

# Japanese Tanka: From the Concrete to the Ephemeral For Grades Three Through Eight

by Phyllis Meshulam

Kids need no special preparation for this lesson, but I especially like to teach tanka at the end of the school year when they are saying goodbye to a classroom or sometimes even graduating to a new school. I put no pressure on young people to conform to the exact syllable count. I like the other feature of these short poems – they tend to start with something concrete and move from the physical to the emotional. I ask the students: “What physical things will you remember about this time of your life? What emotions are these things charged with?”

1. Explain how Japanese children, by the time they reach sixth grade, have memorized one hundred tanka poems, chosen from ones written over many centuries. In Japan, they may be given cards with pictures illustrating the poem—along with one line of it—on one side. On the other is the complete poem. These cards are numbered from *one* to *one hundred*, arranged in chronological order from the oldest to the newest. On the worksheet, you’ll see something that resembles a Japanese tanka card. These cards are also used to play a game that is as popular in Japan as *Monopoly* is in the United States!
2. Point out that the form consists of five lines. Traditionally, the syllable count is: first line—five syllables, second—seven, third—five, fourth—seven, fifth—seven. The first three lines are just like a haiku in terms of syllable count. Most lines are not sentences. This form doesn’t have to be strictly followed in English, but it’s good to vary short and long lines.
3. Read the traditional example on the worksheet, and notice how it moves from mountains to sadness. That’s the other thing typical of these poems—they start with something concrete and physical, and then move into the mood and emotion. Can the students see/feel the progression?
4. Have the kids brainstorm a list of objects they connect with this classroom, or their whole career at this school—now that they are leaving it. Record a bunch of these on the board. Examples: soccer field, bench where you would get benched, cafeteria, traffic circle in front, band room, water fountain, uniforms, detention notices ... (Discourage the generic “friends” as a topic. It’s too hard to be specific with a group.)
5. Read examples of tanka by students of previous years. Notice that ALL the lines are pretty short, and most aren’t sentences.
6. Try a group poem—on the subject of something that the class as a whole can relate to, guiding the kids to start with concrete details, and end with an expression of the feeling. For example:
  - “Let’s pick one of the topics we brainstormed. What’s something you can all relate to?” Someone says “water fountain,” someone else, “boys’ bathroom.” “Well let’s go with ‘water fountain’ so we can *all* relate to it. That could be our first line. *Water fountain.*”
  - “Now, help the reader *see* that water fountain, the one you all know.” Another hand goes up, another student suggests “silver.” “Silver as what?” Another voice: *Silver as a nickel.*
  - “Can we use any other of our five senses to help us remember it?” *Cold water.* “Okay, we have three lines! Our next line could be a little longer if we want.
  - What is special about this water fountain that you want to remember?” “People jam it and you get sprayed.” “Use details. What do they jam it with?” *People jam it with gum and you get sprayed.*
  - “Fabulous! Only one more line. Time to show some emotion. What feeling might you have about this whole thing?” *But without water there is no life.* (With thanks to the 6th graders in Room 10 at Monroe School, spring 2013.)
7. Give students quiet writing time to compose their own. Share.

**Materials:** A board, chart paper, or document reader where you can generate a list of concrete objects from the school.