

## **Korean Poetry Competition Provides Opportunity for American Creative Writing Students**

*Jorgensen shares anecdotes of students submitting sijos, a Korean form of poetry, to the Sejong Cultural Society*

Each semester, in Hartland, Wisconsin, I welcome 180 high school students to my creative writing classes with a course introduction and overview. I read intrigue, investment, and interest on their faces as I say, “My goal is for each of you to be an award-winning or published author by the end of the semester.” What follows is a curriculum focused on writers’ markets. By requiring students to practice professional writing, they submit short stories, poems, and vignettes to competitions and publications throughout the semester. I say, “Everything we do will be sent to a writers’ market. This semester, you will practice what it means to be a professional author.”

I start with a haiku, a familiar form of poetry. “Oh yes, we did this in elementary school,” Sarah says. She’s typing on her laptop. “Haikus have the 5-7-5 syllable form. It’s a Japanese form of poetry. And they’re typically about nature or the seasons.” She

and the rest of the class churn out haikus and submit them to various writers’ markets.

“You’re right. And if you can write haiku, you can write sijo,” haiku’s lesser known Korean cousin. Students, after success with haiku, find comfort in the similarities. “And the thing about sijo is there’s more flexibility—and more room to tell a story.”

Wisconsin writing standards require students to “produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.” Looking for an authentic purpose and audience, I stumbled upon sijo a decade ago through the Sejong Cultural Society. The primers and lectures on the website taught me about sijo—and how to teach it. And I knew the monetary prizes contained incentive—the Society’s sijo-writing competition offers a \$500 first place prize (\$400 second, \$300 third and \$50 for Honorable Mentions).

Connor, sitting in the front row asks, “So, something I do in class can also win me money?”

“Yes,” I tell him. “And you could also be published.” I tell him about the previous winners that came from Arrowhead High School:

*2016 First Place: Austin Snell*

*2016 Honorable Mention: Abagael  
Weber*

*2015 Honorable Mention: Keiagane  
Mork-Cardon*

*2014 Honorable Mention: Joshua  
Dieball*

*2011 Second Place: Alex Griffin*

*2011 Honorable Mention: AJ Arshem*

“I can’t believe Austin won! That’s so cool.” We pause to read Austin’s poem and talk about why we think his sijo was chosen.

***Emma by Austin Snell***

*My new dog, little Emma, a gift to us  
from the heavens.*

*My aunt passed, stupid cancer, my  
mom distraught. Everyone  
muted.*

*I could look into Emma’s eyes, she’s  
still here, on four paws.*

Unlike typical writing classes, mine eschews rubrics and instead requires students to identify and analyze quality writing that can be used as a model. “Sijo, like all poetry, is art. And art, by nature, allows for flexibility, creativity, and originality,” I say. “Although this form is new to you, don’t be afraid to make mistakes, to take risks, and to have fun.” I want my students to write about their passions and to find purpose and pleasure in writing.

I provide a lesson on the form, structure, and beat of sijo but remind my students that more significant are the story, the expressive nature, and the beauty. I review both forms—three lines and six lines—and prepare them to write, focusing on the state writing standard requiring students to “develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.”

“First and foremost, sijos are meant to be songs. What do you know about songs? Why do we listen to songs? What are some of your favorite songs about?” By triggering students’ prior knowledge, I aim to build interest, motivation and confidence in sijo writing.

Kelly says, “Songs tell a story and give off emotion...like something sad or something that pumps you up.”

“Very good. How does a song portray an emotion?” Kelly explains her favorite song and the story it tells, as well as the characters and plot. She talks about how the beat of another favorite song gets her ready for a basketball game.

Connor adds, “My favorite song has this awesome rhythm and refrain.”

Because sijo is new to students, I break the sijo into parts. First, I lecture on the history of sijo: “A sijo was traditionally written in three lines on either a cosmological, pastoral or metaphysical theme. However, as the art of sijo writing evolved, modern English-speaking authors began writing six-line sijos. Both the six-line and three-line forms are acceptable.”

We compare the syllable count of the 17-syllable haiku to the 44, 45 or 46-syllable count of the sijo. “Each line—in a three-line sijo—will have an average of 14 to 16 syllables.” I explain the syllable patterns in each line. “Beyond having an average of 14 to 16 syllables per line, each sijo should stick to traditional syllable grouping patterns. This will make the sijo feel like a song and give it a rhythm, beat and cadence.” The students follow along with my presentation and take notes, mimicking what I draw on the

whiteboard. “The first and second lines are usually written in a 3-4-4-4 grouping pattern. The third line is divided into two sections. First, the twist, is grouped as 3-5. And then the conclusion is 4-3.”

