (for concision)

- 1 Remove unnecessary words.
- 2 Use shorter words with the same meaning.
- 3 Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly (never two adjectives per noun).
- 4 Articles (a, an, the ... ) add to sense and rhythm; **don't** delete them just for concision.
- 5 Seek **strong verbs** to present the image.

|                          |                       |                            |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|
| billabong                | sweet shop            | sunrise                    |
| a dragonfly <b>darts</b> | an ant <b>drowned</b> | spiderlings <b>radiate</b> |
| pose to pose             | in the honey          | from the egg sac           |
| keening wind             | petrichor ...         | birdsong                   |
| a crow <b>plucks</b> at  | <b>dancing</b> with   | every feather              |
| the sheep's ribs         | the first drops       | <b>throbbing</b>           |



## No. 6 Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the placing of two images close together, to compare or contrast, thus contributing to resonance within the haiku. Resonance is a figurative term for the ability to evoke or suggest images, memories and emotions.

Let us consider the first three haiku presented in this workshop.

|                |                     |                 |
|----------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| 1              | 2                   | 3               |
| midday         | water's edge        | schoolyard      |
| a paddock full | the ocean overflows | ants swarm over |
| of dandelions  | his bucket          | the centipede   |

1. The word 'midday' implies the sun, and below it are many suns in the form of dandelions, facing upwards towards it.
2. What a contrast between the ocean and the tiny bucket filled with seawater!
3. Excited young school children tend to run in a bunch hither and thither, as do the ants.



Compare the impact of these two versions of the same observation.

|                     |                     |
|---------------------|---------------------|
| rock shelf ...      | noonday moon        |
| a jellyfish beached | a jellyfish beached |
| in the shallow pool | in the shallow pool |

Note that 'rock shelf' is a single image poem. By replacing L1 (the first line) with another distinct image in 'noonday moon', there is a comparison of shape, with an allusion to the moon's pull on the tide, and the haiku resonates.

## Second image understood

At times the second image is suggested, rather than stated.

|                |                        |
|----------------|------------------------|
| 1              | 2                      |
| butcher bird   | nursing home           |
| the whole body | a lunchtime procession |
| singing        | of walking frames      |

1. The reader may bring to mind a performance by a pop star or opera singer.
2. The reader may bring to mind the procession of a brass band.



## Avoid explanations

rainy day  
water cascades  
into gutters

One part explains the other part. There is no relationship of images.

## Avoid cause and effect

morning dew  
rainbows glisten  
over the grass

One situation is causing the other. There is no new insight.

## No. 7 Structure

**Short/Long/Short:** Traditionally a haiku is written in three lines: short, long, short. There are many acceptable variations of this structure in English-language haiku.

**Break:** A haiku is generally not a run-on sentence. A 'caesura', or break, usually divides the haiku into two distinct sections, occurring after the first or second line, creating a 'fragment' and a 'phrase' (or 'phrase' and 'fragment').

|               |                 |                     |
|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| turning tide  | town bridge     | a twist of roots    |
| the buoy bobs | a frog croaking | in the glass vase – |
| sideways      | under the road  | summer rain         |

Japanese use a cutting word, 'kireji', to mark where the break occurs. In English-language haiku the break is not always indicated, as in the examples above. Punctuation may be advisable in the presentation of some haiku, so that the break is more readily appreciated by the reader.

**Punctuation marks** vary for the required length/intensity of the pause:

- (a) if the break is obvious, a punctuation mark may be omitted.
- (b) 'n' dash is a short dash – which indicates a short pause.
- (c) 'm' dash is longer — and indicates a strong break.
- (d) ellipsis ... creates a longer and more reflective pause.
- (e) exclamation/question marks ! ? are rarely used, but may be effective.
- (f) the tilde ~ is not acceptable to most editors.

|                      |                       |                           |
|----------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| bushfire ash         | old grave –           | hearse—                   |
| the naked shapes     | faded plastic flowers | buds on the oak           |
| of rock              | among the weeds       | again                     |
| minute's silence ... | backing out           | a magpie                  |
| an old man tapping   | of the spider's web   | ignores its baby's cry... |
| his fingers          | ... sorry             | why can't I?              |

**Prepositional phrase:** Avoid using a prepositional phrase in L1. This is not 'wrong', but a better structure is usually achieved without it.

Examples to avoid in L1: in the dark... / by the road... / over the top...

**Capital Letters** are rarely used, but may be required for names of prominent people, festivals, celebrations, holy days, specific places and buildings. Some editors prefer them for animal breeds. The name of a season takes lower case.

|                  |                     |                     |
|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| sunlit Buddha    | Anzac march         | autumn sunrise      |
| a lizard crosses | the riderless horse | the bristled coat   |
| his palm         | blurred by tears    | of a Hereford steer |

A **Pivot** structure arises when L2 makes sense read with either L1 or L3. This creates an interesting ambiguity, but the writer must guard against being 'too clever'. The second line generally begins with a preposition.

alone  
in the rainforest  
all the noise

rubbish bins  
at intervals  
random ibis

a spider  
against the sky  
evening star

a silken thread  
from tree to tree  
southbound plane

seed pods  
in the poinciana  
a new moon

haircut  
on the verandah  
a scavenging wren

**Clarity:** Avoid clumsy structures.

1 Inversion:

in the street  
a stray dog shivers

a stray dog  
shivers in the street

2 A drum roll effect in Line 3 (often associated with an inversion):

midnight –  
on top of the fence  
a black cat

midnight  
a black cat sits  
on the fence



**Rhythm** Be aware that a haiku is a short poem, and as such requires a sensitivity to rhythm, which contributes to the reader's enjoyment and comprehension. As in speech, the most common usage is iambic, but all meters are acceptable.

