

## **SIJO POETRY SLAM**

**GRADES:** 10th

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**TOPIC/THEME:** Culture, Poetry

**TIME REQUIRED:** One to two 40-50 minute class periods

### **BACKGROUND:**

Sijo is a poetic form of expression. It has existed in Korea for over a thousand years. It was used by all classes of society from common folk to the royal court. It represents a rich cultural legacy of an art form and ideas. It is more complex than haiku and presents an intriguing literary format which is used throughout the world today.

### **CURRICULUM CONNECTION:**

Sijo is both a historical and contemporary form of expression. As such, it can be used to examine aesthetics and attitudes about a historical time or as a format for contemporary student expression. It is well suited to a unit that includes abstract ideas and concepts which students have been asked to consider. At the completion of the unit the students are then asked to make connections to the unit ideas and express them in the form of a Sijo poem.

### **CONNECTION TO STUDENTS' LIVES:**

Many students devote a great deal of time listening and thinking about poetry set to music. This lesson uses the ancient Korean form of poetry, Sijo, to allow students to express themselves. If students choose to share their work with each other the teacher can facilitate a Sijo "poetry slam" in the classroom.

### **OBJECTIVES AND STANDARDS:**

1. Students will be able to explain the historical and cultural roots of Sijo.  
**NCSS Standard:** Theme I: CULTURE  
 Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity.  
**WI Standard:** E.12.5 Describe the ways cultural and social groups are defined.
2. Students will use the Sijo format to express themselves on an assigned topic.  
**NCSS Standard:** Theme 4: INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY  
 Social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of individual development and identity.  
**WI Standard:** E.8.13 Select examples of artistic expressions from several different cultures for the purpose of comparing and contrasting the beliefs expressed  
**Common Core Standards:** L 3 Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts  
 L 5 Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships and nuances in meaning

**MATERIALS REQUIRED:**

- One copy of Handout 1: “Sijo Primer” for each student.
- One copy of Handout 2: “Sijo Worksheet” for each student
- One copy of Handout 3: “What Do You Know About Sijo” for each student to be used as an assessment.

**INTRODUCTION and EXPLORATION:** As an introduction to this lesson play a selection of rap music that has a strong component of having the lyrics rhythmically spoken to more minimal musical background. (It is best to find something as current and appealing to students as possible. I suggest that you consult with students prior to the lesson and then view suggestions ahead of using them in class) Play this selection for your students and ask them what makes this so powerful? Discuss the impact and effect of rhythmic language in delivering ideas.

**PROCEDURE:****THE DELIVERY OF THE CONTENT:**

1. In order to expose the students to Sijo read poems to them from the following websites: <http://www.ahapoetry.com/sijo.htm> and [http://www.christinalovin.com/sijo\\_poems\\_65369.htm](http://www.christinalovin.com/sijo_poems_65369.htm).
2. After you have read ask the students to discuss what they heard, what stood out for them, what do they think is important in this type of poetry.
3. Now have student read handout 1- The Sijo Primer. Focus their reading by asking them to read and look for specific answers to the question of “What is Sijo and what is important in this type of poetry?”
4. After the students have read discuss Sijo, it’s historical roots and unique place in Korean culture.

**THE APPLICATION OF THE CONTENT:**

1. Students should apply the content by completing handout 2- The Sijo Worksheet. Students will create their own Sijo poem. You might leave the subject of the poem up to them or suggest an idea that you have been studying in the unit

**ASSESSMENT:** Handout 3- What Do You Know About Sijo, is an example of an assessment that can be used with students. The assessment shows three examples of poetry. Students are asked to determine which of these examples are Sijo poetry. They are provided with a space to give their rationale and are encouraged to use evidence from their lesson on Sijo. Alternatively, the teacher could assess their participation in a “Sijo Poetry Slam” in class and give them a grade for using the correct format and sharing their work with their peers.

