

A Teacher's Resource Guide for
The Mayhem Poets



Slam in the Schools

Thursday, January 28

10 a.m.

Schwab Auditorium

Presented by

The Center for the Performing Arts at Penn State

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Welcome to the Center for the Performing Arts presentation of The Mayhem Poets

Thank you for joining us for the 2015–2016 season of the Center for the Performing Arts School-Time Matinee series—a laboratory of live theatre!

We encourage you to integrate the arts into your classroom, particularly as related to the performance you and your students are attending. For questions about the performance or suggestions for ways to incorporate it into your curriculum, feel free to contact me.

However, because we know your classroom time is precious, we have provided teaching materials and pointed out subject area connections that follow the Pennsylvania Academic Standards and the Common Core State Standards. Feel free to adapt these materials to suit your teaching needs.

By bringing students to our performances and accessing teaching materials, your district is allowed to report 3.5 Act 48 professional development hours. Teaching materials and Act 48 documentation are available at <http://www.cpa.psu.edu/schooltime/mayhempoets>.

From the menu on the website, you'll find reservation details and field trip funding ideas, including a busing subsidy sponsored, in part, by the Bill and Honey Jaffe Endowment. For those wishing to extend their stay at Penn State after the matinee, we provide suggestions for other must-do activities under plan your day.

By bringing your students to a live performing arts experience, you are giving them the gifts of broadened perspective and experiential learning. We're glad you're choosing to bring your students to the theatre and exploring our website! Please let us know what you think. E-mail your comments or questions or phone me at 814-863-8205.

We look forward to seeing you and your students in our audience!



Amy Dupain Vashaw
audience and program development director

Pre-performance Activity: Role of the Audience



A theatre is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation. When the house lights go down, the excitement level goes up! Theatres are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience—whispering, rustling of papers, speaking, and moving about—can be heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these disturb everyone’s concentration and can spoil a performance. Think of all the hard work that went into this moment. Many people have worked for several months to bring it all together, just for you. You are the reason why this performance can take place.

Best Practices for Audience Members

- Use the restroom before you get to your seat in the theater. There is no open food, drink or gum allowed in the theatre, also no photos (the flash can be dangerous for the actors) and no cell phones—including texting.
- Show your respect by not talking or whispering during the performance.
- Please, laugh when you hear something funny! Reward the actors with your applause! At the end of the performance, the actors will return to the stage to take a bow for what’s known as curtain call. At this time, if you really enjoyed the performance, you may rise from your seat to give a standing ovation.
- Enjoy! The actors are performing for your entertainment. They have worked very hard to bring you Mayhem Poets to share with you.
- After the performance is over the lights will come back on but stay seated until someone in charge dismisses your group.

About the Mayhem Poets



The Mayhem Poets communicate important truths about the power of words and about human values, the sorts of truths that all of us in education struggle every day to convey to our students.

– Don Gilpin, English Department Chair, West Windsor Plainsboro South

"Let's go see a poetry show." That is a sentence rarely proclaimed and usually responded to with cringes and excuses. The Mayhem Poets are on a mission to change that. Having been dubbed "an amazing ride" by the New York Times, this mind boggling performance has been described as "The Simpsons meets Malcolm X at a Notorious B.I.G. concert". These theatre-trained, comedically-gifted, lyrical virtuosos seamlessly blend raw elements of hip hop, theatre, improv and stand-up comedy to tell gut-wrenching truths that leave audiences forever changed.

The Mayhem Poet's unique approach to spoken word has landed them feature spots on The Today Show and Eyewitness News, after winning 1st place and a grant for 100K in the Microsoft Idea Wins Challenge in 2006. Since then they've been touring internationally from legendary venues like Lincoln Center, the Apollo Theatre, and Broadway's New Victory Theatre, to hundreds of universities, locals schools of all grades, as well as group homes and correctional facilities.