I discuss each line’s function. First line: introduction. Second line: development. Third line: twist and conclusion. And after students have processed the new form, I ask, “What might differentiate one syllable group from the other?” Students respond: “Punctuation.”—“A change in theme.”—“Dialogue.”—“Point of view.” I remind them of the similarity of sijo to all writing: “Your writing in an essay or narrative or vignette is broken up the same way. But in sijo-writing, you’re given a pattern. Many of you will find writing one easier than writing a free verse poem or essay.” Because the sijo is short and focused, students find it manageable. It’s not a 20-page research paper or a semester-long project. Struggling students find comfort in the form, as they have one less decision to make.

Reminding students of the authentic purpose, I discuss submission guidelines. “Each student can submit one sijo to the competition. Three different judges will read and critique your sijo, so you want to make sure you’re sticking to the form and structure, but also telling a story different people can relate to.”

I say, “You can write about whatever you want, but remember that sijo is different from other types of poetry in two ways. First, sijos are meant to be songs. And second, each sijo will have a twist. How might we define a twist?”

“Something unexpected.” “Something different.” “Something shocking,” the students say. And once they understand the form, function and history, they write.

Riley writes

*Alone—but not lonely—in solitude, stars  
radiate love.  
Full stars metamorphose from pinpricks of  
light in hi-def glory.  
I approach the sun, my shuttle burning  
wood, alone in death.*

Shawna writes

*Cobalt blue and pale white creek,  
a lively sky: crimson and ochre.  
Tranquil home, nestled in mountains,  
every detail absorbed.  
Wipe my breath, watercolors blend,  
across canvas, I paint the world.*

Lauren writes

*“That’s our star, don’t forget it.” Dad’s  
raspy voice echoes dully.  
Silent fog, humid June night. Stars droop  
beneath the faint moon.*

*Shooting star. Mom drops the phone.  
Cancer won its fight tonight.*

Brooke writes

*Morning sun weighs down on me...  
Wrapped in blades of grass, lost in the sky...  
It is peaceful and bright...  
Through my eyes, it’s soothing.  
People say there’s no delight in war...  
But I’m gazing at it—one last time.*

Jude writes

*A city clamors at midnight—while  
people indulge in  
ineffable silence.  
They wonder, what is out there?  
Atlas hears their mellifluous  
thoughts as a sonorous symphony.*

I focus on asking clarifying questions and encouraging students to explain ideas, remaining supportive and optimistic. When students share, I build a classroom community by increasing engagement and attention spans. I remind students, “Coming up with an original idea is difficult. Writing is challenging and an art.” I refrain from critiquing a student in front of the class. Instead, I build an atmosphere of sharing, collaboration and workshopping.

I persuade disengaged students with compliments and encouragement. “Although there is a form to the sijo, like all art, you are in control.” I prompt them to write about topics they are interested in. “You can write about anything in your sijo. And if you’re writing about something you find enjoyable, it’s more likely the reader will enjoy your piece too. Your passion will seep through.” We read Linda Sue Park’s sijo book *Tap Dancing on the Roof* and I ask what they notice about her work. Students discuss the parts of Park’s sijos, her characters, her twists and how she uses form and syllable counts.

As students edit their sijos, I provide feedback, promoting stylistic devices. “Where can you insert a metaphor?”—“How can you use dialogue?”—“What about alliteration or the rule of thirds?” In later assignments, I flashback to the stylistic devices students used to elevate sijos. I remind them that all essays, poems and narratives benefit from stylistic devices.

A positive and productive buzz fills my room. I move about the room, monitoring progress and re-directing off-task students with questions and encouragement. Students share throughout the brainstorming, writing and editing processes, engaging with each other. This allows struggling students to hear ideas, which can trigger creativity and initiate action.

“Your first draft may be dull,” I say, reminding them that writing is a process. “Think of how you can be more creative and use more interesting language within the allotted syllables in your next draft. Try to replace weak verbs with action verbs. Think about the cadence of your poem. Maybe even try your poem in the six-line form.” The process of writing sijos is no different from writing a haiku, or essay, or narrative, or research paper. Students first come up with an original idea; then they form that idea into a particular structure; then they edit, adding stylistic devices and seeking feedback; and finally, they polish and submit a final draft.

After a week or two, students have multiple sijos. They peer edit, share with the class and decide which sijo to submit to the annual Sejong Cultural Society’s sijo-writing competition. I publish student work on my classroom website, on my classroom walls, and in our school’s literary magazine. Riley, Shawna, Lauren, Brooke and Jude’s poems are selected for publication in *Teen Ink*, a national teen publication. Students meet a state standard when they “use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology’s capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.”

By semester's end, more than 85% of my students will leave my classroom either a published or award-winning author. And each year, I hear the same things: publishing gave them purpose, made them feel like their voice matters, and provided an outlet for expression.

And they say the same things about sijo too: It's a poetic form I can relate to—and one I want to continue working with. And I really enjoyed adding a twist. Sijo storytelling is challenging, but worth the rewards and satisfaction.

### Resources

A basic guide to writing sijo. (2004-2016).

Retrieved October 10, 2016, from

Sejong Cultural Society website:

[http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/resources/sijo\\_guide.php](http://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/writing/current/resources/sijo_guide.php)

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