

Notes: Poet Richard Hugo's Advice in "Writing off the Subject"

-- **"I hope you learn to write like you."** – If what I say (or what anybody says) doesn't work for you, let it go. You can become yourself. You can force yourself to write in many ways, but forcing yourself feels like work. We do work only for money. There's very little money in creative writing, so write what feels good, write whatever you enjoy writing just for the sake of writing it.

-- **let truth conform to music:** Pay attention to word sounds, and let the meanings take care of themselves. (And they will – our brain can't see two words together without looking for a meaning, an idea or an image)

-- **you don't have to know what things mean in order to write poetry** [you can describe, stay concrete, play with random words, etc]

-- **"How do I know what I think until I see what I've said"** – giving up control. You can try to control your writing, but that's not fun – you're not likely to be surprised, and your readers won't be, either.

Don't try to control it – throw stuff out, see what's interesting. This idea allows you to go beyond yourself, be smarter, more interesting, etc., than you know how to be. If you plan out your writing, you're probably not being creative. Writing can feel like play; if it feels like work, change.

-- **You FEEL, instinctively or intuitively, that the poem is done. There is no standard, model, or perfect poem.** This is the beauty of creativity. Yes, you can write a limerick and then you'd know you're done with it when it has 5 lines, rhymes, and rhythm. But then you are just writing to a known standard – that's creative, but at your MOST creative, there is no standard. You start out and see where it leads. Since there's no standard to tell you when you're done, you just have to feel it.

-- when writing a poem, the next thing you write always belongs – it fits there because you put it there

-- if you want to communicate, use a telephone (or an essay...). There is no reader over your shoulder. You are writing for yourself. Some ideas ARE important to share – but if you choose that topic, you limit your poem.

-- be willing to say surprising things – a poem is not you. It isn't about you, the poet.

-- knowing can be limiting – if the town's population is 19 but the poem needs the sound 17, use 17

-- there's no need to explain in a poem. In art, as in life, things happen without cause.

-- it's OK for a poet to make arbitrary rules for his/herself – it's one way of prioritizing the music, the sounds of words. Also see his example about “cascade” as word-play

-- take an *interesting* path. – Let “what's interesting” be your only guideline. There's no “wrong” way to write a poem but seek what feels best, what seems interesting -

-- “Get off the subject and write the poem.”

-- Final advice, from Mr. H.: Now, forget all this advice the next time you go to write. You can't write creatively by following guidelines (I've tried – it isn't fun or helpful). These ideas may be useful to you, they may shape your ideas of what poems can be and your process for writing them, but it will likely not help to be thinking of these things as you write. Maybe the trick is to find what works for you and, after the fact, confirm that these ideas worked for R. Hugo and/or M. Hagemann, too. The only real way to become a writer, to develop your creative-writing ability, is to write.