

4 Haiku-Sparking Activities

from Matthew Gollub

Tune into nature

Ask students to discuss the seasons in terms of their natural surroundings. Ask: *Are leaves on trees fluttering in the wind or falling to the ground? Is that a spring breeze blowing or a bitter cold wind? What are birds doing? What color is the sky?*

Next, have students take an oath of silence and walk around outside as if they were Issa journeying around America by foot. Afterwards, have students write their observations in two sentences. Maybe they'll write about raindrops tapping on umbrellas, or how the dry air parches their throats. Anything they come up with is fine, as long as it's "in the moment" and can be perceived by one of the five senses.

Get inside of it

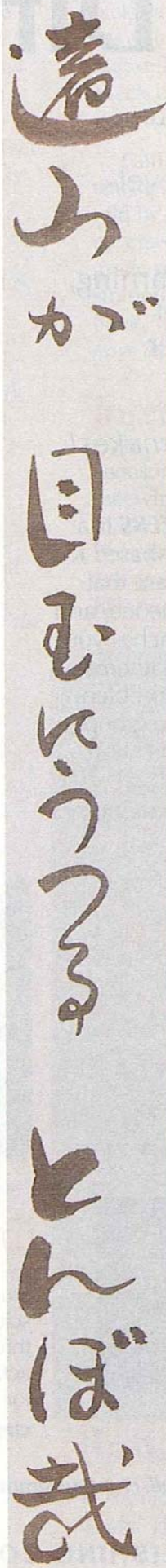
The fun of writing haiku is getting inside your subject's "head"—as Issa did—whether it's an insect, an animal, a bird, or a plant. Have students pretend to be animals, insects, and plants and encourage them to empathize with their subjects. Try to instill a sense of wonder and discovery, without being overly sentimental. Subtlety, not gushiness, is the goal.

Think in foods

What colors are fruits and vegetables in the grocery store? How do seasonal dishes taste? Do certain foods make the mouth water or eyes widen? Ask each student to choose a seasonal food—pumpkin pie, watermelon, corn on the cob, a hearty soup—and write two sentences describing that food's taste. Have them write poems about how a dish smells, looks, or feels.

Expand the word supply

Often, the greatest frustration for young writers is their lack of vocabulary to express their thoughts. Help them overcome this obstacle and link haiku to other subjects, such as spelling or science, by displaying a list of related nouns such as: fleas, flies, mosquitoes, ladybugs, butterflies, and moths. Then review a list of verbs to give students tools to describe how the nouns move: jump, spring, fly, flit, buzz, creep, flutter, and crawl. ■



Matthew Gollub on Haiku

Known as the "world's shortest poet-ry," haiku has exactly 17 syllables in three lines, with five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five again in the third. Students may notice that the haiku in *Cool Melons* do not necessarily have 17 syllables. That's because they have been translated from Japanese. (Japanese words typically have more syllables than their English translations.) Here are other interesting facts to share with your students:

- Haiku is very old. It originated in Japan, where poets have been writing it for several hundred years, even before Issa's time.
- Traditional haiku depicts a single moment in nature. It is usually based on a discovery or an observation.
- A haiku is like a quick line sketch. It's up to the reader to imagine the details and to make the picture complete. In a sense, we can think of a haiku as a telegram, for example: "Should arrive Tuesday, supper time." From this short message, we can infer that, weather permitting, the sender will arrive on Tuesday, and after the tiresome journey, she would appreciate a good meal.
- Often, haiku describes two events side by side, such as: "Plum tree in bloom/a cat's silhouette/upon the paper screen."
- Almost all traditional haiku convey a sense of season. But rather than name the season outright, most haiku rely on a *kigo*—a word or phrase to suggest the season indirectly. For example, "blossom" is a *kigo* for spring. (Challenge students to come up with *kigos* for all the seasons.)



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