IN THE MOMENT:
zen and the art of logical haiku
Mike Round*

The Japanese poetry of Haiku is often introduced to young children as a means of experiencing nature and describing this experience via a structured 3-line description, the three lines consisting of 5, 7, and 5 syllables.

I have tried this many times and, despite the ease at which the process sounds, I’ve never liked any of my work. In addition to sounding extremely artificial, I fight very hard to describe things in the manner noted above.

Do only “creative” people have the ability to write this type of poetry? Does a requirement of “creativity” exclude those of us desiring more explicit algorithms to achieve results? Is there a dilemma between structure and freedom? Can we learn creativity? Let’s see.

Part of my problem, I believe, stems from trying to write poetically about something – from the start. In fact, I do this when I read poetry. Since I usually have no idea what the poet is talking about, it doesn’t help to read on, because the poem becomes mere words – no meaning. I have neither map nor territory! How can I get “the lay of the land?”

To maintain the spirit of Haiku, let’s start with something we experience – any experience – and see where we can get to.

I see a rainbow. I see a cloud. I see a line of smoke trailing an airplane. I see something that interests me. I like that start, but is it enough? Why have I chosen this experience? What is it about this that interests me? Let’s remember the goal: establish meaning. How can I explain these experiences? Let’s start with the rainbow. Why is there a rainbow? Let’s posit a cause: sunlight hits water droplets.

* Mike Round is the founder of the Center for autoSocratic Excellence. He holds BS and MS degrees in mathematics, but takes joy in learning about everything in the world. Mike is the former USA Director of the Theory of Constraints for Education, and has a background in Montessori education.
Is this reasonable logic? Does it explain what I’m seeing?

Let’s see: IF: sunlight hits water droplets, THEN: I see a rainbow in the sky. Does this make sense? I don’t think so. There are many times when I see the sun and the rain, yet I don’t see a rainbow. Also, what has light hitting rain have to do with a rainbow? I can think of a number of problems with this logic.

The missing link, here, deals with the dispersion of light when light hits water. How does this work? I’m not sure.

Is it OK to leave it at this level – for now? Let’s see where we’re at: if sunlight hits water droplets, and if water droplets disperse the light into spectrum colors, then I see a rainbow. This makes sense to me.

But can I add to this – as there now are many facts on the table? Let’s visually organize our understanding thus far.

Of course, there are still a lot of unanswered questions, but nonetheless, I think this is a reasonable starting point.

*Introducing Causal Logical Structure to the Haiku*

But what has this to do with Haiku? Here’s where the union of structure and freedom comes into play. With reasonable statements in place, I can now look to summarize each statement in terms of the 5 / 7 / 5 syllable structure of the traditional Haiku:

For example:
I need a 5-syllable statement to reflect: “sunlight hits water droplets”: Here’s one: *Union: sun and rain.*

I need a 7-syllable statement to reflect: “The water droplets disperse the light into spectrum colors”: Here’s one: *Droplets disbursing colors.*

I need a 5-syllable statement to reflect: “I see a rainbow in the sky”: Here’s one: *Wonderful rainbow!*

Let’s pause for a moment: where did these “haiku-equivalent” statements come from? With my mind now focused like a laser beam on a specific topic (sunlight hits water droplets) and a specific goal (5 syllables), they came from me – *naturally*!

But why stop here: before, I visually arranged my statements to better organize my thoughts and understanding. Now, I’ve got three more statements hanging out there. Why not integrate all of these elements? The result (with my own “causal logic” haiku title added):

![Tree diagram of statements](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Colorful Sky**

*Union: sun and rain.*

*Droplets disbursing colors.*

*Wonderful rainbow!*

This, I’m certain, is the most beautiful haiku poem I’ve ever written! Let’s try another: on my counter is a lit candle in a jar. I place the lid on the jar and the candle goes out. How can I explain this, and translate this into a Haiku?
Logical Haiku:
A Description of the Process

So what have I found? Let’s start with where Haiku is typically taught: English. Above, it’s been brought out into the open, where all the understanding of reality is taking place! Science, current events, math, etc. We talk of making education relevant. Haven’t we addressed that problem above? How does this apply to the real world? We’ve started with the real world! Where, precisely, do we start, given reality is infinite and so are our experiences? We can start with something that interests us, and explain it causally. If you’re like me, you’ll find this is not so easy. Happily, however, this hard work pays off. The structure above I call the “context syllogism”, and it forms the foundation for developing the 5/7/5 Haiku.

With structure in place, I found a wonderful starting point with boundaries that help shape my accompanying Haiku statements. The search for relevant synonyms, varying methods of describing reality, phrases I never would have come up with out of the blue, now are so plentiful the variety is amazing! Have I described my reality? You bet. Have I improved my English? Immensely!

Structure VERSUS Freedom? I think not! Right-brained versus left-brained? Let’s abandon this artificial classification immediately!

