

# Punctuation in Haiku

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# Workshop Purpose

- Show how contemporary English-language haiku poets use punctuation.
- Help you decide whether to use punctuation in your haiku, and when to do so.
- Help you feel confident using punctuation in haiku if you want to add it to your toolbox.

# Note

Because I find data fascinating, I have created some charts showing general trends on the use of punctuation in English-language haiku. I collected an assortment of 100 haiku published in print and online from 2015-2021. This is *not* a statistically significant sample size, but does reflect what I generally see in my reading of contemporary haiku.

# Punctuation for the Haiku Toolbox



# Debating Punctuation

- Some haiku practitioners believe that punctuation has no place in haiku.
- In my own haiku journey, I refused to use punctuation for about three years after a trusted editor/friend told me that I should not use it.
- Their reasoning was that if the words were well-chosen and the images in the right order, punctuation was not necessary. In fact, punctuation would ostensibly make things too easy on the reader.
- However, my reading of contemporary print and online haiku publications shows me that a number of English-language haiku poets find value in punctuating their work.

# Historical Precedent

- Many early English-language translators used standard English-language prose punctuation in their renditions of classical haiku.
- Early English-language haiku poets such as Richard Wright also used standard English punctuation in their haiku.
  - See S4E24, “Haiku across the ponds,” for Stanford M. Forrester’s thoughts
- In my own writing, I see standard English punctuation in haiku translations well into the 1990s—even from well-respected translators fluent in Japanese.

**Note: if you prefer to use standard punctuation in your haiku, enjoy! The following thoughts are not designed to shame anyone. They are reflections of my personal haiku practice.**

# Thoughts on Punctuation in Haiku

- I believe that the historical use of punctuation in haiku translations is one of the reasons contemporary use has a bad reputation.
- The more I read, the more I feel that punctuating a haiku the way one might punctuate a standard English sentence has a tendency to overwhelm the poem.
- While punctuation doesn't **inherently** make things too easy for the reader, or overwhelm the text, the punctuation structures of the English language often seem intrusive in contrast to the brevity of the poem.



# Thoughts on Punctuation in Haiku

- Given the landscape of contemporary haiku, some poets find that standard English punctuation looks outdated.
- In looking at the same haiku through multiple translations, we can see a general tendency to reduce or eliminate standard English punctuation over the course of 50 years.
- Our reading habits, teachers, individual preferences, and the time and place in which we live all contribute to our poetic tendencies, including our likes and dislikes.
- Those of us who have come of age as writers in the last 20-30 years have written in an era where punctuation in haiku was minimal or nonexistent.
- As a result, for certain generations of readers/writers, heavy use of punctuation doesn't necessarily feel natural to the form.

**Note: Dates on the following translations are approximations and may be off by a year or two. Not all of my anthologies had reliable initial publication dates, so I have done my best.**

**The old pond;  
A frog jumps in—  
The sound of water.**

R.H. Blythe, 1952

**The old pond  
A frog jumped in,  
Kerplunk!**

Allen Ginsberg, 1978

**old pond . . .  
a frog leaps in  
water's sound**

William J. Higginson, 1985

**At the ancient pond  
a frog plunges into  
the sound of water**

Sam Hamill, 1995

**old pond  
a frog jumps into  
the sound of water**

*Jane Reichhold, 2002*

One translation five ways

# Value of Punctuation in Haiku

- Deliberate, thoughtful use of punctuation can augment the sense of contrast or tension between images.
- Punctuation is useful for guiding the reader to slow down or stop on the page. It can stand as a substitute for what would be conveyed by pauses or breath when reading out loud.
- Contemporary translators of Japanese haiku often use punctuation to stand in for the kireji (cutting word), a type of sound symbol that doesn't have an easy analog in English.

