

**Dr. Randy Brooks' Haiku Strategy
Tactics Beyond Letters**

by
Asa Pilger

November 11, 2025

When I first heard of haiku, I stuck fast to the 5-7-5 rule of five words in the first and last lines and seven in the second line. I viewed haiku more as a challenge to try and fit one's meaning into such stringent rules rather than how it is supposed to be viewed: an artistic form of poetry meant to be kept as short as possible. Dr. Randy Brooks is a published haiku author who strongly believes that haiku should not be confined to such a strict rule and has been writing haiku following this ideology since 1976.

I have especially come to appreciate Dr. Brooks' haiku that make use of diction that one would not normally think of in order to help the reader interpret the haiku in the way that he wishes. Run-of-the-mill haiku usually consist of only lowercase letters and spaces, but Dr. Brooks' haiku frequently use syntax and spacing we would not think of to make them far more powerful and personal than they otherwise would be. The following examples are what I think to be some of the best uses of these grammatical oddities, and I hope more haiku authors will be brave enough to experiment with examples like these and even come up with new ways to portray their art.

dirt farmer's wife
at the screen door:
no tractor sound

Brooks, *Water Between Mountain Stones*, 2

Starting off simply, this haiku contains two non-letter characters: the apostrophe signaling the possession the farmer has over his wife, and the colon at the end of the second line. The apostrophe is actually not a surprise, as signaling possession, even in minimalistic poetry, is extremely important grammatically. A bit more shocking, though, is the colon. This colon is the first example of a character that forces the reader to pause. Colons often signal either an incoming list or, as it does in this haiku, a sort of announcement. The colon is a proclamation that we are at the screen door, in the shoes of the farmer's wife.

Although it is a single character, the colon manages to pull off two different reading feats in a singular use: the pause and subsequent announcement, which makes the third line all the more impactful. It is strange that there is no tractor sound. If it was not, there would be no need for a colon. The colon allows us into the wife's world as she makes the observation that something is missing, and that invitation gets our imagination running. Is the farmer taking a day off? Is he deceased? Technical difficulties? Without the colon telling us that the lack of sound is abnormal, we would be far less likely to come up with as many interpretations as we can otherwise.

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

Brooks, *School's Out*, 17

A brand new form of punctuation, this time in the form of an em dash. Upon first inspection, the em dash seems somewhat similar to the colon. It causes a pause, but does not have the same announcement effect, so what makes it so special? When I read an em dash like in this haiku, I view it as a passage of time. Whereas the colon makes the reader pause, the em dash makes the entire haiku pause, then skip to a new part of the story, as seen in this haiku. It would be a bit strange to imagine the boy immediately running into the woods with his dog just after school, perhaps even the beginning of the plot of a horror movie. The em dash, though, signifies a significant gap in time between school letting out and the boy following his dog. The em dash lets the reader think about what is going on and fill in the story for themselves. It allows the haiku to become a creative experience for the reader rather than just the author. Perhaps the boy is in trouble and wants to get away. Maybe the dog ran off and the boy is trying to catch it. The em dash is similar to the colon in that it allows more for the reader to think for themselves, but unlike the colon, forces a longer pause and, in turn, the passage of time

after all these years
she asks about her mother . . .
I put on another log

Brooks, *Water Between Mountain Stones*, 6

Quite similar at first to the em dash is the legendary ellipse: the hallmark of often-misused punctuation. The primary purpose of the ellipse in traditional writing is to signify a sort of trailing off, whether it be in dialogue or the narrator's thoughts. It indicates that one is lost in thought, not quite sure how to proceed, and that is exactly what Dr. Brooks is trying to achieve in this haiku. The presumable caretaker of a child is being interrogated by said child to learn more about their original mother. Of course, this would be a monumental moment in the child's life, and so the caretaker is unsure how to proceed.

Whereas the em dash allows readers to fill in blanks in the story for themselves, the ellipse simply marks a blank. Rather than making the reader be creative, it offers a pause for the reader to think about the situation just as the haiku author would. How would one proceed after that question? How would you proceed? Those three simple dots tell so much about uncertainty that a simple word could not.

last day of school . . .
the crack of a baseball bat
outside the open window

Brooks, *School's Out*, 29

Another excellent example of an ellipse being used in a haiku, which I interpret as one wondering what to do after school. Beyond the ellipse, though, Brooks also opted for a much more obvious change with this haiku: the indentations of the lines. Whether it be in formal or creative writing, seeing inconsistent forms of indentation is quite a rarity, but when given so few words to work with as we are in haiku, we have to use every tool available to make it as powerful as possible.

Firstly, the indentations make the reader read the haiku a bit more slowly, to ensure that they are taking everything in. More importantly, though, is the imagery that indentations can inspire. Although difficult to pull off generally, Dr. Brooks masterfully used indentation in his haiku to create the image of a baseball flying upwards and away. Perhaps the ball is flying in the direction of the window, where the final day of school is still taking place for some students. It is incredible that a story can be inspired by completely invisible text characters, and yet, haiku can manage this excellently.

first
snow

no
walk
long
enough

Brooks, *School's Out*, 100

This haiku completely breaks one of the most important “rules” of haiku: we are restricted to three lines. And yet, this haiku is extremely unique, striking, and leaves a lasting impression on the reader. Why is this? Can it even be called a haiku? I believe it can be, although that does not mean that every haiku should try and use Dr. Brooks’ method as we see here. Rather than restricting the haiku to three lines, Dr. Brooks decided that he could get a lot more out of this haiku by bending the rules.