Biographies

Mikumari Caiyhe

An established actor, emcee, spoken word poet, and arts educator and native of Washington, DC, Mikumari graduated from the distinguished Duke Ellington School for the Arts, with a focus in Theatre. He completed his formal education at Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University majoring in acting. Mikumari has toured internationally as an artist. Some credits include being cast as the lead actor in the musical *Revelations*, while in London, England, playing the role of God/MC. In the same year, he was one of the first emcees/rappers to ever do a Hip Hop concert at Shakespeare's Globe. Most recently he was a member of NYC's Nuyorican Poets Cafe 2013 Competitive poetry team. As an educator and arts advocate, Mikumari is independently contracted by The New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC), Boys and Girls Club of America, and the YMCA to facilitate art residencies and workshops teaching literary arts, acting, and ballroom dance. Finally, it is Mikumari's ambition to "use art to liberate individuals from fear, emancipate and empower the light within and...illuminate forever. "

Scott Raven

A graduate of Rutgers University with a double degree in Theater and Journalism, Scott Raven co-founded The Mayhem Poets. His performance work has been featured by Fiat, Purina, CNN, and The Today Show. His written work has appeared in the New York Times and the New York Post. He is the author of *Sonnets*, a collection of Shakespearean sonnets based on all of his past romantic relationships; and the upcoming *6 Piece Chicken* (performable poems and stories from on tour). He's also a proud member of the Spoken Word Almanac Project (SWAP) and Poetic People Power (P3). Scott grew up in Edison, NJ, and currently lives in Harlem, NYC, where he runs and puns with his almost wife and imaginary man's best friend, Spot.

Mason Granger

Originally from Philly, raised in Willingboro, and currently living in Queens, NYC, Mason Granger has been a full-time member of the performance poetry trio The Mayhem Poets since 2005. With a style that's equal parts smart & smile, Mason gets his points across in a way that leaves audiences hopefully a little more knowledgeable and feeling a little better than when they arrived. Mason is also the creator of SlamFind, the world's first mobile app dedicated to performance poetry that allows poetry fans to discover & connect with live poetry venues and individual poets all over North America. SlamFind poetry videos have been featured by The Huffington Post, Upworthy, BuzzFeed, Cosmo and many more. Mason himself has been featured in magazines such as Vibe, Complex, Fader and Rolling Stone as a spokesperson for New Era Caps.

Slam poetry--the competitive art of performance poetry



The poetry slam was established in the mid-1980s. Originally its purpose was to heighten public interest in poetry readings. Today, slam poetry is that and so much more. Slam poetry is an international art form emphasizing audience involvement and poetic excellence.

Specifics of a slam vary from event to event, however certified slams follow a basic structure. Generally a slam series would take place weekly or monthly in a public space. Poets who compete sign up with a host. The host is responsible for finding five audience members who would be interested in serving as judges. The judges judge each poet on a 0 to 10 scale. They are asked to consider both content and performance. While performing, the poets must follow three rules: 1) the poems must be originally composed by the performer, 2) the poets may not use any props, costumes, or musical instruments, and 3) the poets must stay within the three minute time limit (with a 10 second grace period). When judging the poets, the high score and low score will be dropped, and the middle three scores combine to be the score for the poet. When doing slam poetry there is supposed to be some degree of audience involvement. Therefore the host encourages the audience to respond to the poet in an appropriate manner.

All poets read one poem in the first round. The top-scoring poets go on to a second round, and those top scorers go onto the third and final round. Cash and other prizes are offered to the winner as congratulation for performing well. In some cities, the slam series will have a final slam at the end of the season to determine which poets will represent the city at the annual National Poetry Slam tournament. See *Slam: Frequently Asked Questions* on page 8 in this guide for more information about how slams work.

Poetry slams have become some of the best-attended poetry events. Slam's purpose is to target the community—addressing the audience has made slam poetry more inclusive – with a more diverse audience than a typical poetry reading. The marriage of poetry and competition slam has allowed non-traditional audiences a tangible and intriguing avenue for experiencing poetry.

Slam Poetry--Frequently Asked Questions

What is a poetry slam?

A poetry slam is a competitive event in which poets perform their work and are judged by members of the audience. Typically, the host or another organizer selects the judges, who are instructed to give numerical scores (on a zero to ten scale), based on the poets' content and performance.

Who gets to participate?

Most slams are open to everyone who wishes to sign up and can get into the venue. Though everyone who signs up has the opportunity to read in the first round, the lineup for subsequent rounds is determined by the judges' scores. In other words, the judges vote from which poets they want to see more work.

