

Haiku: Walking the Fine Line

While Japanese haiku is traditionally written in a single, unbroken, vertical line, regular use of the tercet has been popular since early in the history of English Language Haiku (ELH). When Japanese haiku are translated into English, line breaks are often added at natural reading pauses to create tercets.

However, ELH is not dependent on line breaks to indicate pauses. When we write, our word choices and order build rhythms for the breath to follow. Reading our poems aloud greatly helps to determine where these pauses lie. While the focus here is one-line haiku, sometimes referred to as “monoku,” one-line tanka is gaining interest in English as well, and similar principles apply.

ELH written on a single line need not be gimmicky or “experimental,” but there are ways in which these poems differ from enjambed poems like tercets, in which a phrase is interrupted by a line break. Whichever lineation you choose for your poem, the format should fit the poem. Placing a tercet on an unbroken line is not sufficient to create an effective one-line haiku.

After you have written your one-line poem, ask yourself: will my poem lose something if I add line breaks? If your haiku is easily cut into two or three lines and reads better in one of those formats, that may be the lineation best suited to your poem. Likewise, single-line poems find their full potential when written on an unbroken line.

how the wind sighs every September song

Compare this to the same poem with different line breaks added, indicated here by slashes:

how / the wind sighs / every September song

how the wind sighs / every September song

how the wind sighs every September / song

The poem simply reads better and feels unbridled on a single line, as it leaves the interpretation of the poem more open to the reader. When enjambment is added, the poem feels constrained as the reader is guided toward one potential reading.

Other questions can be asked regarding the appropriateness of a single line format for a haiku. **Can my poem be read in more than one way? Does my poem contain multiple potential breaks?** While not required, the presence of two or more poems created by multiple natural pauses may take your haiku to the next level. The different readings of the poem can add new depth or dimension, add meanings, extend, or juxtapose one another to create several interrelated poems. The result can enhance the reader's enjoyment and be quite magical. Take the following, for example:

frog inside the bamboo so tiny the moon

frog inside the bamboo so tiny the moon (flow of ideas)

frog inside the bamboo so tiny / the moon (emphasis on the moon)

frog inside the bamboo / so tiny the moon (emphasis on the moon's smallness)

frog / inside the bamboo / so tiny the moon (relation between frog and moon)

frog inside / the bamboo so tiny / the moon (location of frog)

frog / inside the bamboo / so tiny / the moon (chopped meaning and broken cadence)

Notice how the meaning of each of these poems listed above are changed by placing a break or breaks at different positions.

Does my poem have musicality and rhythm as a single line? Repeating words and sounds, such as with alliteration, assonance, internal rhyme, and other tools to create euphony can lure the reader along the line. Many single-line poems have a delightful cadence that would be altered by a line break. Sometimes this alone is enough reason to keep a haiku on a single line.

curling into the bowl the shadow then the peel

Looking at the stressed (capitalized) and unstressed (lowercase) syllables in this poem, the tumbling “shadow then the peel” takes on a pleasing unstressed-stressed musical quality that complements the movement being described:

CURling INto the BOWL the SHAdow THEN the PEEL

Taken a step further, the repeated consonance and assonance are musical notes playing a word-rhythm. Notice the sounds “L,” “IN,” “THE,” and “OW” repetitions.

CURling INto (the) BOWL (the) SHAdow THEN (the) PEEL

Is my poem improved in movement or pace by writing on one line? Some poems are written on a single line for no reason other than the speed or impact of delivery. A haiku can be a sprint, a walking meditation, or a waltz; each poem dictates its own needs. The movement can complement the content of the poem or simply add a quality to the poem that would otherwise be lacking with physical breaks.

finding my inner axis the tilt of a blue bird's head

finding my inner axis / the tilt of a blue bird's head

Tracing the narrative of this poem, we follow the direction of the tilt of the blue bird's head. The poem does not readily break down into 3-lines, and, even in the 2-line configuration (shown), it lacks the flow, momentum, and the reader participation that the one-liner allows. Alternately, with the single-line haiku, the reader has first-hand experience moving along the axis with the bird's head.

Is there anything extraneous in my poem, such as fancy formatting or words that do not contribute meaning? Often writers new to one-liners want to experiment with too many things at once, which can lead to haiku that feel busy or dense with tools. Read your poem aloud and carefully vet each word, each pause, any formatting, and any devices to ensure they are not detracting from your poem but benefitting it.

the blue swallows the blue swallows

The deceptive simplicity of three repeated words makes this poem sing. If any additional words had been used, we would miss the lulling richness of the potential readings. As a noun, a swallow is a type of bird. When read as a verb, “swallows” can mean “envelops” or “folds into.” “Blue” can be the color or a synonym for “sky.” For clarity, descriptions of the meanings are below:

the blue sky envelops the blue birds

the blue sky folds into itself—look at the birds

the blue birds . . . the blue birds . . . (read like a meditation)

the blue sky folds into itself . . . the blue sky folds into itself . . . (like a churning)

If one considers that “blue” can also express a sad mood, additional readings of this poem are possible.

When I read my poem aloud is there anything impeding the flow that I haven't intentionally put there to do so? Does it feel balanced? Does it have a pleasant rhythm and arc? Do I need to rearrange, change, add, or remove words to improve these things? Am I using an experimental device that draws attention to itself rather than expands the meaning of the poem?

the constant great gray cold of winter owl

the constant cold of winter / great gray owl

Although the words are not written sequentially, the fragment “great gray owl” is clear as a reading of the poem. By shifting the words “great gray” from the fragment “great great owl” into the phrase “the constant cold of winter,” the poet creates a poem with a synergistic effect that simultaneously encompasses both fragment and phrase while also transcending them.

One-line haiku, with its potential to create additional layers of resonance, can likewise create new incongruities. When first setting out to write single-line haiku, take extra time to look for opportunities that elevate a good poem into a great poem. Keep a running log of edits in case you want to go back to an earlier, cleaner version of the poem, as one-liners sometimes have an increased tendency to get overcomplicated or overworked. It can help to have a reader for feedback, even for those experienced with three-line haiku, given the significant difference in function and feel of single-line poems. Many poets find themselves switching lineation back and forth, and this can be part of the process of letting the poem speak to you as you explore your comfort level within the line.

You may, at first, feel a bit out of your comfort zone, but didn't we all, when we first came to haiku? Embrace the same curiosity that you did then, and the playfulness this format allows. Have fun with it and see where the line can take you!

Glossary

Alliteration: a poetic device that uses the repetition of consonant sounds in adjacent, nearby, or connected words

Assonance: a poetic device that uses the repetition of vowel sounds in adjacent, nearby, or connected words

Cadence: the song-like pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that rise and fall as we read

ELH: English Language Haiku

Euphony: the quality of being pleasing to the ear

Tercet: three-line verse

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Written by Kat Lehmann and Robin Smith

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Errata corrected.