

A Haiku Workshop at Morrisonville Elementary School
Morrisonville, Illinois
May 18, 2016

by Randy Brooks, PhD

My Preferred Approach to Haiku Workshops in Schools

Over the years, it has been a pleasure to share the fun of haiku with students at all levels. When I provide haiku workshops in the elementary or secondary schools, I usually like to visit classes at least twice with a week or two between each visit. With multiple visits, the students can get a better sense of reading, writing, editing, publishing and sharing haiku.

During the first visit, I emphasize the art of reading haiku by simply sharing excellent haiku with the students and asking them to imagine what they see, feel, or remember based on the haiku read. Then we talk about writing haiku with some introductory discussion of how haiku is a literary art emphasizing images—words or phrases that evoke sensory perception and related memories. Often I will ask them to imagine being at a specific location or situation, such as the beach, then share things they might see, hear, feel, taste, or smell. I write their images on the board then ask them to write a couple of haiku based on these collected words and phrases. I end by encouraging the students to keep a haiku journal for the next week, writing about things they remember or see.

Before the second visit, the teacher collects and sends me the student haiku. I go through their work and select some of their best haiku attempts for a kukai session. I also select some haiku that have a great deal of potential, but could be improved with editing. During the second visit, we start with the kukai session where students pick out favorite anonymous haiku and talk about what they imagine and feel from those haiku. We call out for the author and applaud their haiku. After the kukai session, we do a haiku editing workshop. I start by talking about four editing activities: (1) **cutting** unnecessary words; (2) **adding** words for better context or implied significance; (3) **rearranging** “the furniture” by moving words, phrases and lines around; and (4) **replacing** less effective words with more evocative, effective words or phrases. (I note that replacing is just a combination of cutting and adding a more effective word.)

If there is time for a third visit, I will work with the teacher to identify a student editorial team who I work with to review all submissions for a collection of student haiku. The student editorial team helps select haiku for the collection and suggest slight edits or revisions. They often help title and design the cover for the anthology. Sometimes these collections are published online or in a small booklet. The third visit is then a celebration of the publication of student haiku, with a reading for other students, teachers and/or parents in the school.

A One-day Workshop

However, for a recent workshop at Morrisonville Elementary School, I had only one day for the haiku workshop. It was almost the end of the school year, so there wasn't time for multiple visits. Therefore, I led a modified version of my preferred approach. Fortunately, I did get to have about 90 minutes to work with the sixth grade students. I still wanted students to experience the art of reading haiku, writing and editing haiku, and kukai competition. Here is how I compressed the experience.

I started by asking the students to close their eyes and imagine being in this haiku:

the sun coming up
five eggs
in the iron skillet

James Tipton, *Bittersweet*, Cold Mountain Press, 1975

With their eyes closed, I ask them where this haiku took them. What colors do they see? What kind of day is it? Is it hot or cold out? What do you hear and smell? They open their eyes and tell me about going to grandma's house or camping. I ask them how they knew that the skillet was black. What do we lose if cut the word "iron" from this haiku? We enjoy thinking about sunrise and breakfast and all the things they imagine doing after eating a big breakfast.

Morrisonville is a rural community, so I followed with another haiku by James Tipton:

the lambs sold
tufts of wool
on the wire fence

James Tipton, *Bittersweet*, 1975

I asked the students to share what they imagine or feel from this haiku. Where are the lambs? Why have they been sold? Where do you imagine yourself in this haiku scene? Are you with the farmer? Is the farmer happy or kind of sad, or both? Have you had to sell a farm animal? How did you feel? Do you like the word "tufts" in this haiku? Why is "tufts of wool" better than "a little bit of wool"?

The third haiku shared was by Shiki:

spring breeze—
the green field
tempts me to play catch

Masoka Shiki, *If Someone Asks . . . Masaoka Shiki's Life and Haiku*, 2001

I ask the students to imagine this haiku and what a green field tempts you to do? Do you like to feel the breeze on your face? Japanese haiku often include a kigo, an image or phrase that expands the haiku into the feelings of a season.

And since we are limited by time, I jumpstart the haiku writing process by asking students to write their haiku starting with "spring breeze". Imagine you are looking out over a green field. What do you imagine you would like to do? Everyone writes a "spring breeze" haiku, then I ask students to share their haiku.

