

Korean Sijo (Short Song)

Pronounced Shi-jo, it is a concise Korean poetic form consisting of three lines, each containing 14-16 syllables, totaling 44-46 syllables. These lines feature a midpoint pause, akin to a caesura, although it need not adhere to a specific meter. The first half of each line encompasses six to nine syllables, while the second half should contain no fewer than five. Each line should consist of four groups of syllables that fall into natural groupings. 4/4/3/4 (total of 15 syllables) for example. Modern Sijo are often presented in six lines with breaks at the caesuras so the syllable groupings might 4/4 followed by a 4/3, or any combination of syllables as long as the total is 14-16. Sijo masters try to begin the final line with a group of 3 syllables, though it is not a requirement of the form.

Originally intended to be sung, Sijo typically explore themes of romance, metaphysics, or spirituality. Regardless of the topic, ideally, the first line introduces an idea or narrative, the second elaborates the theme, and the third offers closure, often with a twist. Traditional Sijo lacked titles, while contemporary ones may or may not be titled.

Sijo share some characteristics with other poetic forms more familiar to us. The 14-16 syllable line, for example, closely resembles the length of Haiku (no, having 17 syllables does not make something a Haiku). It also closely parallels the “American Sentence” as imagined by the beat poet, Alan Ginsberg. Emily Dickinson was known to favor poems written in *common meter*, which feature alternating lines of 4 beats and 3 beats (14 syllables per couplet). Common meter a staple in songs like *House of the Rising Sun*, *The Yellow Rose of Texas* and *Amazing Grace*.

Writing Sijo in English is a challenge, similar to the challenges of writing Japanese Haiku in English. The rhythms and syntax of English differ significantly from those of the Korean language. Our best hope is to capture the essence and spirit of Sijo in English rather than to reproduce the form perfectly.

Following are some examples of Traditional and Contemporary Sijo:

Traditional Sijo

The spring breeze melted snow on the hills then quickly disappeared.
I wish I could borrow it briefly to blow over my hair
And melt away the aging frost forming now about my ears.
— U Tak (1262–1342)

Oh that I might capture the essence of this deep midwinter night
And fold it softly into the waft of a spring-moon quilt
Then fondly uncoil it the night my beloved returns.
— .Hwang Chin-i (1522-1565)

Contemporary Sijo

Under our oak the grass withers,
so we plant petunias;
We water them, we coddle them,
burn their youth with chemicals.
Digesting their timely death,
the oak renews our summer shade.

- Anon.

Without the pines / the wind is silent;
without wind / the pines are still;
Without you / my heart is voiceless,
without that voice / my heart is dead.
What potent power / of yang and yin
pairs us / before we sleep?

-Anon

On the night I was born,
my father bought two bottles of champagne.
One he drank — one he saved
to drink with me when I turned twenty-one.
He didn't know that champagne
wouldn't keep that long — nor would he.

-David Jibson

Sijo Resources

The best source to learn about the history and writing of Sijo is the website of the Sejong Cultural Society: (<https://www.sejongculturalsociety.org/>).

The society's mission is to "advance awareness and understanding of Korea's cultural heritage among people in the United States by reaching out to the younger generations through contemporary creative and fine arts."

The site contains links to video lectures on Sijo as well as articles on writing and teaching Sijo at various levels. The society holds an annual competition open to residents of Canada and the U. S. for several age groups and publishes the winning entries.