

# Study Guide For Teachers

## *Mayhem Poets*

Slam in the Schools

**Contact:**

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### ABOUT THE PROGRAM:

Get ready for a verbal adventure as these vibrant poets take the stage, and present poetry like you've never heard it before. This accessible collective of young poets show how meter, rhyme, and verbal dexterity are not only the concerns of the poets children study in school, but also of contemporary slam performers.

Students and teachers will love the dynamism and excitement of these verbal veterans, and may be inspired to write and perform spoken-word poetry for themselves. This art form combines verbal mastery, originality, and creativity with oral performance skills in a way that is engaging, inspirational, and fun.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS:

Spoken-word poetry has been around for literally hundreds of years. Many of the poems that students still study in books began as performance pieces. William Shakespeare is probably the best-known performance poet, because all of his plays were written in verse and were meant to be performed. In fact, it was Shakespeare's actors who finally wrote his plays down so that we can study them today. Without this effort, all of his great plays would have died on the stage, soon after they were performed.

Spoken-word also has strong roots in the West African griot tradition. The griot was a storyteller and historian who spoke or sung the history of his people, and was the basis of an oral tradition that is still alive today among Africans in their homeland, and in the Diaspora.

Slam poetry first saw its rise in Chicago in 1985 at a jazz club called the Green Mill where a construction worker named Marc Smith (a.k.a. Papi) structured a lyrical boxing match pitting poets one-on-one, to be judged by audience members chosen randomly, who scored the poets from 0-10. From there it caught fire in larger cities such as New York and San Francisco. In New York City, the Nuyorican Poet's Café in the east village eventually became the Mecca of Performance Poetry (largely in part to the vision of its co-founders Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman). Spoken-word poetry as an art form often merges with theater, hip-hop, music, and even stand-up comedy as poets work to impress the crowd and win high scores from the judges. Poets sometimes wear costumes, incorporate songs or chants in their poetry, and can have a funny, serious, or political message. Now, slam poetry can also be seen on television, or even Broadway *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam*.



### **LEARNING GOALS:**

- Students will actively listen to understand spoken-word poetry
- Students will understand why poets write, and some of the topics that inspire them
- Students will understand the cultural influences that led to the rise of spoken-word poetry
- Students will understand the elements and principles of spoken-word poetry

### **BEFORE THE PROGRAM**

1. Find out what students know about slam or spoken-word poetry. Ask how many of them are familiar with Def Poetry Jam, or how many listen to rap music. You may also bring in some examples (listed in the “Resources” section) to listen to as a class. Ask students to compare spoken-word poetry to written poetry. Is there a difference in style or tone? Are there differences in rhyme structure or meter?
2. Explore the differences between Standard Written English and colloquial speech. What can you do or say in colloquial English that would be unacceptable in written English? Would they expect to see some of these differences in the performance, or would they expect the poets to use Standard Written English in their performance? Why or why not?
3. Have students write a short “boast” rap about themselves and perform it for the class. A boast is a traditional hip-hop form that gives students the opportunity to write about themselves, and explore why they are special or different from their peers. Most students will be familiar with this form if they listen to rap music.

### **RESOURCES**

#### On the web:

[www.poetryslam.com](http://www.poetryslam.com) – general info, history, etc.

[www.slampapi.com](http://www.slampapi.com) – more info from the father of slam

[www.brickcity.net](http://www.brickcity.net) – for students to submit and post their poetry online

[www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html](http://www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html) - a great resource for organizing a classroom slam; useful lesson plans for language arts teachers. Also includes links to other useful sites that house poetry slam ideas.

<http://www.poetryteachers.com/index.html> - describes tips for teaching poetry and having your students perform poetry.

#### In the library:

Eleveld, M. & Smith, M. (2003). *The Spoken Word Revolution*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Media Fusion.

Glazner, G. M. (ed.). (2000). *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. San Francisco: Manic D Press.