We continue reading, imagining and writing haiku in response to additional haiku. You can see the complete list of haiku on the attached handout. We read the "boiling beet tops" haiku by Raymond Roseliep, and I talk about the difference even one letter makes in a haiku by changing the last line from "loved" to "loves". We read the gruesome haiku:

dead cat . . .
open-mouthed
to the pouring rain

Michael McClintock, *The Haiku Anthology*, 2000

The students moan and snicker, then talk about times they have found a dead animal or lost their family cat or dog. We talk about how cold and dark it seems to be in this haiku, and why the cat's

mouth is open. Then I write the following on the board and ask them why this would not be a very good haiku:

I was sad
when I saw
a dead cat

This is a sentence, but not a haiku. Why? The students puzzle over the two versions and decide that they like the first one better because it doesn't tell you what to think. It doesn't say how you feel, but you feel it more with the images in the first version. You get things like how the cat looked and the chill of the pouring rain. One of the students writes:

German Shepherd
my best friend
gone forever

G.M.

We enjoy reading a few more haiku from the handout together. They love imagining the haiku by George Swede:

warm spring breeze
the old hound runs
in his sleep

George Swede, *Almost Unseen: The Selected Haiku of George Swede*, 2000

To make up for the gruesome dead cat haiku, I share this one:

spring evening—
playing with the last kitten
to be given away

Chuck Brickley, *The Haiku Anthology*, 2000

Again, the students notice that this haiku is both happy and sad. I ask them what kind of evening is it? How do you imagine it feels like to give away your kittens, especially the last one? We share our stories and are ready to write haiku for a kukai competition.

To speed up the process, we write from a word or phrase prompt.

The first prompt is “monkey bars” and everyone writes a haiku about the playground, or more specifically about playing on the monkey bars. Here are some of the haiku attempts written:

monkey bars
where I feel free
swinging around, being the true me

J.W.

monkey bars
the iron bars
full of laughter and joy

R.B.

**monkey bars
I can't
do them**

B.B.

monkey bars
feeling lonely
it keeps me occupied

R.O.

**monkey bars
my sister doesn't
want help**

T.M.

monkey bars
sitting at the top
eating a banana

A.H.

monkey bars
swinging around on them in the spring breeze
alone

J.F.

**monkey bars
my friends share lemonade
on a hot summer day**

G.M.

We discuss what we like about the various “monkey bar” haiku, then we select two or three favorites for a final vote (the ones in bold were selected as the best). B.B.’s was selected as the favorite haiku of those three.

After each haiku writing competition, the winner got to select the word or prompt for the next session. One student chose “America” as the prompt. The resulting winning haiku was:

America
4th of July parade
in a little town

K.L.

I ended the workshop by reading from my collection of haiku, *School's Out*. Then students had one final kukai writing competition with “school's out” as the prompt. Here are two of their haiku:

school's out
people are dancing
on the bus

A.H.

school's out
playing baseball
with friends in the cool breeze

R.B.

I want to thank Mrs. Sarah Jennings, an inspiring sixth grade teacher at Morrisonville Elementary School, for hosting the haiku workshop and for permission to publish these student haiku.

Haiku Workshop Handout – May 18, 2016
Morrisonville Elementary School

Dr. Randy Brooks
Millikin University

the sun coming up
five eggs
in the iron skillet

James Tipton

snow falls from tree branches
the rumble
of passing boxcars

Alan Pizzarelli

the lambs sold
tufts of wool
on the wire fence

James Tipton

warm spring breeze
the old hound runs
in his sleep

George Swede

spring breeze—
the green field
tempts me to play catch

Masaoka Shiki

spring evening—
playing with the last kitten
to be given away

Chuck Brickley

boiling beet tops
only for the scent
Papa loved

Raymond Roseliep

headless snowman . . .
the only snow left
in the schoolyard

Randy Brooks

dead cat . . .
open-mouthed
to the pouring rain

Michael McClintock

school's out . . .
a boy follows his dog
into the woods

Randy Brooks

on hands and knees
I follow a toad
down the parsley row

Jeff Ingram

calling for the dog
at 2am
wind chimes

Aubrie Cox

three ducks
waddle across the playground
just before recess

Joseph Pegura