

WRITE ON

National
Literacy
Trust

ALCS

**RUNNING
A POETRY SLAM
IN SCHOOL:
A TOOLKIT**

Poetry slams: an overview



What is a poetry slam?

A poetry slam is a competitive form of performance poetry. It was invented by Chicago poet Marc Smith in 1984 and spread to New York in 1988. Slam pioneers wanted to invent a way of doing poetry that was different from the traditional poetry scene, which they saw as stuffy and elitist.

How does it work?

In a slam, poets perform for a live audience. Their poems must be their own work and less than three minutes long. Poets are not allowed to use music, props or other aids.

The audience is the ultimate arbitrator of quality and is encouraged to be vocal in their opinions. Judges are often selected at random from the audience. This system is why the form is so popular: it creates a communal experience where poetry can be delivered straight to a live audience.

Why use slam in school?

- The slam format draws heavily on forms of spoken word such as the poetry of the African diasporas and Hip-Hop. It is effective for young people because slam poetry is a link between Hip-Hop/Grime and the poetry they study for GCSE.
- Slam is an excellent way to get kids writing because the slam format is open to all types of poetry. There is no correct or incorrect way to do it. The aim is simply to entertain the audience with your verse. I once performed a set that consisted of a Shakespearean sonnet followed by free verse and then a Hip-Hop piece!
- With slam, teachers are free from marking and can take on the role of facilitator, while students are free from the pressure to use correct grammar and spelling – of course this is important, but delivering your message takes priority in a slam competition.

- Slam engages young people with the power of the written and spoken word. YouTube is full of talented writers and poets using the slam format and is an exciting and accessible way for children to engage with contemporary poetry.
- The process of organising a slam develops many soft skills too; confidence is the most obvious one, but slam also develops teamwork, critical discernment and self-expression.

No grammar? Anything goes? Are you sure this is a good idea?

Slam is not without its critics. Some poets and academics dislike the competitive aspect of slam, saying it degrades artistic merit by putting value on the ability to invoke (sometimes cheap) reactions from the audience rather than valuing the poetry specifically.

I can sympathise with these negative views of slam. It is possible for a lazy writer to win by stage presence alone, and more subtle, skilful poems can be drowned out by bombastic competitors.

However, a poem that is well-crafted and brilliantly performed will always surpass less well-written pieces. Slam makes poetry exciting for huge numbers of people who wouldn't usually enjoy poetry per se. The slam "gives an opening to those people who may feel they do not have a role in poetry and writing."¹

¹ Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz Words in Your Face, A Guided Tour through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam (2008) Soft Skull Press

Preparing for and running your poetry slam



Deciding where to hold it

A great thing about the slam form is that it is adaptable.

Why not:

- Turn your library into a literary hub by running a lunchtime slam – open to all!
- Build a sense of community within your tutor group by running a slam during tutor time
- Fulfil national curriculum goals for speaking and listening by having a slam in an English lesson
- Have your GCSE drama group organise a slam
- Raise the profile of poetry in your school by having a school-wide slam. Start by holding mini-slams within tutor groups, then get each tutor group champion to compete with the others from their year group. The winner from each year group can take part in an inter-year competition to decide the ultimate school poetry slam champion.

Pre-slam activities

1. Create

The aim here is to get words onto paper. Believe me, it's harder than it sounds! Even for a professional writer the hardest part is getting started.

Here are some ideas to get past the dreaded objection, "I don't know what to write":

- The creative process should be divorced from the editing process. Encourage your students to write without worrying about spelling, grammar and punctuation. Tell them to focus only on telling their story.
- Challenge your students to "free write" – to keep writing no matter what for a specific time period, even if it is gibberish. The goal is to generate material that can later be turned into a poem.

- Ask your students to write about a specific event – this is often easier than something abstract. If they run into difficulties have them focus on clarifying the event in their imagination first and then the right words ought to come.
- Try the "cut-up method": Cut out words and have your students arrange them into a poem.

2. Edit

Slam is written for an audience, not exclusively for therapy or self-expression. Therefore, we need to edit our work with our audience in mind.

Questions to ask your students to help them edit their poem:

- Have you got rid of everything that is superfluous to your message?
- Is your message clear? Is it easy to understand your point?
- What rhetorical techniques can you use? Rhyme, rhythm, repetition, puns, wordplay, imagery, other techniques?
- What images have you come up with? Do they make sense? How can you make them clearer?

Why not set up an online group or message board where your students can post their poems and talk about ways they can improve?

3. Practise

It is preferable but not essential to learn a poem off by heart. Some videos of me discussing other performance techniques are available at www.literacytrust.org.uk/competitions/write_on

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The event

You will need

- Performers
- Time-keeper
- Audience
- Scorecards (numbered 1-10)
- 3-5 judges
- Prize for the winner

Slams usually have an MC to host the event. You could choose a student or invite a teacher or ex-student to be the MC for your slam. Slams also often feature well-known poets who perform a short set before and halfway through the slam competition. Why not invite a local poet to perform at your slam? Websites such as www.bookapoet.com and www.applesandsnakes.com can help with this.

Rules

1. Each poet has three minutes to perform.
 2. Scores out of 10 are given by the judges. Judges can be professional poets or just picked from the audience.
- Scores can be given using specific criteria such as “quality of writing”, “quality of performance” and “audience reaction”.
 - With five judges, for consistency sometimes the highest and lowest scores are discounted and the three remaining scores make up the final number.
 - The winner is the poet with the highest score.

Follow-up activities

Hopefully, through taking part in the slam, at the very least your students should have a positive experience with live poetry. They will have increased in confidence and perhaps some who normally struggle with writing will have done well on the strength of their performances.

The slam can be an impetus for class debate on the merits of slam as a form. Students could critique and discuss new media and its relationship to poetry; for example, performance poetry lends itself very well to YouTube, so videos have become a common way for performers to publicise their poems. What could this mean for the future of poetry?

Following on from this you could also use the students’ experience of performing in the slam as a stimulus for discussion about ownership of their poems. How would they feel about other people performing their poem without permission, or using ideas from their poem without crediting them? It’s a great opportunity to explore the world of copyright and creative ownership.

Other ideas:

- Produce a book of your finalists’ poems
- Film the event for the school and use it to enter the Write On competition
- Form a slam poetry club for your school
- Hold an inter-school poetry slam with other schools in your local area.

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