

Grade 7 Reading Achievement Test - March 2006
Annotated Item 40

Standard and Benchmark Assessed:

Standard: Reading Applications: Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text

Benchmark: E. Explain the treatment, scope and organization of ideas from different texts to draw conclusions about a topic.

Multiple-Choice Question:

40. A magazine article about Japanese folktales and the information in this passage would be most useful for a research report on which topic?
- A. Japanese culture
 - B. Japanese politics
 - C. American-Japanese relations
 - D. American poets of the 20th century

Commentary:

This multiple-choice question asks students to explain how the text of a work of non-fiction may relate to other texts on a similar topic. Response A is correct because it identifies a topic (Japanese culture) in which the background and rules for writing haiku would apply along with information about Japanese folktales. Responses B and C are incorrect because the study of folktales and poetry are more easily linked to the study of culture than politics and relations between nations are more easily tied to economics or politics than by folktales and poetry. Response D is incorrect because the passage about how to write haiku and a magazine article about Japanese folktales are not about 20th Century American poets.

Performance Data:

The percent of public school students selecting answer choice A for question 40 on the March 2006 Grade 7 Reading Achievement Test was 68%.

Keywords: main ideas, different texts, topics, draw conclusions

Passage:

Do You Want to Write Haiku?

Myra Cohn Livingston

*If things were better
for me, flies, I'd invite you
to share my supper.*

—Basho

Some of you may recognize that this short poem, written in just seventeen syllables, is called a haiku. Haiku poetry has been written in Japan for centuries and has become popular in the United States during the past forty years. But there are specific rules for writing haiku, and many people do not know about them. Often, all they *do* know is that the poem is made up of seventeen syllables, that it is usually written in three lines, and that it does not use rhyme.

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It would be impossible to list all of the rules about writing haiku, but the most important thing to know is that the word “haiku” itself means “a beginning phrase.” The haiku was originally the beginning of a longer poem, and the first seventeen syllables were written to introduce the reader to the rest of the poem. Today haiku is considered a form in itself.

The first rule for writing haiku is that the poem must always refer to something in nature or use what is called a “season word.” Many of the haiku you read refer to the nature symbols of Japan, but unless you live in or have visited Japan, you will be better off writing about things you know. For instance, if you read about a cherry blossom in a Japanese haiku, it means spring. If you live in the United States, you might want to write about snowdrops, crocuses, or daffodils instead. You do not have to use the terms “spring,” “summer,” “autumn,” or “winter” to identify the season when you write a haiku—if you use the word “snow,” for example, it becomes a season word for “winter.”

Another rule is that the haiku must be about *one* thing only. A haiku is not a poem that describes several different subjects or events. A good writer of haiku observes one thing carefully and writes about only that.

The third rule is that a haiku must be written as though you are just seeing or experiencing what you write about. It should happen *now*, not yesterday or the day before or last year. Therefore, haiku is usually written in the present tense.

The next rule is that a good haiku must present a clear picture of something you want to think about further. It paints a picture in words that stirs your imagination and makes you eager to find out more.

Look back at the haiku by Basho, translated into English by Harry Behn, at the beginning of this article. See how it follows the rules:

First, it is written in seventeen syllables and without rhyme. Next, nature and a season are both indicated in the word “flies.” Flies are certainly a part of nature, and they are also a season word for summertime. This haiku is about just one thing—someone talking to flies—and even though it was written many years ago, it sounds as though the conversation were happening this very minute.

Finally, think about the picture this haiku suggests. Is it of a king sitting at a banquet table brushing away the flies? What sort of person is speaking? The words “If things were better for me” give you a clue. The man or woman speaking would like to share some food with the flies, but apparently things are so bad that he or she can’t even spare a few crumbs. The picture, then, is of someone who must be very poor. Each of us will see something different in these words and will probably want to know more: who is this person, what made him or her poor, and how does he or she speak to the flies—in a complaining or sad or humorous voice? This haiku arouses our imaginations and gets us thinking more about the picture Basho has painted in words.