
Student Haiku Contest: Fostering a Tradition of Peace Through Poetry

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For two decades, the Northeast Council of Teachers of Japanese (NECTJ) has fostered the emergence of young voices through its annual student haiku competition. Started in 2006, it was designed and led by Kazuo Tsuda (1948-2025). What began as a regional contest became a space where students learned the art of seeing the world in 17 syllables or less. The United Nations International School (UNIS) joined the organization in 2009. The Japanese-language category includes students from supplementary Japanese schools and heritage language programs. About 60% of participants in the Japanese division, however, are students studying Japanese as a foreign language.

The contest has blossomed to encompass entries in several languages. The first edition of the contest in 2006 featured haiku in Japanese and in English. French was added in 2017, Spanish in 2019, Italian in 2024 and German in 2025. The hope for the coming years is to feature haikus in additional languages across the world, including First Nations and indigenous.

Since 2026, the Movement for Language and Culture (MLC) along with the UNIS and supported by the Permanent Mission of Japan to the United Nations, carry the tradition forward. The mission remains the same: to offer students across the United States and around the world a platform to write, reflect, and connect.

About the 21st Edition (2026) of the contest:

www.mlcnyusa.org/blog/the-21st-annual-student-haiku-contest-celebrates-creativity-across-languages

Writing Across Languages, Connecting Across Borders

A defining feature of the new contest is its multilingual format. Students are invited to compose haiku in the language that feels most natural to them.

When poems are shared in many languages, they cross borders without losing their voice. Students hear each other across linguistic and cultural lines. That exchange turns the writing contest into a global conversation.

The Classroom as the Creative Space

The creative process starts in the classroom. This choice is intentional. The contest centers on what happens before a poem is submitted: the process of making it together.

Working with teachers to craft haiku means listening to rhythm, exploring the meaning and sound of words, and shaping own views within a few lines. The shared moments of counting syllables, debating the right image, reading drafts aloud are an essential part of the experience.

By practicing how to listen to a classmate's words, to a different language, and to a perspective shaped by a different life, students build understanding across differences.

Haiku as a Medium of Peace

At its heart, haiku is simple and deep. In just a few lines, students are invited to explore their creativity, develop cultural awareness, and express their own perspectives through the power of their words.

Haiku is a medium of peace: a space where we can express ourselves and listen to one another with openness and respect. In a world often divided by differences, the brevity of haiku reminds us of what we share as human beings. A season changing. A moment noticed. A feeling named.

The Student Haiku Contest opens that space again for a new generation of poets, with the hope that it will continue to connect people across cultures and generations.

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