

Brother, Can You Spare 17 Syllables

by [Tina Owen](#)



An ancient form of poetry lifts spirits during the current economic downturn.

As the United States faced the ordeal that came to be known as the Great Depression, the simple lyrics of one song seemed to distill the very essence of the nation's emotional, psychological, and economic turmoil. "Brother, can you spare a dime?" crooned Bing Crosby in 1932, striking a chord with millions of people reeling from homelessness, bankruptcy, hunger, unemployment, and despair.

Now, some 80 years later, as the "Great Recession" strikes home, a different kind of art form cuts to the heart of the matter. While most economic pundits offer chapter and verse on the current recession, one academic presents his case much more succinctly—in haiku:

*In the warm April,
before a morning shower,
She strips her assets.*

Forget macroeconomics; think smaller than micro. Stephen T. Ziliak, 96PhD, a professor of economics at Roosevelt University in Chicago, offers "haiku economics"—an unorthodox yet surprisingly effective effort to understand modern business and finance by way of an ancient literary tradition.

Throughout history, art has helped people process difficult times, to make sense of what's happening in their lives. While any form of poetry is intrinsically economical with words, a haiku poem takes the concept to the extreme with a mere 17 syllables. Such scarcity of sound forces the poet to operate within a constrained budget, to deliver, in Ziliak's phrase, "maximum-impact stories,

insights, and meanings at minimum cost." Ironically, haiku does more with less.

Haiku economics helps bridge the artificial divide between art and science. Writing short-verse poems teaches students to relate to abstract economic theories by making connections with their own experiences, says Ziliak. After all, behind every economic theory lurks a real-life human story: a young single mother trying to get by without health insurance; a student attempting to find a job in a marketplace oversaturated with applicants; a family facing the loss of their home after property values plummet and mortgage rates soar.

"What's more efficient and precise than a haiku?" asks Ziliak. "With its low and constant marginal cost of just 17 syllables, it's the most efficient form of story-telling. And economic theory is all about precision and efficiency."

A surprising number of people from all walks of life have latched onto haiku as a way to lift their spirits during the economic downturn. If "Brother, Can You Spare A Dime?" spoke to millions in the 1930s with its anthem for the common man, then haiku offers a reassuringly minimalist and egalitarian view of the world to people bewildered by the staggering complexity of today's crisis.

Perhaps haiku meshes perfectly with the *zeitgeist* of these troubled economic times. Ziliak's research suggests that periods of scarcity produce more poetry than times of abundance, and he's noticed his students' poems take on a darker tone as times become tougher.

A haiku contest organized in 2008 by the New York Times' "Freakonomics" blog attracted more than 300 poems, with one entry reading:

*Demand curve slopes down
Because the more cake I eat,
The less cake I want.*

After National Public Radio's Planet Money team issued a recession haiku challenge, hundreds of listeners responded with poems that set out their economic woes in 17 careful syllables. One entry summed up an economic reality that's become a fact of life for many people these days:

*The furlough begins.
Salaries cut by ten percent.
Fridays by the pool!*

When the Wall Street Journal ran an article about hard-hit financiers turning to poetry to make sense of the crisis, the journalist interviewed Ziliak. Later, a Chronicle of Higher Education writer conducted an interview and then (with Ziliak's help) wrote the question-and-answer article entirely in haiku.

"I always thought the literary elite would pick up on economic haiku—perhaps the New Yorker magazine would publish it," says the professor. "Instead, the idea is catching on with financial traders as much as with poets and political speechwriters. The unemployed can't seem to resist it."

Part of haiku's appeal probably comes from its clear images and simple structure—it seems easy enough for even a grade-schooler to grasp. Indeed, most people first encounter haiku at grade school, when they discover the myriad creative possibilities inherent in one short verse broken

down into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables.

"Haiku's surface is deep," says Ziliak, referring to the poetry's ability to convey universal ideas or feelings through the imagistic use of concrete objects, many of them derived from nature. A spider in a haiku may symbolize a bank, while an egg represents savings.

Ziliak became interested in the poetry more than 20 years ago, after meeting and becoming close friends with Etheridge Knight, a leading African-American poet, who insisted that Ziliak should find a way to combine haiku and economics. When they met, Knight had just won the American Book Award for *The Essential Etheridge Knight*, which included 35 of his haiku.

At first, Ziliak admits, he didn't get what Knight was proposing. Appropriately enough, his breakthrough came in 2001 at a pub in Atlanta, Georgia, where he and friends were discussing poetry over drinks.

"Haiku derives from renga, a collaborative poem written by Japanese poets who were often fueled by a good supply of sake," he explains. "That evening, I realized that economics—like haiku—is fundamentally about human life. Then the haiku started pouring out."