A closing thought or two: is this Haiku? Haiku is traditionally thought of as directly experiencing nature. Isn’t that what I’ve done above? I think so. And if it’s not technically Haiku, it seems to me to be in the spirit of Haiku. However, for those bent on challenging the nomenclature and therefore the process, let’s simply
address this objection by not thinking of this as “Haiku,” but perhaps causal poetry, or applied English.

Secondly, in the above examples the logic can certainly be tightened. In fact, in any logical structure, the firmness of the logical connections can be improved. Improve as you wish. In fact, extend the Haiku into further Haiku and create a sequence of 5/7/5 explanations.

“Art OR Science” vs. “Art AND Science”

An objection may come to mind: by analyzing nature and reality in this method, do we not take away from the wonder of the moment? Can’t we marvel at the beauty of the rainbow without breaking it down by scientific analysis?

Richard Feynman, the great physicist, addressed this point wonderfully in “The Pleasure of Finding Things Out”:

I have a friend who’s an artist and he’s sometimes taken a view which I don’t agree very well. He’ll hold up a flower and say, “Look how beautiful it is,” and I’ll agree, I think. And he says - “you see, I as an artist can see how beautiful this is, but you as a scientist, oh, take this all apart and it becomes a dull thing.” And I think that he’s kind of nutty. First of all, the beauty that he sees is available to other people and to me too ...

At the same time, I see much more about the flower than he sees. I could imagine the cells in there, the complicated actions inside which also have a beauty. I mean it’s not just beauty at this dimension of one centimeter; there is also a beauty at smaller dimensions, the inner structures. Also the processes, the fact that the colors in the flower evolved in order to attract insects to pollinate it is interesting - it means that insects can see the color. It adds a question: Does this aesthetic sense also exist in the lower forms? Why is it aesthetic? All kinds of interesting questions which shows that the science knowledge only adds to the excitement and mystery and the awe of a flower. It only adds; I don’t understand how it subtracts.

So, now where am I? I started out by looking at something. Trying to describe this experience via the Haiku form, I couldn’t do it – I couldn’t “see” enough to write. To address this problem, I applied a logical structure, allowing me to focus
not on writing a poem, but instead on writing specific observations and related inferences.

In the process of doing this, I came to realize what I thought I knew I really did not. What I thought I was seeing was actually very difficult to describe!

A whole new arena of thought cascaded about me! A flower was suddenly an amazing element of nature. So was the wind, the solar system, a burning candle. Everything came to life! My understanding went deep! When I look at these objects now, I have an unbelievably beautiful picture in my mind of what I am seeing.

And herein lies a very interesting part of the story – perhaps it is the story.

Previously, I would look at a butterfly, and thought I was looking at a butterfly.

Upon close examination via logical structures, I realized there was so much more to the butterfly than I was seeing, and a rigorous but joyful process of investigation led me to an unbelievably deep understanding of the butterfly.

It’s tempting to think the scientific mind has taken over – that I would suddenly start looking at the structure of things with the analytical mind – that this approach may take away from “the beauty of everyday things.”

Interestingly – perhaps amazingly – with this continued analysis, my experience of the butterfly returns to “it’s just a butterfly,” though I am not seeing “the same butterfly.”

And with this, I’m reminded of a quote from the great martial artist Bruce Lee:

*Before I studied the art, a punch to me was just a punch, a kick was just a kick. After I’d studied the art, a punch was no longer a punch, a kick was no longer a kick. Now that I understand the art, a punch is just a punch, a kick is just a kick.*

But the above, I believe, describes a Zen state! Is that what’s going on here?

**Integrating Dynamic and Static Qualities:**

“The Butterfly is the Butterfly”

There seems a missing element here. In attempting to integrate the Haiku philosophy of “starting with nature,” I started with an experience. But why did I choose “the butterfly,” “the candle,” “the cloudless sky,” etc.? There are billions of experiences to choose from, and given all these possibilities, why did these “seem neat to me”? Let’s call this “dynamic quality” – a pre-intellectual experience saying, “Look at me.”

OK – I’ve looked. Now, I want to understand it, not merely from a surface
perspective, but deeply. I don’t want to simply remember names and dates – fleeting facts elusive to recall – but meaningful aspects of the experience – things providing static quality.

And once I have this static quality in place, I’ve now got more ammunition to go back and understand the experience!

With this structure, I can capture my butterfly experiences many ways. Here’s one:

**AIRBORNE ALGORITHM**

lepidoptera
encapsulated beauty
patterned awe in flight

But here seem two avenues to experience and understand reality: on the one hand, there is the Zen exhortation to “see the butterfly,” on the other hand, there is a description whereby “seeing” generates logical explanation, the logical explanation of which has me “seeing better.” Are these two separate avenues leading to the same place, or are they the same path? To heighten the experience by way of logical understanding? Isn’t that what’s been done with these simple causal haiku?
I realize “causal Haiku” wasn’t the goal in all of this – it was a means to an end: joy in understanding reality … not simply uniting the map with the territory, but allowing me to see beyond the territory!

For more examples on “Zen and the Art of Logical Haiku,” visit “research” on www.rationalsys.com.

Additionally, contribute to the “Logicionary” of Logical Haiku examples.