# Types of Punctuation



# Pauses

Commas, semicolons, colons, and  
em-dashes

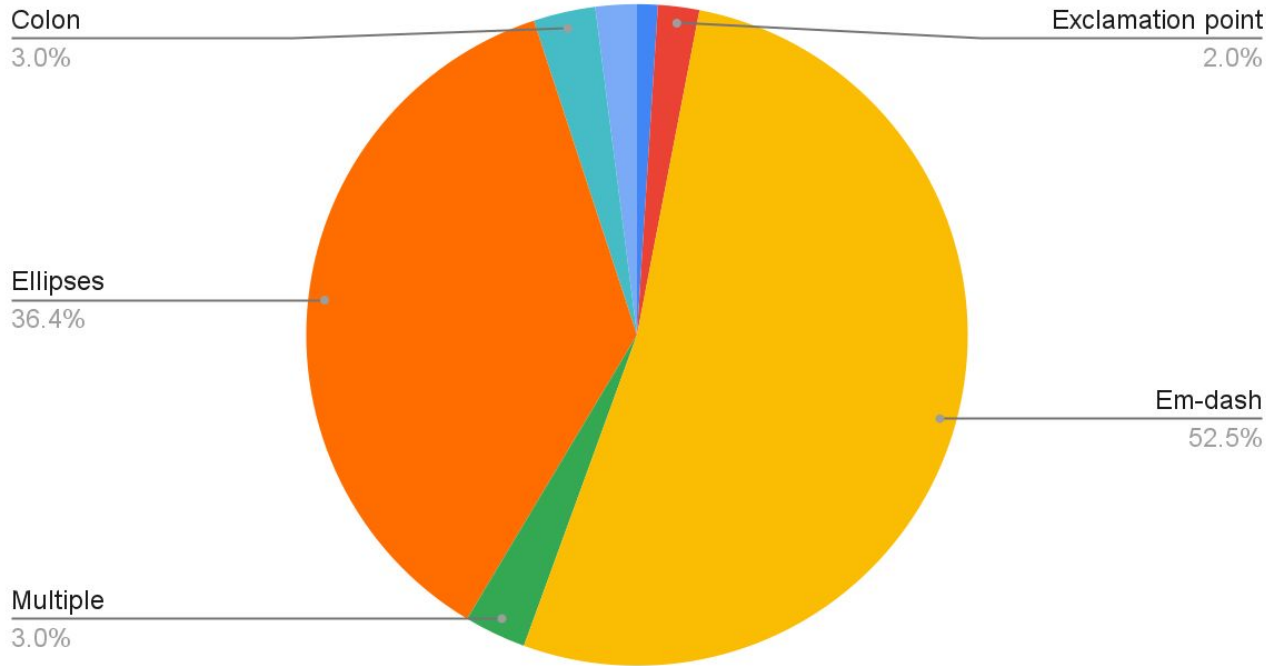
- Different punctuation marks tend to cause different lengths of a pause
  - Commas create the shortest pauses; em-dashes create the longest
  - Contemporary English haiku seems to favor pauses over hard stops.
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# Stops

Periods, exclamation points, and question marks

- Periods and exclamation points directly disrupt the flow of the poem.
  - The line breaks in haiku are a form of stop as well; adding a period or exclamation point heightens the impact.
  - A question mark serves as an end-stop but also creates a sense of continued openness.
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## Punctuation in Contemporary Haiku



### Note:

The **light blue** slide indicates **commas**, with a total of **2%**.

The **medium blue** slide indicates **question marks**, with a total of **1%**.

Figure 1: Punctuation tendencies in contemporary English haiku



# Example Haiku

before  
they were my daughters ...  
wildflowers

—Meredith Ackroyd, *Frogpond 44.3*

- The ellipses at the end of the second line creates a pause that heightens the surprise of the final image.
- The pause extends and softens the line break; the reader doesn't stop hard, but also cannot rush onto the next line.
- The ellipses creates a sense of length in the second line without adding extra syllables. In this way, punctuation can be a useful tool for those who like to write minimalist haiku.

# Example Haiku

**my hand takes them  
down the sledding hill,  
the legendary one**

—Randy Brooks, *The Ohio Haiku Anthology*

- The slight pause gives the reader an extra beat to pause at the end of the line, making the impact of “the legendary one” more dramatic.
- My interpretation of the comma is that while it heightens the drama, it also creates a sense of intimacy.
- The pause seems conversational; I think it cultivates a sense of being in the know.
- In my reading of this haiku, the pause doesn’t need to be dramatic, because the presumed listener knows what the speaker is talking about.

# Example Haiku

river delta—  
my foster mom's fingers  
entwined with mine

—Hifsa Asraf, *Kingfisher 3*

- The em-dash creates a long pause after the first line, leaving the reader anticipating what is to come.
- The connections and branchings of a river delta (see photo on next slide) provide an image that heightens the image of foster mom and child holding hands.
- A river delta can also evoke the image of veins on the back of a hand.
- The river delta is a less common association for family than a tree. and the fact that it is a fresh image makes the haiku compelling.
- The pause heightens the juxtaposition of the enjoined river and the enjoined hands.