The next day, Ziliak tried out his new theory on a class of his students at Georgia Institute of Technology, where he was teaching. He entered the large auditorium filled with engineering, computer science, and math students with some trepidation. It was difficult enough getting the students he privately thought of as "big brains" to be excited about a social science. Surely they'd scoff at his poetic license?

Actually, students found that haiku offered an access point into abstract theories and impenetrable rhetoric; it overcame their indifference curves, encouraged them to apply a morality framework to their cost-benefit analysis. Poetry became Ziliak's teaching equivalent of a stimulus package. It even helped him win a Faculty Member of the Year Award that same year at Georgia Tech.

"The standard approach to teaching economics is the supply-and-demand chart, but that abstract approach doesn't connect with about 90 percent of students," explains Ziliak, who'll often spontaneously scribble a haiku next to a graph or formula to help make a point.

Haiku isn't Ziliak's only unusual method to help make theories meaningful. In his "Introduction to Economics" classes, he regularly assigns readings from John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*—the famous story of the Joad family's attempts to survive the Great Depression without losing their humanity—to illustrate classic economic theories such as supply and demand.

When he moved to Roosevelt University in 2003, Ziliak found that Chicago students also loved haiku economics. Although he regularly assigns one haiku for bonus points during exams, students often submit extra.

Eric Egler, a Roosevelt student completing his master's degree in economics, first encountered haiku economics during Ziliak's "Rhetoric, Writing, and Economics" class. The professor has offered economics students such an "intensive reading, intensive writing" rhetoric course at every university he's worked—Emory, Georgia Tech, Bowling Green, and now Roosevelt. (While studying for his Ph.D. in economics at Iowa, Ziliak also became the first graduate of the UI's Ph.D. certificate program in rhetorics of inquiry, known as POROI (<http://poroi.grad.uiowa.edu/about>).

Founded in 1980, POROI's areas of interest include "communicative opportunities and problems that arise at the intersections between disciplines.")

Egler admits that initially he only saw the "communicative problems" between poetry and economics. He struggled to summarize weighty concepts, before realizing that "often, there's a better, imagistic way to use words more efficiently and powerfully."

Economic topics he's tackled in haiku form include NAIRU (Non-Accelerating Inflation Rate of Unemployment) and the relationship of U.S. agricultural subsidies to overproduction. In 17 syllables, that complex topic boils down to:

*Farmer in Chile
Knows U.S. farm policy
Steals corn from landlord.*

In a reverse flow of inspiration, one of his poems even led to a lengthy and detailed research paper. Egler is a fan of Ziliak's unusual classroom approach. "After all, what is teaching?" he says. "Isn't it supposed to foster a situation that encourages you to learn on your own? The best teachers don't tell you the answer; they give you the tools to find out. That's especially important with a discipline like economics."

Ziliak maintains that haiku encourages students to focus; it instills discipline and critical thinking, improves their writing and observational skills, and stimulates open discussion. Egler notes that haiku helped his writing become more concise and precise, with "less filler material." He can even offer statistics to back up his claim. In the writing component of the GRE test Egler took before Ziliak's course, he scored 4.5. After haiku economics, he achieved a score of 6—the maximum on a 6-point scale.

Not everyone is a fan, of course. Ziliak admits to a fair share of detractors and critics—like the colleague who snidely suggested that he add color to his haikus by putting them in the blue recycle bin. Ziliak notes that professors who are "a little too stuck to the blackboard" may feel threatened and scared by haiku, which requires writers to expose their views, experiences, and feelings.

Nick Krafft, an economics student at Notre Dame, admits that he was skeptical when he first heard of haiku economics. "Ziliak has certainly had some important heterodox contributions to economics, [but] I didn't really believe that haikus really added another dimension of thinking to [the field]," he notes on the "Open Economics" (<http://openeconomicsnd.wordpress.com>) blog maintained by Notre Dame students and alumni. Then he realized that "just like Facebook, Twitter, and blogging, haikus make economics more accessible. They get students thinking about economics who otherwise would not."

For his part, Ziliak has taught every kind of economic theory in the last 13 years, and he knows this one has merit. This past October, the International Journal of Pluralism and Economics Education published one of his papers on haiku economics, including a guide to help university and high school economics instructors apply his methods in their classes.

Whether haiku economics takes off widely remains to be seen. For now, Ziliak is content to explore his poetry both in the classroom and outside. An easily recognizable figure, he's often seen walking

around his Chicago neighborhood, talking out loud and counting on his fingers. Seeking and finding inspiration in everyday scenes, he melds science and art—in 17 precisely beautiful syllables.