

RULES OF RENGA

more like guidelines, really

Renga was a collaborative poetic game first developed in thirteenth century Japan. It is best known today as the origin of the haiku. Renga was composed by two or more poets in collaboration, alternating stanzas.

Though there were a number of cultural and language specific rules for the composition of renga, the rules we'll be following today are:

1. The first stanza (and all odd stanzas) will be a haiku. A haiku is a poem of three lines, with the first line being five syllables long, the second seven syllables long, and the last five syllables long.
2. The second stanza (and all even stanzas) will be a waki. A waki is a two line poem, with each line being seven syllables long.

Ideally each stanza will follow logically from the stanza that precedes it, but will also offer a little surprise or recontextualization of what came before. This can be as extreme as changing the setting or meaning of the previous one, or as subtle as hinting at an emotion that it evokes.

This “leap” is the signature feature not only of renga, haiku and tanka (a related form). Even within a haiku, the best practice is for the first two lines to be concrete sensory details (a sound, a smell, an image) and the third line to tie them together, put them into a context, or offer some little surprise. To that end, we're adding a third, non-traditional rule:

3. Before handing the renga off to the next person, fold back the stanza before yours from view.

In traditional renga, there were a number of other rules (the unit that was counted 5-7-5 was not exactly a syllable, but a related concept specific to Japanese). Each verse sometimes had to refer to a season, or to a subject chosen by the host. Usually the first verse would be written by the guest of honor, and would involve a compliment to the host, and the second would be a self-deprecating response from the host, and so on. Renga are a fun and easy game to customize in that way. I encourage you to experiment with the rules (and the form itself) with other writers!



GUIDELINES FOR GIVING FEEDBACK

Say something positive about the piece. Even if a piece of writing needs a lot of work, there is usually something good that can be pointed out—the seed of a great idea, a particularly well-turned phrase, the beginnings of a good organizational structure, etc.

Critique the writing, not the writer. Instead of saying, “You aren’t very good at endings,” say, “This ending didn’t really work for me.”

Speak from your own perspective, using phrases like, “My reaction to this was...” or “I found this to be...” rather than “this piece is...”. Acknowledge that there may be a variety of opinions about the piece of writing.

Remember that you are in a writing group to help one another improve. It does not help the writer if you see problems with a piece of writing but don’t mention them because you’re afraid of hurting his/her feelings. Usually a writer would rather hear about a problem from the friendly, supportive members of his/her writing group than submit a finished draft with problems.

Talk about the way you responded as you were reading/listening . Sometimes it’s easier and more helpful to say, “When I read this sentence, I wasn’t sure if the paragraph was going to be about this or about that” than it is to say, “This sentence was confusing.”

Be specific. Instead of just saying, “The imagery needs work,” try to figure out which images you didn’t like and why (too familiar, too difficult to understand, etc.)

Whatever you say, imagine yourself on the receiving end of the comment. If this were your work, what would be helpful to you? How would you want people to provide you with criticism?

Tailor your comments to the writer and his/her needs. Ask what kind of feedback would be helpful and try to provide that. Ask the writer what sections s/he is most worried about. Remember that the requirements of their genre or taste may be substantially different from your own.

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GUIDELINES FOR RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Start by setting expectations and clarifying the kind of feedback you are looking for:

- Is this part of a larger piece of writing (a chapter from a novel, etc.)? If so, how does it fit with the rest of the project?
- How much work have you done on this piece of writing already? Is this a first draft, second draft, etc.?
- What do you think are the biggest strengths and weaknesses of this piece of writing right now?
- What kind of feedback, if any, have you received from others about this project?
- What kind of feedback would be most helpful to you at this stage?

Sometimes it is difficult to hear other people respond to your work, even if they have the best of intentions. Here are some tips that might help you react to other people's critiques in a positive way:

- **Remember that your writing group is trying to help you become a better writer.** Anything the group members say about your work is designed to help you make it stronger, more readable, and more effective.
- **Put yourself in the critic's shoes.** Remember when you've struggled to respond to someone else's work without hurting their feelings or being "too nice." Understand that this process is sometimes hard for both the reader and the writer.
- **Keep in mind that every reader is different.** What one reader finds confusing, another might find crystal clear, and tastes and genres vary. It is ultimately your writing, and you will have to decide which bits of feedback to act upon and which to ignore.
- **Try not to be defensive.** It's easy to think, "What do they know?" or "They just didn't get it," but keep in mind that while one reader's response may be the result of that reader's own misunderstanding, if several readers agree that a section is confusing or implies something you didn't intend, the problem probably lies with the writing and not with the readers.
- **Remember that a criticism of one piece of writing is not an indictment of you as a writer,** nor is it a critique of your worth as a person. It is simply a response to words that you wrote on one occasion.
- **Listen to praise with the same intensity that you listen to criticism.** Often, writers can obsess over critical comments and fail to hear all of the good things said about their writing. We can be our own worst critics and harshest detractors. Shut off that filter that says, "They don't really mean that," and accept sincere praise at face value.
- **Keep track of the kinds of feedback that you receive again and again.** Do readers often suggest changes in structure? Do your endings usually seem to need work? Do people frequently tell you that they don't understand words that you use? Do readers praise your clarity? Do they regularly tell you that your introductions are interesting? Use these observations to identify patterns of problems and strengths