## No. 8 Five Senses

Observation is made using the five senses.

### Sight

fireside  
a piece of jigsaw  
slips into place

lingering twilight  
a water dragon's tail  
dangles in the pool

dusk –  
a white horse holds  
the sunlight

a duck rises ...  
fading footprints  
on the pond

sun's out  
a drop on the lily pad  
changes to green

evening star  
a patterning  
of bats

### Hearing

distant siren  
the sound of a heifer  
calving

hammock ...  
the falling pitch  
of a departing crow

playground  
searching the hubbub  
for one voice

overhead fan  
the chuck-chuck  
of a gecko

rainforest hush  
the crack of a whip bird  
answered

midnight  
some of the sounds  
are insects

### Smell

orange blossom  
a stinkbug deep  
in the perfume

fireside toast  
the willow spits out  
its aroma

home from the wake  
the smell of my father  
in his wardrobe

fairy floss  
drawn to the scent  
of dung

forest walk  
exchanging breath  
with the pines

wakened by rain  
the scent  
of bruised mint

### Taste

salt spray  
a taste of peat  
in my whisky

church bells  
waking to the taste  
of metal

grandma's letters  
the saltiness of toast  
and dripping

### Touch

Anzac dawn  
the bronze wall  
chills my hand

wild weather  
I feel the cat's purr  
in my toes

mosquito  
a stranger's blood  
on my hand

## No. 9 Simplicity

A haiku uses simple language, without poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, alliteration, assonance, rhyme or anthropomorphism (attributing human features to a non-human subject). Thus a haiku presents observations unadorned by elaborate syntax, and does not indicate, 'Look at me! What a clever poet I am!'

## No. 10 Objectivity

A haiku is objective, without abstractions, judgments or conclusions. The writer does not tell the reader what he is feeling, or what he expects the reader to feel. A concrete image is presented as observed, and if the writer has performed his task effectively, the reader will respond with the same enthusiasm that the writer experienced at the time of observation. Haiku can be extremely emotive, while remaining objective.

sick neighbour  
the bare branches  
of her magnolia

fever  
sound of the sea  
wall to wall

fresh grave  
the school bully  
underfoot

roadside cross  
plastic flowers  
the colour of dust

beach walk  
the smooth contours  
of yesterday's castle

sunburst  
exchanging dandelions  
with a toddler

rounded rump  
of a grazing steer  
lush pasture

midday  
a fat man bends over  
to pick his pumpkin

a helium balloon  
tied to his gravestone  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY

## No. 11 Reader

The reader reacts readily to a well-perceived, well-structured haiku, completing the communication cycle. The reader is willing, and eager, to respond to the material before him if it is an honest presentation of objective observation. He does not need all the details, as long as the words offer the essence of the moment, so that he may explore the layers of meaning and add interpretations of his own. A reader does not respond to obscurity, innuendo or to riddles.

## No. 12 Ahh!

For many, haiku is not just poetry – it is a way of life, in which the poet focuses on a specific moment of awareness, and shares this with the reader. May the appreciation of the 'ahhh' moment become a way of life for you!



**Acknowledgement** of first publication of haiku / senryu above:

(Journals are Australian, unless otherwise specified)

*Cattails* UHTS 2016, *Cherry Blossom Festival* Canada 2011, *Chrysanthemum* Austria 2007/2010, *Creatrix* 2010, *Dor de Dor* Romania 2007, *Famous Reporter* 2006, *FreeXpresSion* 2010/2015, *Haiku Dreaming Australia* 2006, *Haiku Reality* Serbia 2009/2011, *The Heron's Nest* USA 2005/2006/2007/2008/2010, *Kabocha* Croatia 2016, *Kokako* New Zealand 2008/2010/2016, *Kusamakura* Japan 2016, *Moonset* USA 2008, *Notes from the Gean* USA 2010, *NZ Poetry Society* New Zealand 2005/2006/2007/2008/2016, *Paper Wasp* 2004/2005/2008/2009/2014, *Presence* UK 2008/2009/2010/2016, *Shamrock* Ireland 2008/2010/2011/2013, *Simply Haiku* USA 2007, *Scoici de Mare* Romania 2007, *Stylus* 2005/2006/2007, *Taj Mahal Review* India 2008, *Vancouver Cherry Blossom Festival* Canada 2011, *Wild Plum* Poland 2016, *Wollumbin Haiku Workshop* 2007, *Yamadera Haiku* Japan 2016, *Yellow Moon* 2005.

Photo Credits: All photos presented here are under a Creative Commons license, with the exception of the author photograph, which is used with the kind permission of Jacqui Murray, and the Grey Butcher Bird image, which is used with the generous permission of Peter Crane: <https://pacart.smugmug.com/>

Copyright Quendryth Young. Sydney School of Arts & Humanities ([www.ssoa.com.au](http://www.ssoa.com.au)) has published this e-brochure, making it available free to the public. If any part of the e-brochure is used for any further publication, accreditation to Quendryth Young and Sydney School of Arts & Humanities is required. For further information contact [enquiry@ssoa.com.au](mailto:enquiry@ssoa.com.au)