

May 16, 2014 (April letter)

Dear Samantha,

I loved your April letter!! You said you didn't have much to write about – but that's not how I found it. There were plenty of cool things for my enjoyment – and they were all packaged in tight little containers.

The first was your lovely “descriptive phrase”. It made me think of the many nights I have spent around a campfire with my own marshmallow stick, how often I tried to roast the perfect golden marshmallow, and how often I failed as my patience ran out or the fire got too close. You captured the process perfectly – plus added the brilliant touch of the friends' perspective. Did you know you did all this?

The second was your fantastic economy of words. I have spent many hours (and commented on many student papers) about the importance of cutting out unnecessary words and finding the best word for what you want to communicate. I always remember the advice of E.B. White (the author of Charlotte's Web):

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell. (Strunk and White 1979:23)

It looks to me like you did this on your “descriptive phrase” – big time! I guess it's something I have to improve in my letters to you!

Then I looked at the second page – and laughed at your lovely haikus. As you point out, working with a structure like Haiku is hard – but structure is also your friend.

Without structure you would be a blob of skin and muscle like a giant slug. Without structure we would be listening to the hiss of static rather than a call for breakfast or the ‘get up and dance’ sounds of Kluz. In fact, you wouldn't be able to “go bake a cake” without the guiding structure of the recipe.

It is often the structure of things that makes them work. For example, it is when vibrations get structured into notes and notes get structured into chords that beautiful music emerges. It's also when the sounds we make are structured into words and the words are structured into sentences that we can communicate.

It's even structure that makes many jokes work – or rather, the violation of structures. Many jokes are funny because the punch line reverses some expectations we have about the structure set up by the lead-in. That's the basis of most knock-knock jokes, for example.

Structure is also the friend of writers. I enjoy the challenges imposed by the structure of sonnets and rhyming couplets when writing poetry. It's a great way to inspire new ideas, words, and images. Just like music, dancing, soccer, or cooking – it's all about playing with the structure.

I appreciate how your haiku poems do a wonderful job of juxtaposing two images that don't often fit together – like haikus and cake or rats, shoes, and cats. You have captured the spirit nicely – and made your Grandfather proud at the same time!