

## Activity

## RENGA

Pair up with someone to write a collaborative poem, using the 'rules' of renga - a Japanese form of poetry where stanzas have a repeating syllable count of 5-7-5 then 7-7. Send your lines on to a friend to continue and then pass back for you to add to further.

### What should I do?

Learn about renga, tanka, syllables and stanzas

**You will find definitions for all the words in bold in the 'Things that could help me' section below. Be sure to read these carefully and check you understand what they mean.** You could also use an online dictionary such as <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>, if you need.

At its simplest, a **renga** is a sequence of **tanka** written by more than one poet. This form of Japanese poetry existed before **haiku**, which you may have heard of; a haiku is actually the first three lines of a tanka. Sometimes, poets will link several renga to create a renga chain.

In English, all these types of poem have a strict number of **syllables** you need to stick to. A renga will have a 3-line **stanza** of 5-7-5, followed by a 2-line stanza of 7-7, and this pattern will be repeated to create a much longer poem, e.g.

Cloudy skies in June (5)	}	tanka 1
bubble, dark and ominous; (7)		
in one moment break, (5)		
reveal fingers of sunlight (7)	}	tanka 2
to stroke my welcoming face. (7)		
Rays speckle the skin: (5)	}	tanka 3
my smile opens like a flower; (7)		
eyes drink in the warmth (5)		
and at that point the clouds mass. (7)	}	tanka 2
A drop of rain hits my cheek. (7)		
I frown and I glare, (5)	}	tanka 3
pull up the hood of my coat, (7)		
curse British summers. (5)		
A brisk wind picks up, lifts dust, (7)	}	tanka 2
nudges leaves into a dance. (7)		

(You can download a similar activity from Education.com, if you like, which includes another example of a renga: <https://sevies.weebly.com/uploads/2/4/3/1/24317847/renga.pdf>.)

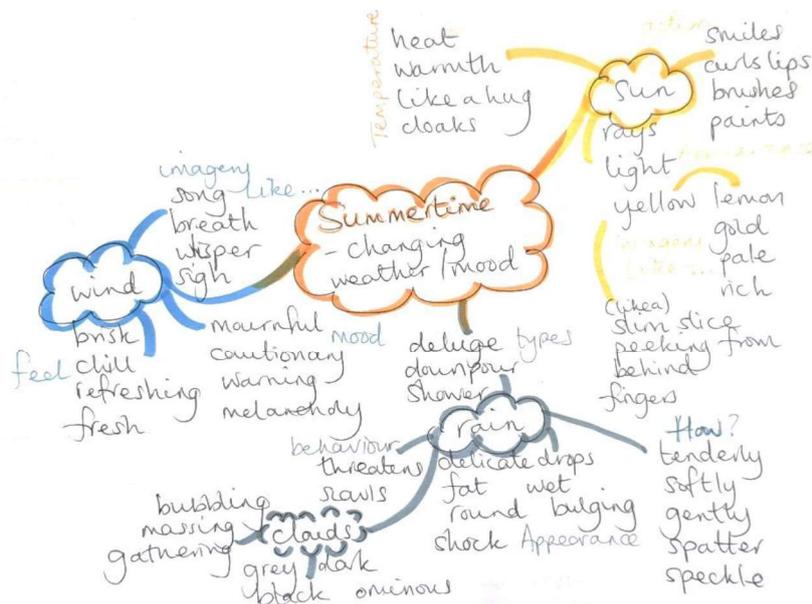
Choose your topic; collect ideas

First, find a friend or someone at home to be your writing partner. (You can write on your own if you really must but the point of a renga is to collaborate, so try and work out a way to pass the poem back and forth between different writers.)

Decide what to write your poem about. They are often on the subject of nature, and changing seasons in particular, and emotions like love and sadness. You should pick a theme that can be developed over a series of tanka. Choose one of the pictures and words below, or find your own, to get you thinking:



There are so few words in this form of poetry that every single one counts (literally!). You need to gather some brilliant vocabulary – words that describe objects and feelings precisely and vividly. Making a mind map or word web can help. The example below was about summertime:



If you find yourself becoming stuck, don't stop writing words down but just go back to basic ones, thinking about...

- what you can see (colours, objects, shapes, movements),
- what you might hear,
- how it could feel to be there (your mood, the temperature, the touch of things).

Then find some synonyms (you can use an online thesaurus such as <https://www.thesaurus.com/> or <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english-thesaurus>) and add these, e.g. record all the names you can think of for 'green'. Also consider what the features you want to describe are *like* and create some similes, e.g. birch leaves fluttering *like a ballerina*; birch leaves *as delicate and frothy as lace*. Don't worry if you are not pleased with your ideas at this stage, just keep on getting words down – you will need to be very selective anyway when you come to write your poem.

Write your first tanka

By now you should have agreed a good topic to write about, so it's time to get drafting!

Poet A writes three lines to create the first stanza. These should have a syllable count of 5-7-5 (the haiku bit). Once done, pass it on to someone who will be your Poet B.

