
ESSAYS

Prepositions in Haiku

Brad Bennett

Historically, the haiku has been called the poem of the noun, and rightly so. Nouns create the foundation for the haiku moment: the who, what, when, and where. Adjectives are integral in the depiction of the haiku moment. Verbs are also important in haiku that involve action and motion. Other parts of speech are perhaps less vital to haiku, yet the form's concision demands that we choose every word carefully. But who gives prepositions much thought while they're writing haiku? We often include them, but rarely consider their contributions carefully. Prepositions are usually short words (e.g. "in" and "on"), so they're easy to ignore. In our haste to pare down a haiku to its essentials, we may even toss one out that we deem unnecessary. That discarded preposition, however, could be more significant than it looks at first glance. I would argue that prepositions in haiku are more common, and perhaps more essential and more robust, than people might realize. Look at the following haiku consisting of thirteen words, four of which are prepositions.¹

on the first day **of** spring
snow falling
from one bough **to** another
*Virginia Brady Young*²

Young utilizes four different prepositions: "on," "of," "from," and "to." By using multiple prepositions, Young has effectively created movement in her haiku that also enacts its content. As the poem bounces from one preposition to the next, the reader can imagine a clump of snow bouncing from one tree branch to another.

As we know, juxtaposition is an essential element in the construction of a haiku. And juxtaposition is a relationship of sorts; the writer presents two things together and the reader is invited to ponder their connections and interactions. Therefore, haiku deal with relationships, and that's what prepositions are all about. As the word itself suggests, a preposition comes before a noun. It shows the noun's positional relationship in a particular setting (location, time, direction, and space). Prepositions are thus indicators of the kind of relationship that each particular juxtaposition entails. Since haiku are constructed with this essential relationship in mind, one could argue that prepositions are perhaps the most inherently haiku-ish part of speech in the English language.

How common are prepositions in contemporary English-language haiku? In order to get a sense of the quantity and diversity of prepositions used by current haikuists, I assayed issue 53.2 (Summer 2022) of *Modern Haiku*. Out of the 280 total poems in the "Haiku and Senryu" sections in the issue, 207 (~74%) included prepositions. Thus, a large majority of the haiku included at least one preposition. Of those poems using prepositions, sixty (~29%) included more than one. Determining instances of prepositions can be a bit difficult, since some prepositions can also act as adverbs and other parts of speech. While counting prepositions, I did not include uses of "to" as part of verb infinitives, but I did include prepositions that were part of predicates (e.g. "toss out") because they imply a positional relationship and are usually followed by nouns.

The three most common prepositions used in the issue were "of" (found in ~34% of the total of haiku containing prepositions), "in" (~21%), and "on" (~17%). It makes sense that these three were used more frequently. We also use other prepositions like "at," "by," "from," "to," and "with." Note that these prepositions are more passive and can easily be overlooked when revising a haiku. In addition, often there are no other prepositions that work with a particular phrase or fragment. Other prepositions found in the issue's haiku were more active, implying some kind of motion, or they pointed to a more specific relationship. Words like "across," "between," "through," and "toward" give the reader more active or definitive information about the primary relationship in the poem.

English-language prepositions can be tricky to use in haiku. They are highly idiomatic, in that there are specific ways we use specific words, some of which are nationally-, culturally-, or regionally-dictated. Prepositions are also nuanced—different prepositions give you slightly different meanings and interpretations. Consider, for instance, the varied meanings of these prepositional phrases: “in the forest,” “beside the forest,” “beyond the forest,” “above the forest,” and “from the forest.” There are about 150 prepositions in English, so the haiku writer can explore multiple nuances in meaning as they construct their poems.

David Cobb, in his essay, “Between Moments,” posits that “Prepositions seem... to be at the heart of creativity.”³ So how can the dedicated haikuist take advantage of the creative potential of prepositions? First, and foremost, prepositions are vital to the construction of the right relationship in each haiku’s juxtaposition. Second, the poet can take optimum advantage of where they place their prepositions within their poems. Third, careful use of prepositions can aid in the composition of rhythm in a haiku. Fourth, prepositions can be recruited to create effects like motion and contrast. Fifth, judicious use of prepositions can help infuse our haiku with Japanese aesthetic concepts. Finally, experimenting with new ways to use prepositions can lead to some fresh and exciting new haiku techniques.

