



*by Jane Reichhold
for ages 11+*

Haiku are little and seem easy to write. Because they are so small, even tiny errors can seem huge. You, as the writer, have only seconds in which to impress the reader, so you want to make the experience as specific and pleasurable as possible.

One of the most important actions a reader takes is picturing the haiku images in his or her mind. When your eyes read "old pond," you, as a reader, are expected to do more than think about seeing two little words on the page. You are being asked to think of some old pond you have known or seen. Maybe it was a pond in a zoo, or out on a farm, or a secret one in the woods. But to read a haiku successfully, you have to go to the trouble of finding the best "old pond" image that is stored in your memory bank.

This action is vital to haiku and is the actual making of the haiku.

By using one image per line, as most poets do when writing haiku, it gives the reader an

opportunity to pause and picture each mind image. This is because the reader's mind is forced to slow down before it swoops over to the beginning of the following line; however, if this is done too often, the haiku risks sounding choppy.

But long ago, the Japanese, who created haiku, discovered that poets could build haiku lines in a way that would encourage the reader to quickly shift his or her eyes to the following line to reach the next image.

Let us say I have written:

**the sea
a child throws a stone
breaking waves**

When you read that out loud, you can feel the drop in your voice at the end of each line. We often say the poem feels "choppy" – like waves in stormy weather. However, if I can connect two of those lines so they flow together, I can get rid of one of the choppy places. Just that small trick greatly improves and smoothes out the sound and feeling of the haiku.

When I look at the poem, I feel the best two lines to connect would be "the sea" and "a child throws a stone," so I try:

**a child throws a stone
at the sea**

Do you see how simply adding 'at' smoothes out the sound of the haiku? Sometimes we call this section of the haiku the "phrase" because it sounds just like a phrase should in English.

But now I have one more image I need to add "breaking waves." This is called the "fragment" because it is only a fragment of a sentence. I could write my haiku as:

**the child throws a stone
at the sea
breaking waves**

Now I have too much flow between the images so that it sounds and feels like a sentence. We do not want this in haiku. We are out for more excitement.

If I move the fragment to the top of the poem it will stand alone and feel like a good fragment.

**breaking waves
a child throws a stone
at the sea**

Can you feel how differently you read this version of the haiku? Can you see which line is the fragment? Which two lines form the phrase? Do you see what makes this haiku unexpected and funny?

It is unexpected because the first line gives the image and idea of waves breaking on the

shore. When the reader reads this, I hope that he or she will imagine tall waves tumbling over each other. Then the reader is asked to see a child throwing a stone. When that image combines with the sense of the first line, one could wonder, "Is the child throwing stones to break waves?" However, when the last line is read, the reader understands that it is the sea breaking its own waves, and a child has become part of the sea by having a good time throwing stones.

And I hope you have a good time finding the haiku in your life!



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Author and translator, with a special interest in haiku, tanka, and renga, Jane Reichhold was a three-time winner of the Haiku Society of America Merit Book Award. She had been a member of the Haiku Society of America, Haiku Poets of Northern California, Haiku Canada, Haiku International (Tokyo, Japan), German Haiku Society, and Poetry Society of Japan. She ran the web site Aha! Poetry (www.ahapoetry.com).

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