

KENT JOHNSON

33 Rules of Poetry for Poets 23 and under

after Nicanor Parra

1. Study grammar. Only by knowing grammar, knowing clearly the parts of speech and sensing their mysterious ways in sentence parts, will you be able to write interesting poetry. For poetry is all about grammar's interesting ways.
2. Don't suck up to other poets. Well, OK, you will do so, of course, like all poets do, but when you do, feel it in your bones. Take this self-knowledge and turn it into a weapon you wield without mercy.
3. Read the old Greeks and Romans in the original. Studying Greek or Latin is one of the best ways of becoming a man or woman of grammar. Well, Duh, as they say here in Freeport at Tony's Oyster Bar.
4. Ask yourself constantly: What is the fashion? Once you answer, consider that noun, participial, infinitive, or prepositional phrase (the answer will mutate over time) your mortal enemy.
5. Ask yourself constantly: What is the worth of poetry? When you answer, "It is nothing," you have climbed the first step. Prepare, without presumption, to take the next one.
6. Don't drink and drive. Better yet, just don't drink.
7. At the second step, should you reach it, don't look down: You might get dizzy from the height and fall into an alcoholic heap. Trust me.
8. Read Constantine Cavafy's great poem, "The First Step." Meditate upon it.
9. Don't worry if you have social anxiety at poetry events. Most everyone else will be as secretly anxious as you are.
10. Read Ed Dorn carefully, starting with *Abhorrences*, working your way back.

11. Remember that the greater part of it is merely show and acquired manners. Poets can be mean and they will try to kill you.
12. Ponder Bob Dylan's classic line: "I ain't gonna live on Maggie's farm no more."
13. After reading Roland Barthes's famous essay on it, watch professional wrestling at least once a month. Reflect on how the spectacle corresponds, profoundly, to the poetry field.
14. Go on your nerve, and whenever you feel you shouldn't, do.
15. Don't smoke cigarettes, even if you think it makes you look cool to others (or to yourself).
16. Go by the musical phrase and not the metronome. But when convenient, or just because it's beautiful, go by the metronome.
17. Don't let anyone tell you MFA programs are bad. MFA programs are really great—you can get a stipend and live poor and happy for two or three years.
18. Make sure you act like an insufferable ass in your MFA program. Never suck up to other poets. Traditional or avant-garde...
19. If you don't know another language, make it your mission, as I suggested earlier, to learn one. Translation is the very soil of poetry. Its mystery.
20. The Web is a wonderful development. Don't make yourself a slave to its "cool" corporation of the moment.
21. Whenever you are in doubt about being a poet, instead of, say, being an architect or a physicist, or something of the superior sort, remind yourself of Leibniz's immortal question: "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (Keep this question in your pocket against your heart. Because no one can ever answer it, it is the key to your purpose.)
22. Write political poems. But remember: The politics you are likely protesting are present, structurally, inside poetry, its texts and institutions. Write political poems with a vengeance.
23. Read Wittgenstein. Don't ever feign you understand him. He didn't understand himself! Steal from his genius ammo dump.
24. When someone tells you there are two kinds of poetry, one of them bad, one of them good, chuckle gently.

25. Don't ever use a Power Point® at a Conference on Innovative Poetry. Power Points make you look like a tool!

26. Remember what I said (sorry to be so pedantic!) about grammar. If you can't confidently analyze a sentence, forget about poetry. Poetry is the art of language, right? Well, if poets cannot be the experts on grammar, then something is wrong. A generalized disregard of linguistics and grammar, by the way, is one of the main reasons the so-called *post-avant* is in crisis. I'm dead serious.

27. If you feel you have wasted your young life so far writing poetry, that writing poetry was a fool's, a loser's pursuit, and you sense despair and absolute darkness before you, well, you are surely on the second step. There is no shame in turning back and leaving it all behind. Turn back without regret. On the other hand, if you are crazed and brave and you put your queer shoulder to the wheel, much wonder, blessedness, and inexpressible sorrow awaits.

28. Travel. Go to Asia, South America, Africa, Micronesia, North Dakota.

29. Read Eliot Weinberger, starting with both *What I Heard about Iraq* and *Karmic Traces*, working your way back.

30. Read Kenneth Rexroth's *One Hundred Poems from the Chinese* and *One Hundred More Poems from the Chinese*. If someone tells you there are two kinds of poetry, chuckle gently.

31. Look in the mirror and be honest. You are going to die. But right now you're alive... Look really hard. This is fucking astonishing. Why is there something rather than nothing?

32. Determine, as of now, that should you have children sometime, your devotion to poetry will somehow enrich their lives and not be a cause for their suffering. Listen to me and don't take this as melodramatic, middle-aged fluff. Quite a few kids have died for lack of what a poet found there.

33. On the third step, should you get there, its blank humming sound, realize this is almost surely the last step. Pump your legs up and down. Victory will be (as they used to say in the days of Deep Image and Language, back when poetry was innocent yet) dark, opaque, and strange.