JUXTAPOSITION

Since the main job of prepositions is to show relationships, they are often at the heart of a haiku’s essential juxtaposition. In the following five examples, well-chosen prepositions are vital in creating effective connections and interactions between the two parts of each haiku.

a moth flies
through my breath
 in moonlight

*Bill Pauly*⁴

summer solstice
 my tilt **towards**
 the sun

*Robin White*⁵

finally
without a business suit
 summer wind
*Jacob Salzer*⁶

quiet
within the quiet
 a copse of cedars
*Hannah Mahoney*⁷

PLACEMENT

How else might we utilize the full potential of prepositions? Careful thought given to their placement within the haiku can yield some very effective results. For instance, while some haikuists might eschew starting a haiku with a preposition, I would argue that this technique can be very successful, as shown in the following two poems.

around we go
 down the lighthouse stairs ...
 summer's end
*Michael Dylan Welch*⁸

with each throw
 the boy's stone lands
 at the centre of the universe
*Paul Chambers*⁹

Do you remember those painful grammar lessons back in Junior High or Middle School? The admonition I most remember was that we must avoid ending a sentence with a preposition. While that rule has relaxed somewhat in recent decades, I still occasionally find myself cringing when I end line one or two with a preposition, thereby enjambling the phrase. Sometimes it makes sense, sometimes it doesn't. Perhaps the key is to determine whether the preposition needs to be tied to the verb at the end of a line, or should instead be linked with the noun on the next line. In the following haiku, the actions "filling in" and "topping off" seem to necessitate keeping the verb and preposition together.

slow melt
 a warbler **fills in**
 for the forsythia
*Tanya McDonald*¹⁰

coffee shop
 the waitress **topping off**
 loneliness
*June Rose Dowis*¹¹

When constructed mindfully, deliberate enjambment can be quite rewarding. Ending line two with a preposition can create some delightful disjunction between the last two lines that yields a rewarding surprise:

citizenship oath —
I stumble **on**
bearing arms

*Michael Dylan Welch*¹²

In Welch's haiku, "stumble on" initially suggests difficulty reciting certain words during the oath. But then we are surprised by a twist on the last line. In the following haiku, ending line two with a preposition works effectively because it extends the emotional longing.

Tsundoku
my deep longing **for**
a rainy day

Eva Limbach^{13, 14}

Using line two of a three-line haiku as a pivot line has been a very successful strategy in the contemporary haiku world. Prepositional phrases act very effectively as middle line pivots and help to create effective ambiguity in the poem.

morning fog
with one brush stroke
blue sky

*Debbie Olson*¹⁵

tadpoles
among the lily pads
a gutted porcupine

*Nancy Orr*¹⁶

What about ending a haiku with a preposition? Prepositions, by definition, usually occur before a noun, but as noted above, they can be attached to verbs and thus imply an object. So, one could end a haiku with a preposition like so:

porchlit night
the moths let in
want **out**

*Carolyn Hall*¹⁷

RHYTHM

Prepositions can also contribute to the rhythm of a haiku. Multiple uses of prepositions can create a riff that helps to unify a poem via sound and beat. Writers sometimes use two prepositional phrases for this reason.

blackberry briars
 the struggle **of** a rabbit
in a rusted snare
*Sean O'Connor*¹⁸

The two prepositional phrases in this haiku can sound like a rabbit thrashing back and forth in the snare. The poem would be less effective if it were written differently:

blackberry briars
 the rabbit's struggle
in a rusted snare¹⁹

In addition, the haiku writer may choose a preposition (e.g. “of”) to avoid using a possessive noun.

breathing in
 the wisdom
of wisteria
*Jill Lange*²⁰

If Lange had used “wisteria’s wisdom” instead, the poem would lose the rhythm of the last two lines. In addition, prepositions often help us avoid ending a line with a possessive noun, which could be distracting to the reader. Some haiku use three prepositional phrases that build rhythm; the first two sound a specific beat and the third alters it in some way. In the following haiku, “of the moon,” and “of the hive,” sound the same beat, which is then altered slightly in the last line, “in the honey,” thereby accentuating the word “honey.”

dark **of** the moon
 the flavor **of** the hive
in the honey

*Marjorie Buettner*²¹

Repeating the same preposition(s) in the same haiku can also add to the rhythm of the poem. Here are two haiku that demonstrate this technique:

lily:
out of the water ...
out of itself

*Nick Virgilio*²²

the morning pulse
of lobster boats
of gull wings

*Brad Bennett*²³

More active prepositions imply more intensity, so repeating them can create more depth or intensity in the poem. The next poem creates a sort of Mobius strip effect, and the one after batters the reader with its intensity, like a gust of winter wind.