Braided River Delta, Kachemack Bay, Alaska, USA.  
Credit: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

# Example Haiku

**Be there then!  
Click here now!**

**—Warren Decker,  
personal correspondence**

- The exclamation points create hard stops at the end of each line in this two-line senryu..
- In this piece, Warren Decker has created a senryu that illustrates the intensity of contemporary life, specifically with regard to rushing through the day and having a shortened attention span.
- The punctuation choice reinforces the sense of urgency, as well as the sense of satire that Decker brings to the poem.
- I find that exclamation points often add humor to a haiku.

# Example Haiku

**an empty homestead  
how many pathways were there  
under all these weeds?**

**—ayaz daryl nielsen, *cattails* April 2020**

- Question marks have the special quality of resolving a grammatical statement while also allowing for a sense of openness.
- When I read this poem, I envision the vast expanse of a farmhouse surrounded by miles of agricultural fields, and the question mark accentuates that feeling of space.
- A question mark has a specific job: to create a sense of wonder.
- When combined with well-honed lines and word choices, the punctuation brings the reader into the space of questioning, confusion, or contemplation.

# Placement of Punctuation



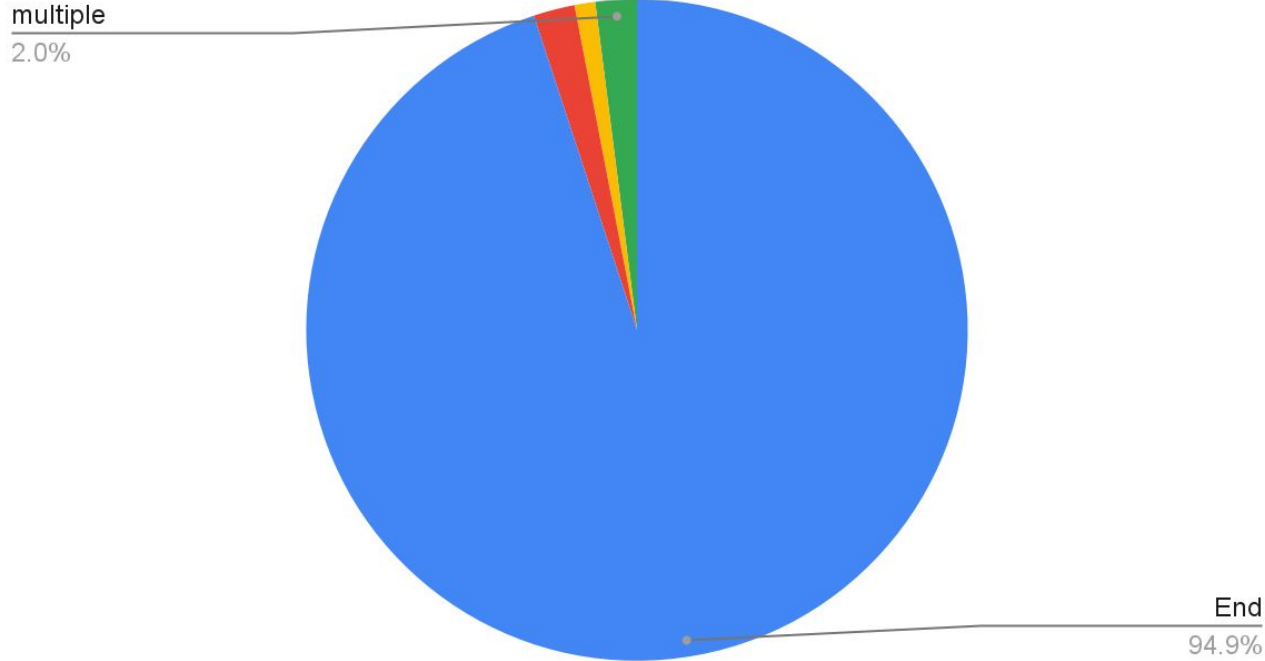
# Within Lines

Beginning, Middle, End

- Punctuation at the end or beginning of the line slows the transition between images.
  - Punctuation in the middle of the line is rare; I didn't actually find any in my survey, though I know it exists.
  - Contemporary haiku poets tend to favor punctuation at the end of the line.
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## Location Within Lines



### Note:

The **red slice** indicates punctuation at the **beginning** of a line, with a total of **2%**.

The **yellow slice** indicates punctuation in the **middle** of a line, with a total of **1%**.