**RESOURCES:**

Gross, Larry. *Sijo Primer*. <http://www.egroups.com/message/sijoforum/15>, 2000.

McCann, David R. *The Structure of The Korean Sijo*. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 36, 1976.

## HANDOUT 1: SIJO PRIMER

By Larry Gross

From Sijoforum (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/sijoforum/>)

An introduction for those new to sijo, a refresher for others.

*See the house fall at our feet, faithful timbers come crashing down;  
Those with our life in their hands join the termites, gnaw at beams.  
Till the dawn, hold me while we sleep -- in the cold, that is enough.*  
(TOP #14 May 1995; Canadian Writer's Journal, Fall 1995)

It seems to be the nature of mankind continually to try something new. That is just as true in poetry as it is in other areas. During the past forty years or so we have shown increasing interest in Asian verse patterns. The Middle Eastern ghazal has its devoted followers in the West, and Japanese forms like haiku, tanka, renga and haibun are now commonly found in small press and commercial poetry periodicals.

Journey through the Internet and you will see these forms blossoming everywhere. We Westerners have fallen in love with Asian patterns, patterns that connect us tenuously with ancient cultures so different from our own. So it is with the SIJO (see-szo or she-szo, with the J pronounced as the French pronounce Jacques). The roots of this lyrical Korean cousin of haiku and tanka stretch back well over 1000 years. It has been the most popular form of lyric verse in Korea for over 500 years, sung equally by Confucian scholars, members of the royal court and common folk. I say sung because the sijo is, at heart, a song. It is for the Koreans what the ballad is for Western Europeans. Originally, that word referred only to the music. The lyric was called tan-ga, an ancient verse based on still earlier Chinese patterns which also influenced Japanese poetry. Eventually, the term sijo (which is both singular and plural) came to be applied to both words and music.

Sijo is traditionally composed in three lines of 14-16 syllables each, between 44-46 total. A pause breaks each line approximately in the middle, somewhat like a caesura, as illustrated in this verse by Yun Son-do (1587 - 1671), one of Korea's most revered poets:

*You ask how many friends I have? Water and stone, bamboo and pine.  
The moon rising over the eastern hill is a joyful comrade.  
Besides these five companions, what other pleasure should I ask?*

Each half-line contains 6-9 syllables; the last half of the final line may be shorter than the rest, but should contain no fewer than 5 syllables. This natural mid-line break comes in handy, since printing restrictions often cause Western sijo to be divided and printed in 6 lines rather than 3. Indeed, some translators and poets have adopted this technique in their writing, so most editors accept either format.

The sijo may tell a story (as the ballad does), examine an idea (as the sonnet does), or express an emotion (as the lyric does). Whatever the purpose may be, the structure is the same: line 1 of the 3-line pattern introduces a situation or problem; line 2 develops or "turns" the idea in a different direction; and line 3 provides climax and closure. Think of the traditional 3-part structure of a narrative (conflict, complication, climax) or the 3-part division of the sonnet, and you'll see the same thing happening.

Though the ancients seldom titled their sijo, some modern writers, such as Elizabeth St Jacques in the following verse, frequently do:

*EVEN NOW*

*Just us two in the photograph  
his arm around my thin shoulder  
That strong limb I then leaned against  
would break so many falls  
We stood like this but only once  
but his strength holds me still*

[Elizabeth St Jacques, *Around the Tree of Light*(1995)]

To achieve the rolling, musical quality so characteristic of sijo, each half-line is further divided into two parts averaging 3-5 syllables each. Look at Elizabeth's "Even Now." Notice that each line usually divides into 2 phrases or word groups ("just us two / in the photograph"). Some people find parallels between this rhythm and that of Bible verses, and others find likeness to sprung rhythm popularized by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Regular meter is not vital to sijo, but that musical quality is.