she slips **into**
 the ocean the ocean
 slips **into**

*Peter Yovu*²⁴

winter wind
against my window
against my will

*Joseph Robello*²⁵

ACTION AND MOTION

We have seen that prepositions can add to the rhythm and sound of a haiku. The skillful use of prepositions can also create other effects, like motion and action. Words like “along,” “away,” “through,” “to,” and “towards” can show positional and temporal motion and action.

foxglove
 a bumblebee bounces **off**
 a bumblebee backing **out**

*Chuck Brickley*²⁶

Prepositions can also create movement and action in verb-less haiku. The word “from,” for instance, implies something began at a particular place or time, and/or is now to be found in a new place or time. That indicates movement or action, entirely created without a verb.

from mud
to sky
the heron’s feet

*Paul O. Williams*²⁷

spring dawn
from every tree
another story

*Olivier Schopfer*²⁸

CONTRAST AND OPPOSITION

Prepositions often come in pairs like “up” and “down” or “in” and “out.” Using one of these pairs obviously creates contrast or opposition in a haiku.

autumn afternoon
up a ladder, **down** a ladder
move a ladder

*Alan S. Bridges*²⁹

train whistle —
the darkness **before**
and **after**

*Angela Terry*³⁰

JAPANESE AESTHETICS

Because prepositions are more relational and often more nuanced than other parts of speech, they can help to invoke Japanese aesthetic concepts in haiku, including *yugen*, *karumi* and, most definitely, *ma*. For instance, the word “inside” in the following poem suggests something elusive happening within a person, and perhaps within a breeze, thereby creating some intriguing *yugen* (mystery, unknowable depth).

spring breeze
the shy one singing
inside her room

*Rick Tarquinio*³¹

The following haiku exemplifies how prepositions can aid in creating *karumi* (a light touch). The act of lifting higher, as implied by the word “above,” keeps this poem lively and light, and adds to its humor.

moonlit pond ...
 he lifts his child **above**
 the threat of frogs

*Janelle Barrera*³²

Since prepositions are indicators of relationships between entities, they are especially adept at creating *ma* (the creative potential of space) in haiku. *Ma* can exist between the two parts of a haiku, the phrase and fragment, as set up by the *kire* (cut). But we can also find *ma* in the interpretation of meaning in a haiku. This can be created by using prepositions that create semantic space. The semantic *ma* discovered in a haiku can be positional, temporal, and emotional. For instance, you can create positional or directional *ma* by using words such as “under” and “inside.”

just about spring
 feeling for the latch
under the hood

*Michele Root-Bernstein*³³

from my desk **inside** a cardinal

*Brad Bennett*³⁴

In the first haiku, the reader searches for the *ma* under the hood of a car. In the second haiku, the search shifts to the insides of a home or a bird. The haiku poet can also create temporal *ma* by using prepositions like “before,” and “after.” The present moment can be juxtaposed with a past or future moment.

the handshake
before the first move
 autumn equinox

*Jim Chessing*³⁵

after stretching April sky

*Rick Tarquinio*³⁶

Prepositions are also an effective and understated way to allude to human relationships and emotions. Words like “without,” “beside,” “except,” and “below” can also be used to invoke emotional *ma*. They can create separation, reunion, pathos, and poignancy.

maple leaves
some things go
without saying

*Michele Root-Bernstein*³⁷

below the missing dog a missing woman

*Joan Torres*³⁸

“With” and “for” seem especially evocative, often infusing a poem with emotional energy, even when the poem is mostly about the natural world. The *ma* that these two prepositions create is more connective, and sometimes more convivial.

spring romance
kneading dough
with four hands

*Hemapriya Chellappan*³⁹

for the wind milkweed

*Brad Bennett*⁴⁰

Finally, there are two words that can intentionally and powerfully open up plenty of dreaming room in a haiku. “From,” when used in the context of removing or leaving, can create an absence that can be filled with multiple interpretations. And the word “between” always nudges the reader to explore the cracks of a poem. In the following two haiku, the word “from” suggests a void that invites the reader in to muse and wonder.

missing **from** her effects
the hum of bees
in wisteria

*Michele Root-Bernstein*⁴¹

instead
I blow the dust
from a bowl of sea glass

*Sheila Butterworth*⁴²

The preposition “between” is especially *ma*-evoking. “Between” suggests spaces, relationships, connections, and juxtapositions. Perhaps it is the quintessential haiku word.

between the sound
of shoes and slippers
first rain of the year

*Pragya Vishnoi*⁴³

between phrase
and fragment
the cat

*Jacquie Pearce*⁴⁴

EXPERIMENTATION

As we have seen, prepositions have traditionally served many purposes in our haiku. They can also be used experimentally and creatively to produce new haiku techniques and fresh ways of looking at things. For instance, prepositions can be used to rate or measure events and objects in fresh new ways.