Figure 3: Punctuation placement within lines

# Specific Lines

Location, Location, Location!

- Punctuation in the first or second line can heighten the sense of juxtaposition between two images.
  - Punctuation in the third line can create a sense of closure (in the case of a stop), or tension/mystery (pause)
  - In my reading experience, I see a trend toward placing punctuation in the first line, with punctuation in the second line not far behind (see next slide).
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# Line Choices for Punctuation

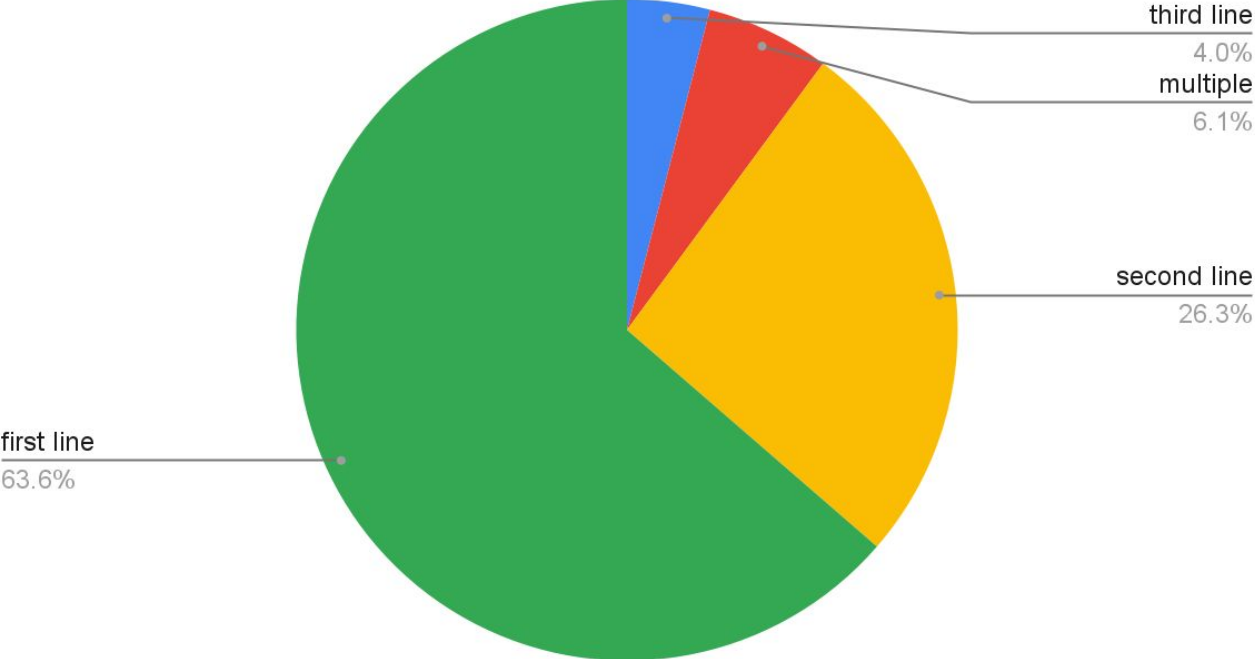


Figure 2: Punctuation line choice tendencies

# Example Haiku

**cricket weather—  
the first chirp  
of the smoke alarm**

**—Angela Terry, *Kingfisher 3***

- The em-dash at the end of the first line makes us pause before we move into the second image.
- The pause invites us to slow down and think about what “cricket weather” might entail (usually late summer/early fall).
- The pause makes the second image all the more compelling and humorous.
- From a grammatical standpoint, putting the em-dash in line 2 would not have worked as well.

# Example Haiku

**six crows—  
at the bus stop  
—south bound**

**—Linda L. Ludwig, *Poetry Pea Journal*,  
Autumn 2021**

- The pause at the end of the first and beginning of the third lines creates a sense of mirroring.
- The double pause reinforces the two images: that of a south-bound bus stop, and that of birds preparing to fly south for the winter.
- By pausing twice, the reader is invited to sink into this haiku moment: the birds, and an autumn urban landscape.
- The bus stop serves as a linchpin around which the first and third lines revolve.

# Example Haiku

**just when I thought  
the day was grey—a blue jay  
swoops over the lilac**

**—Doris Lynch, *Poetry Pea Journal*,  
Autumn 2021**

- The em-dash in the second line makes the whole line feel complete, even with the enjambment between the second and third lines.
- Sometimes, the use of enjambment in haiku can create an unhelpful sense of fragmentation.
- With the em-dash here, we get the sudden appearance of the blue jay in the line itself. The line feels resolved even though the thought isn't completed until the third line.
- This is an example of a haiku in which punctuation enhances other literary devices.

