

TANKA FORM

LINEATION & LINE LENGTH AS CRITERIA OF TANKA FORM

A Modern English Tanka educational supplement.

Perhaps the single most common misunderstanding of tanka writing in English is the idea that there is a simple formal structure, based on counting syllables, which is *definitive* of tanka. It is not so.

Here is the *formula* for tanka form that is commonly cited. It is based on counting English syllables arranged in five lines in a set sequence: 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 5 syllables, 7 syllables, 7 syllables, which amounts to 31 syllables in total. Thus, a tanka is sometimes *defined* as “a poem in five lines with 5-7-5-7-7 syllables.” The following graphic represents such a “full count” tanka with boxes representing syllables on five lines; the boxed numbers indicate the cumulative syllable count.

FULL COUNT

Line 1 - 5 syl	1	2	3	4	5		
Line 2 - 7 syl	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Line 3 - 5 syl	13	14	15	16	17		
Line 4 - 7 syl	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Line 5 - 7 syl	25	26	27	28	29	30	31

The problem with this common understanding is that the sound-units (morae) in Japanese (which are variously [and questionably] referred to as *ji*, *on*, *onji*, *hyouon moji*, etc.) are not directly comparable to English syllables. Syllables in English may be one mora but many are two morae. Therefore, the poem based on the 31-syllable formula virtually always takes longer (and very frequently takes substantially longer) than a 31-morae Japanese poem to enunciate. That is, the audible duration of such a poem in English is too long to replicate the *brevity* of Japanese tanka, which *is definitive*. Like the even shorter haiku, tanka is characterized by brevity.

LEARN MORE: To study the mora/syllable matter in greater depth, read Dr. Richard Gilbert’s excellent article, “Stalking the Wild Onji,” online. Search on the article’s title.

What can be said about form as a criterion of tanka in English? Since tanka in Japanese are usually written in a single line, lineation *per se* is largely an English innovation. Tanka in Japanese are characterized (in the opinion of many experts on the subject) by their fragmentary nature and by including five phrases with caesura separating them. A caesura is a pause and in English poetry can be realized as a line break. (Of course, longer lines of English poetry include caesura within the lines.) In English poetry, of course, lineation is a fundamental of versification. So it is that, in the one century of tanka in English, it has become traditional for the form of tanka to be defined, in part, as “five phrases on five lines.” Not everyone agrees, but it is the consensus of poets, editors, and critics.

What then can be said confidently about line length in English tanka? There is no consensus on this. There are schools of thought which have become partisan in their support for their view on line

length. One school believes that the number 31 is the key and holds that the “full count” 31-syllable tanka described above is the only proper form. Another school believes that the number 31 is the key but that mora-counting should replace syllable-counting to bring the poems down to the brevity of the traditional Japanese tanka. This school often couches their position in terms of a different formula for counting syllables, to attain the same effect. Following is a graphic representing the “mora-counting” school’s concept of syllable counting in conjunction with a restated shape of “short-long-short-long-long.” In this case, the formula becomes 3-5-3-5-5 syllables for a total of 21.

ABBREVIATED

Line 1 - 3 syl	1	2	3		
Line 2 - 5 syl	4	5	6	7	8
Line 3 - 3 syl	9	10	11		
Line 4 - 5 syl	12	13	14	15	16
Line 5 - 5 syl	17	18	19	20	21

It must be noted that there is no single such formula used widely by this school of tanka. Their position is that 31 English syllables is too long and that something on the order of 19 to 24 syllables comes closer to approximating the audible length of Japanese tanka.

Another school of thought eschews all length criterion held by the first two schools and considers “five phrases on five lines” to be sufficient guidance for form. They accept full count (31 syllables), abbreviated (31 morae), and even shorter poems on five lines as tanka. Amongst these, some prefer longer, some shorter, some have no preference. Along these lines, extremely brief “minimalist tanka” are accepted. As you know, subject to the same considerations of morae vs. syllables, haiku are often defined as tercets with 5-7-5 syllables, i.e., 17 syllables. The idea of tanka that are shorter than haiku is disconcerting to some writers and readers. Still, it is done. A minimalist formula for a tanka might be 2-3-2-3-3 syllables, totaling 13 syllables. Poems this short are rejected as “tanka” by some tanka traditionalists. Others discern the tanka distinctives even in so short a form. Again, there is no consensus amongst poets, editors, and critics working in tanka in English.

MINIMALIST

Line 1 - 2 syl	1	2	
Line 2 - 3 syl	3	4	5
Line 3 - 2 syl	6	7	
Line 4 - 3 syl	8	9	10
Line 5 - 3 syl	11	12	13

What then may be concluded from these disparate views? Due to the fundamental differences between Japanese and English, no exact analog in English of the traditional Japanese tanka is possible. In terms of form, first, the now-traditional “five phrases on five lines” may be considered characteristic of tanka in English. Second, for those wishing to closely emulate the brevity of

Japanese tanka, poems in the range of 19-24 English syllables may work best. Third, the general shape of short-long-short-long-long lines, taken together with attention to making the final line a strong one (the longest line of the poem, if one is longer than others), will come closest to emulating the overall shape of Japanese tanka. However, any of these criteria applied as definitive rules can hardly be supported and would likely result in formulaic (and, thereby, failed) tanka. Tanka is so much more than its form that making form definitive simply won't work. These criteria are to be taken as *benchmarks* for the tanka in English. The single indispensable method of learning the form of tanka is reading good tanka—whether Japanese tanka in good translations or modern English tanka. With long familiarity, the shape of tanka will be recognizable in a number of variations.

Combined Table Illustrating Three Forms of Tanka

Minimalist

Abbreviated

Full Count

Line 1	1	2	14	22	23		
Line 2	3	4	5	16	17	26	27
Line 3	6	7	15	24	25		
Line 4	8	9	10	18	19	28	29
Line 5	11	12	13	20	21	30	31

It should be noted that tanka writers, readers, and critics do not all agree on whether there is, or even should be, a standard form for tanka in English. Each of the three styles shown on this handout has its supporters and its detractors. In addition, there are some who appreciate all these styles. When one is actually writing, formulas need to be forgotten—their touch is poisonous to poetry. Rules form the poet—they cannot form a poem. This handout is for educational purposes only. Do NOT write poetry by formula—it does not work.

— *Denis M. Garrison*

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