best **ofs**
and worst **ofs**
another orbit

*Christopher Patchel*⁴⁵

seventh summer
we measure his height
in sunflowers

*Lorraine A. Padden*⁴⁶

bird **by** bird
the toddler kisses
her storybook

*Carol Raisfeld*⁴⁷

As noted above, prepositional phrases can act as pivots in the second lines of three-line haiku. Prepositions can also act as one-word pivots by themselves, as achieved in the following two monoku. The second one includes two pivoting prepositions.

hiding **in** everything plain sight nothing **to** write **as** rain

*Don Wentworth*⁴⁸

*Kristen Lindquist*⁴⁹

The previous haiku show the subtle and creative power of the proper preposition placed accurately. Most of the haiku we write include prepositions, but do we take full advantage of their potential? Prepositions are vital, evocative, and potent. As we revise our haiku, we would be well-advised to continue to devote attention and care to these perhaps underappreciated parts of speech.

placing
the right preposition
flagstone moss

*Brad Bennett*⁵⁰

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NOTES

¹ In order to highlight the relevant prepositions present in the example haiku in this essay, I have bolded them. They are not bolded in the original poems.

² *Haiku Headlines* 7.2.

³ Cobb, David. "Between Moments" in *A Silver Tapestry: The Best of 25 Years of Critical Thinking from the British Haiku Society*. Selected by Jon Baldwin and Margery Newlove, edited by Graham High. United Kingdom: British Haiku Society, 2015. From <https://www.thehaikufoundation.org/omeka/items/show/4533>. Accessed October 27, 2022.

⁴ *Frogpond* 8.3.

⁵ *Frogpond* 45.1.

⁶ *Frogpond* 45.1.

⁷ *Chrysanthemum* 26.

⁸ *A Hundred Gourds* 5.3.

⁹ Chambers, Paul. *The Dry Bones*. United Kingdom: Red Ceilings Press, 2021.

¹⁰ *The Heron's Nest* 23.2.

¹¹ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

¹² *Frogpond* 45.2.

¹³ *Tsundoku* is the act of piling up books to read later, but never actually getting to them. Thanks to Kristen Lindquist for suggesting I include this haiku, and for her thoughts on lines that end with prepositions.

¹⁴ *The Heron's Nest* 23.1.

¹⁵ *Akitsu Quarterly*, Summer 2022.

¹⁶ *Frogpond* 45.2.

¹⁷ Hall, Carolyn. *Cricket Dusk*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2020.

¹⁸ *The Heron's Nest* 23.4.

¹⁹ Thanks to Kristen Lindquist for suggesting I use this haiku and for reimagining how it could be constructed without both prepositions.

²⁰ *The Heron's Nest* 23.3. Thanks to Kristen Lindquist for suggesting I include this haiku and for pointing out the loss of rhythm if it had included a possessive noun.

²¹ Buettner, Marjorie. *Seeing it Now*. Minnesota: Red Dragonfly Press, 2008.

²² van den Heuvel, Cor, Ed. *The Haiku Anthology* (Third Edition). NY: W.W. Norton, 1999.

²³ Bennett, Brad. *a box of feathers*. Winchester, VA: Red Moon Press, 2022.

²⁴ *Frogpond* 32.3.

²⁵ *Modern Haiku* 52.3.

²⁶ *Acorn* 48.

²⁷ *Frogpond* 4.3.

²⁸ Schopfer, Olivier. *Half in Light, Half in the Shade*. Cyberwit.net, 2019.

²⁹ *The Heron's Nest* 24.1.

³⁰ *The Heron's Nest* 23.2.

³¹ *Frogpond* 29.3.

³² *The Heron's Nest* 10.1.

³³ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

³⁴ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

³⁵ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

³⁶ *Modern Haiku* 53.1.

³⁷ *The Haiku Calendar 2022*, Snapshot Press.

³⁸ *#FemkuMag* 31.

³⁹ *The Heron's Nest* 23.1.

⁴⁰ *The Heron's Nest* 19.4.

⁴¹ *first frost* 3.

⁴² Martin Lucas Award 2021, *Presence*.

⁴³ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

⁴⁴ *Modern Haiku* 53.2.

⁴⁵ *The Heron's Nest* 18.4.

⁴⁶ *tinywords* 21.2.

⁴⁷ *Frogpond* 44.3.

⁴⁸ *tinywords* 13.2.

⁴⁹ *hedgerow* 138.

⁵⁰ *tsuri-dōrō* 2.