# Example Haiku

**two brothers tear the sky  
from the lake  
... fly fishing**

—Ava C. Cipri, *Frogpond* 39.2

- In this haiku, Ava C. Cipri puts the pause, in the form of ellipses, at the beginning of the third line.
- The punctuation location itself is a surprise; haiku practitioners tend to place punctuation at the end of the line.
- Rather than pausing at the end of the line, we have the jump between lines first, then a pause.
- The image “tear the sky / from the lake” is not an obvious one, and the ellipses allows the reader to savor the anticipation before getting the explanation.

# Example Haiku

**slowing my heartbeat  
to the river's speed:  
a patch of comfrey**

—Matthew Paul, *Kingfisher 3*

- In prose, a colon is used to draw a reader's attention to the information that follows.
- In this haiku, the colon clearly draws our attention to the comfrey in the third line; we cannot avoid it.
- While one might feel that the colon is heavy-handed, in my opinion, the use of punctuation emphasizes how much of an effect the comfrey had when Matthew Paul saw it.
- I feel that the colon is emphasizing what a calming sight the comfrey is.





Common Comfrey. Credit: Lairich Rig, 2018.

**after a nightmare—  
hearing white-winged doves  
foreshadow sunrise**

**(Original, Em-dash)**

**after a nightmare;  
hearing white-winged doves  
foreshadow sunrise**

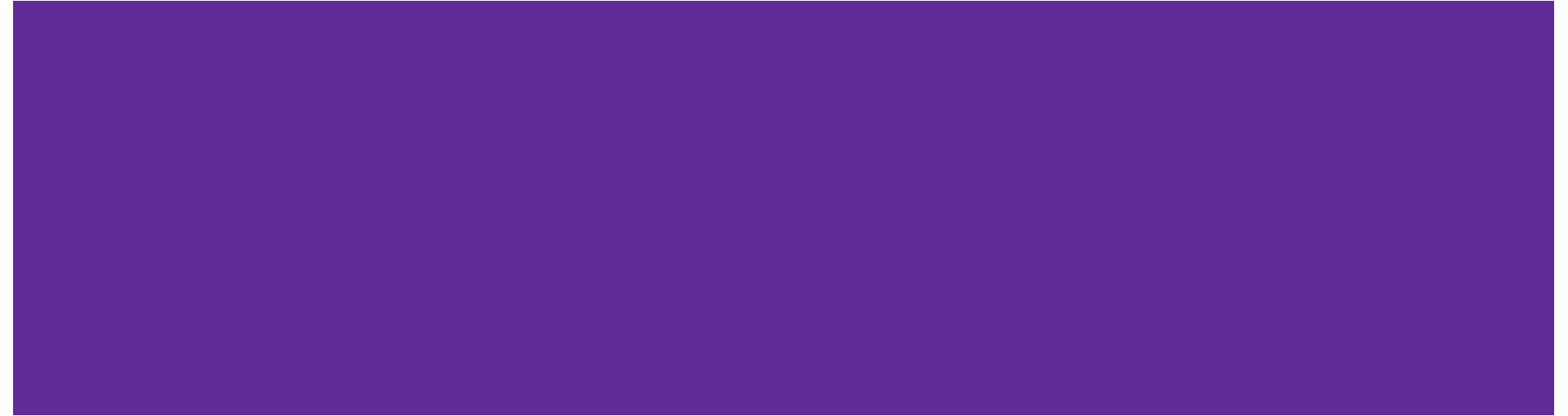
**(Variation 1, Semicolon)**

**after a nightmare,  
hearing white-winged doves  
foreshadow sunrise**

**(Variation 2, Comma)**

One haiku three ways

# Strategies for Practice



# Break the Rules

Strategy #1

**If you have been told that you shouldn't use a specific type of punctuation mark, give yourself permission to break the rules.**

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# Experiment with Location

Strategy #2

**Write different versions of the same haiku, observing what happens when you use punctuation in different places.**

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# Experiment with Marks

Strategy #3

Write different versions of the same haiku, keeping your punctuation in the same place, and observing what happens when you try different punctuation marks.

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The goal of these exercises is not necessarily to write the best haiku of your life, but to deliberately experiment with punctuation in haiku and observe the results.