Here is Yun Son-do once more, with a verse from his masterpiece, "The Fisherman's Calendar":

*When autumn arrives on the river, all the fish grow fatter.  
We savor unnumbered hours swept along by gentle currents.  
Man's dusty world fades away, doubling my joy with distance.*

Like haiku, sijo usually displays a strong foundation in nature, but, unlike that genre, it frequently employs metaphors, puns, allusions and other word play. And it loves to play with sounds. The first word (or two) of the final line is very important. It provides a "twist": a surprise of meaning, sound, tone or other device, much as the beginning of a final sestet does in the sonnet or the final line does in a haiku. That final sijo line is frequently lyrical, subjective or personal, and may very well supply a profound, witty, ironic, humorous or proverbial twist.

Remember the three characteristics that make the sijo unique – its basic structure, musical/rhythmic elements, and the twist. It is shorter and more lyrical than the ghazal. It is more roomy than the haiku, and it welcomes feelings and emotions which haiku either discourage or

disguise. It should please lovers of ballads, sonnets and lyrics, and the downplay of regular meter and rhyme should appeal to writers of free verse. In short, it's a fascinating challenge. Let us see your latest one.

*Carefully I lifted it from the branch, an empty cocoon,  
took it home and mounted it center stage on the mantel.  
Hear it speak? What does it say of living, what of the dead?*  
(Parnassus, Winter 1996)

Text and adaptations by Larry Gross unless noted otherwise.

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<http://www.egroups.com/message/sijoforum/15>

## HANDOUT 2: Sijo Worksheet

Part 1: Deconstructing a classic Sijo Poem.

Look for the following elements in the Sijo poem below.

- Number each of the 3 lines
- Count the syllables in each line and put the number at the end of the line
- Find the two separate but connected sections of each line. Put a slash at the pause between them.
- Check the math. Does each half-line have 6-9 syllables? (The half-lines should not contain fewer than 5 syllables) Does each line have 14-16 syllables? Does the entire Sijo have 44-46 syllables?
- Find the “Conflict”, “Complication” and “Climax” and identify them.

Untitled

Yang Sah Uhn 楊士彥 (1517-1584)

*Soaring high though a mountain may be, it is a mere mound beneath Heaven  
Climb and climb, and no summit cannot be reached  
Yet people stay at its base saying the mountain is too high.*

What is your reaction to this Sijo? What is it trying to say? Where is the twist that we read about in the “*Sijo Primer*?”

Part 2: Create your own Sijo poem.

What is your topic? (It can be narrative and tell a story or thematic and concentrate on a single idea.)

Try writing your own Sijo poem on these lines. Below each line are some helpful directions and reminders. *Please note that after the pause ( / ) the second half of the line must have at least 5 syllables to follow Sijo's format. A traditional pattern is 9 syllables / followed by 5 syllables but there is room for flexibility to increase the syllables **after** the pause, but the line should still be a total of 14-16 syllables.*

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Line 1 – introduce the “Conflict” in 14-16 syllables with a “pause” in the middle.

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Line 2 –introduce a “Complication” make it memorable- 14-16 syllables with a pause.

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Line 3 – The “Climax” complete your Sijo with a twist - 14-16 syllables with a pause

### HANDOUT 3: WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT SIJO?

This brief assessment will check how much you know about the Korean literary form of Sijo. There are 3 poems below. For each poem determine if it is Sijo and then explain your answer. Use what you have learned about the structure of Sijo to support your answer.

#### Example 1.

##### **Untitled**

U-Taek (1262-1342)

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.

Is this Sijo? (*circle one*)

Yes

No

Why?

#### Example 2.

My life is Jello  
Sitting and waiting in the bowl  
Patiently to gel

Is this Sijo? (*circle one*)

Yes

No

Why?



Example 3.

Deep blue stream, don't boast so loud  
of your passing through these green hills.  
Though your way runs swiftly down to the sea  
there is no such easy return.  
While the bright moon floods these lonely hills  
why not pause? Then go on, if you will.

Is this Sijo? (*circle one*)

Yes

No

Why?