Poet B then writes the next stanza of two lines. These should have a syllable count of 7-7. What and how Poet B adds must have something to do with Poet A's first three lines.

Poet A \_\_\_\_\_ (5)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (7)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (5)

Poet B \_\_\_\_\_ (7)  
 \_\_\_\_\_ (7)

Create a renga

To make a renga, you'll need to repeat the process. This time, have Poet B write the first 3 lines and Poet A the last 2.

You could ask another pair of poets who've been working together to join in. Each tanka needs to feel complete on its own, but they all need to be linked by a common factor, e.g. shared images, the topic, particular words, etc.

How many poets can you get involved?

Think about good ways to pass your poem back and forth between writers if they are somewhere else – could you use email, or text your lines?

Can you write another couple renga linked to the theme and then chain them together? How long can you make your renga chain?

Share your work

How might you share your work with your friends and your teacher(s)? Can you film yourself reading your renga, or word process it, make a slide show, email or upload to a shared area?

Young Poets Network, part of The Poetry Society, has set a similar challenge and asks young writers to submit their renga with the chance to have it published online: <https://ypn.poetrysociety.org.uk/workshop/renga-a-collaborative-poetry-challenge/> If you and your friends are interested in submitting your poem, you will need your parents to complete the entry form for you and giving their permission for you to take part.

*You can tweet what you've been up to using the Twitter handle @BabcockLDPEng and the hashtag #BabcockEnglishAtHome.*

**IMPORTANT:** If you decide to share your finished work publicly, just remember everything you have been taught about staying safe online, and do check with the person who looks after you before posting anything.

Things that could help me

Use this glossary to remind you of what each term in bold means:

<p><b>haiku</b> - a type of Japanese poem; has 3 lines; uses a strict number of syllables in each line: 5-7-5; doesn't rhyme; is traditionally about nature (but nowadays can be about whatever you like), e.g.</p> <p><u>Summer has arrived:</u> (5)</p> <p><u>in England, it brings the rain</u> (7)</p> <p><u>amongst hotter days.</u> (5)</p>
<p><b>renga</b> – a series of tanka linked by a common theme, written by more than one poet.</p>
<p><b>stanza</b> – the parts a poem is divided up into (like paragraphs).</p>
<p><b>syllables</b> – the 'beats' in a word, e.g.</p> <p><u>pear</u> (1)</p> <p><u>apple</u> (2)</p> <p><u>banana</u> (3)</p> <p><u>watermelon</u> (4)</p> <p>Practise counting and clapping the syllables in your name: Re- be- cca (3), Ja- mal (2), Jake (1).</p>
<p><b>tanka</b> – from the words <i>tan</i> meaning short + <i>ka</i> meaning verse. A Japanese form of poetry made up of 5 lines following the syllable count 5-7-5-7-7. It does not rhyme and often has no punctuation (though we have chosen to put some in to help the reader). It's usually about nature and emotions and in many tanka, there is a point where the focus changes, e.g. from looking at an image to making a personal comment:</p> <p><u>Against my bare legs</u> (5)</p> <p><u>Tiny grains of sand prickle</u> (7)</p> <p><u>Warmed by summer sun;</u> (5)</p> <p><u>Lying on the beach this day,</u> (7)</p> <p><u>I dream the year's first snowflake.</u> (7)</p>

You can find more explanation of tanka from The Touring Teacher in *Tanka Poems // Poetry For Kids* at <https://safeYouTube.net/w/cqAM>.

Change it up!  
...Go further!

- A) Online poetry generators can be quite fun to try, though they don't always produce the best writing so you'll probably need to do some editing! Why not have a go? With adult supervision, you can use something like <https://www.poem-generator.org.uk/tanka/>. It will ask you for...
- A noun, singular (e.g. kitten, boyfriend)
  - What best describes that noun (you can choose a pronoun)
  - A verb describing how you feel about that noun (you have a choice of 4 – 'dig' means really like... it's an American site)
  - Two adjectives to describe that noun
  - A feature of that noun (must be another noun)
  - How many of the above does it have?
  - An adjective describing that/those features

- Another feature of the original noun (must be another noun)
- How many of the above does it have?
- An adjective describing that/those features
- A verb (e.g. purrs, laughs)

If that all sound ridiculously complicated(!), you may prefer to look at the haiku generator instead: <https://www.poem-generator.org.uk/haiku/>.

- B) Find out more about tanka, as well as other poetry for which syllable count is important. What can you discover about the haiku and nonet, or even katauta, choka, sedoka, tanaga...? Can you have a go at writing some?

### Notes for parents and teachers

The YouTube video suggested has been vetted as appropriate for children and has been linked through Safe YouTube (<https://safeyoutube.net/>), but parents will still want to moderate their child when using the internet.

Use of the online poetry generator may require adult supervision as the site has the following disclaimer: 'Please note: this generator brings in words from an external source, which can occasionally include potentially offensive content'.