### **AFTER THE PROGRAM:**

1. Discuss students’ impressions of the performance as a class. What were they surprised by? What do they remember? What was their favorite part? Have students write a poem in response to one of the poems they heard in the performance. Consider having them perform for the class or sending their responses to the artists.
2. Work with your class to organize a school-wide poetry slam. This is easier than you’d think; a great way to energize the whole school community, and celebrate students’ hard work. You and your students can decide whether the slam will be competitive or not, and can organize prizes for the winners, or participants. You need to find a program M.C. and a scorekeeper (with a calculator and list of participants) if you are going to choose a winner. Often, slam judges are chosen randomly right before the competition begins. Judges can be students, teachers, parents, or staff. All they need is paper and a big marker, with the instructions to score poetry from 1-10 (a 1 means “this is hardly even a poem” and a 10 means “this is the best thing I’ve ever heard.”) You can choose to register performers ahead of time, or have students sign up once they get to the slam. Some great extensions include publishing the poetry that is performed, and getting the community involved by sponsoring prizes, or advertising in a slam program. If you are not ready for a school-wide slam, you can easily host a class slam with students judging each other.
3. Work with students to explore another genre of performance poetry – Shakespeare. Choose your favorite monologue or soliloquy and print it out in a large font (18 pts.). Then, cut the paper so that there is only one or two lines of text on each piece. You need to have one sheet (and only one) for each student in your class. If necessary, you can break one line into two so that each piece contains one thought or idea. Have students stand in a circle and give each student a piece of the speech. Then, have students read their line, one-by-one, around the circle. Encourage students to play with their line and try reading it in different ways. After going around several times, ask students to add a gesture or movement to their line as they read. Then, ask them to paraphrase their line in their own language. Not only will this help students understand Shakespeare’s language, it will help them understand the elements of performance.

## **ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE:**

Think of all the hard work that went into preparing this performance. Many people have worked for several months to bring it all together just for you.

The audience plays a very important role during the performance. They are one of the most important reasons the performance can take place. When you come into the theater, please remember to do the following:

1. Make sure you use the restroom before you get to your seat in the theater. You won't want to miss anything! And please remember that there is no open food, drink or gum in the theatre.
2. When the lights go out, the performance is about to begin. This is your cue to be quiet and ready to listen and watch. You will want to show respect to your friends and other audience members by remaining seated and still for the entire performance.
3. After the performers have finished each piece, you may show your appreciation with applause. How do we know that the piece is finished? The performers will be absolutely quiet, if there is a conductor, his hands and baton will come down.
4. At the end of the performance, the performers will stand and bow, and you can— you guessed it, applaud some more!
5. After the performance is over, the lights will come back on, but stay seated until someone in charge dismisses your group.
6. Most important of all – enjoy the performance!!

## **CONNECTIONS TO THE NEW YORK STATE LEARNING STANDARDS:**

### **The NYS State Standards for the Arts**

Standard 1: Students will actively engage in the processes that constitute creation and performance in the arts (dance, music, theatre, and visual arts) and participate in various roles in the arts.

Standard 2: Students will be knowledgeable about and make use of the materials and resources available for participation and arts in various roles.

Standard 3: Students will respond critically to a variety of works in the arts, connecting the individual work to other works and to other aspects of human endeavor and thought.

Standard 4: Students will develop an understanding of the personal and cultural forces that shape artistic communication and how the arts in turn shape the diverse cultures of past and present society.

### **APPLICATION OF NY STATE STANDARDS OUTSIDE THE ARTS:**

English Language Arts Standard 2: Language for Literary Response and Expression

Students will read and listen to oral, written, and electronically produced texts and performances from American and world literature; relate texts and performances to their own lives, and develop an understanding of the diverse social, historical, and cultural dimensions the texts and performances represent.

English Language Arts Standards 3: Language for Critical Analysis and Evaluation

Students will listen, speak, read, and write for critical analysis and evaluation, ideas, information, and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria.

English Language Arts Standard 4: Language for Social Interaction

Students will listen, speak, read, and write for social interaction. Students will use oral and written language that follows the accepted conventions of the English language for effective social communication with a wide variety of people.

### **NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MUSIC THAT APPLY TO THIS FIELD TRIP:**

Content Standard 6: Listening to, analyzing and describing music

Content Standard 7: Evaluating music and music performances

Content Standard 8: Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts

Content Standard 9: Understanding music in relation to history and culture