“No walk long enough” is an interesting phrase when it comes to this haiku because, obviously, the haiku is far longer (at least in how much space it takes up, not necessarily in word length) than most other haiku. This phrase and this fact together perfectly parallel each other. The author does not want the walk to end and, in a similar vein, the haiku. Additionally, Dr. Brooks chose to include a blank line in the haiku, almost as if trying to draw the walk out even further. By stalling the haiku, Dr. Brooks reminds us of a feeling we have all experienced: procrastinating something nice before we get back to normal life.

foul ball
caught by dad
daughter
tosses it back
into play

Brooks, *Walking the Fence*, 45

I will be the first to admit that this is not a haiku. Not because I dislike the story it tells—much the opposite, actually—but because the author did not intend for it to be. Rather, Dr. Brooks specified that this poem is a tanka. Tankas are defined by their five-lined structure and tendency to tell more detailed stories, and this more detailed structure is precisely what separates unique haiku from tankas. In the previous haiku, we had seven whole lines, making the overall count closer to that of a tanka, but it was still a haiku because of the amount of information it provided.

Haiku allow for, and even encourage, reader interpretation and feeling. The previous seven-liner is a haiku proper because it only gives readers six words’ worth of storytelling, then leaves the rest of it up to the reader. This tanka, though, paints a full scene for the reader. It still leaves finer details up to interpretation, but we overall get a much fuller view of what Dr. Brooks is trying to get us to see. This allowance of information is the key difference between a haiku and a tanka, regardless of line count.

lifting the frog
to her twin sister
you kiss it first

Brooks, *Water Between Mountain Stones*, 16

With only three lines to paint a full scene, dialogue is almost unheard of in haiku—there simply is not enough room to include it. Yet in this haiku, Dr. Brooks took the daring challenge to dedicate an entire line to indented dialogue. What does this dialogue provide that an extra line detailing the scene would not? That would be the motivations and personalities of the two twins. Perhaps Dr. Brooks could have included a line such as “to become royal” or “to meet her prince,” but neither of those two sound quite right. A description would be lengthy and take away from the reader’s ability to interpret the haiku.

That is why, I believe, Dr. Brooks chose to include dialogue in this haiku. We automatically recall the age-old tale of kissing a frog and the frog turning into a prince, and we know why the two girls would try it: what little girl does not want to be a princess? In addition, we see some of the personality of each of the twins. They are both apprehensive and beginning to regret their decision to find a kiss-worthy frog. A descriptive line would either clarify the scene or give the twins personality, not both. When needed, dialogue can fill in details a haiku needs without making everything completely obvious.

the way she cares
for every plant
water me!

Brooks, *Water Between Mountain Stones*, 35

This haiku is incredibly ordinary all the way up to the very last character: the exclamation point. Perhaps the third most common form of punctuation just behind the question mark and period, it seems completely out of place in the otherwise calm world of haiku. Haiku rarely even include capital letters, so an exclamation point is especially odd. The exclamation point, though, plays an extremely important role in the overall reading of the haiku. This is a demand, a pleading request from the writer, with so much desperation that it leaks into the haiku.

The exclamation point prevents the haiku from being what Dr. Brooks so elegantly describes in his preface for *Walking the Fence: a “word puzzle”* (7). Without the exclamation point, the meaning of the line “water me” would be vague. Is it a plant wanting to be watered? A person? Why would a person want to be watered? The exclamation point, though, puts emotion into the haiku that only a human could have. Once we know that the third line is being thought, said, or written by a human, we can apply more human characteristics, like potential metaphors. Watering means giving attention to the plant, and so, the writer of this haiku wants attention from the waterer. All of this would be far more difficult to deduce without that one, singular exclamation point.

Dad’s tackle box
needle nose pliers above
all else

Brooks, *Water Between Mountain Stones*, 65

I contemplated finishing this essay after the previous haiku, but there was one more thing Dr. Brooks has done in several of his haiku that I felt I needed to comment on, and that was the use of capital letters. Again, capital letters rarely find themselves a spot in haiku, but in this simple fishing haiku, a capital D was used. Because capitals are so rare in haiku, any time we do see them brings much emphasis to the word it is attached to. Capitalized words are meant to have all the attention on them; they are one of, if not the, most important word of the haiku.

Personally, it is clear to me to see why Dad is capitalized. It is important to the writer, and it is relatable for nearly every person on the planet. Almost everyone has a fatherly figure they can relate to. We have objects we associate with our fathers like the tackle box (mine would be a well-loved coffee mug far larger than what can possibly be healthy). While this haiku does create a nice scene for the reader, it also encourages us to insert our own father into the haiku. The capital letter, in this case and in most other cases, draws our eyes to the word, and forms the entire haiku around that word.

Works cited:

Brooks, Randy. *School's Out: Selected Haiku*. Foster City, CA: Press Here, 1999.

Brooks, Randy. *Walking the Fence: The Selected Tanka of Randy Brooks*. Taylorville, IL: Brooks Books, 2019.

Brooks, Shirley and Randy Brooks, Editors. *Water Between Mountain Stones*. Two Autumns Press, Santa Rosa, CA: Haiku Poets of Northern California, 2025.