What are the rules?

Though rules vary from slam to slam, the basic rules are:

- Each poem must be of the poet's own construction;
- Each poet gets three minutes (plus a ten-second grace period) to read one poem.
- If the poet goes over, points will be deducted from the total score;
- The poet may not use props, costumes, or musical instruments;
- Of the scores received from the five judges, the high and low scores are dropped, and the middle three are added together, giving the poet a total score of 0-30.

Are the rules the same from slam to slam?

Some slams have slight variations on the rules, but most adhere to the basic guidelines. The key rule is that judges are selected from the audience, and those scores are used to determine who advances.

Who organizes the slams?

Slams are typically organized by poets interested in cultivating poetry in their communities. The vast majority work on a volunteer basis, and the price of admission typically goes toward either keeping the show running or toward special projects, like funding a slam team's trip to the annual National Poetry Slam.

What can the audience do?

Audience members are usually encouraged to respond to the poets or the judges in any way they see fit. Audiences can boo or cheer at the conclusion of a poem, or even during a poem. At the Uptown Slam at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern, where poetry slam was born, the audience is instructed on an established progression of reactions if they don't like a poet, including finger snapping, foot stomping, and various verbal exhortations. If the audience expresses a certain level of dissatisfaction with the poet, the poet leaves the stage, even if he or she hasn't finished the performance. Though not every slam is as exacting in its procedure for getting a poet off the stage,

the vast majority of slams give their audience the freedom and the permission to express itself.

What kind of poetry is read at slams?

Depends on the venue, depends on the poets, and depends on the slam. One of the best things about poetry slam is the range of poets it attracts. You'll find a diverse range of work within a slam, including heartfelt love poetry, searing social commentary, uproarious comic routines, and bittersweet personal confessional pieces. Poets are free to do work in any style on any subject.

How did poetry slam start?

In 1984, construction worker and poet Marc Smith started a poetry reading at a Chicago jazz club, looking for a way to breathe life into the open mike format. The series, and its emphasis on performance, laid the groundwork for the brand of poetry that would eventually be exhibited in slam.

In 1986, Smith approached Dave Jemilo, the owner of the Green Mill (a Chicago jazz club and former haunt of Al Capone), with a plan to host a weekly poetry competition on Sunday nights. Jemilo welcomed him, and the Uptown Poetry Slam was born on July 25th of that year. Smith drew on baseball and bridge terminology for the name, and instituted the basic features of the competition, including judges chosen from the audience and cash prizes for the winner. The Green Mill evolved into a Mecca for performance poets, and the Uptown Poetry Slam continues to run every Sunday night.

What is the National Poetry Slam?

The National Poetry Slam is the annual slam championship tournament, wherein three to five-person teams from all over North America and Europe gather to compete against each other for the national title. It has become part Super Bowl, part poetry summer camp, and part traveling exhibition. Staged in a different city each year, the National Poetry Slam has emerged as slam's highest-profile showcase.

What is the difference between slam poetry and poetry?

That's not the right question to ask. There is no such thing as "slam poetry" even though the term "slam poet" seems to have gained acceptance. Those who use the term "slam poetry" are probably thinking more of hip-hop poetry or loud, in-your-face, vaguely poetic rants. The more useful question to ask is "What is the difference between spoken word and poetry?" Spoken word is poetry written first and foremost to be heard. At any given slam, much of the work presented could be called spoken word.

Slam Poetry Philosophies

Taken from the website http://www.slampapi.com/new_site/background/philosophies.htm.

“The points are not the point, the point is poetry.” – Alan Wolfe

“The purpose of poetry (and indeed all art) is not to glorify the poet but rather to celebrate the community to which the poet belongs.” – Wendell Berry

The show and the show’s effect upon the audience are more important than any one individual’s contribution to it.

The performance of poetry is an art – just as much an art as the art of writing it.

No audience should be thought of as obligated to listen to the poet. It is the poet’s obligation to communicate effectively, artfully, honestly, and professionally so as to compel the audience to listen.

The Slam should be open to all people and all forms of poetry.

With respect to its own affairs, each Slam should be free from attachment to any outside organization and responsible to no authority other than its own community of poets and audience.

No group, individual, or outside organization should be allowed to exploit the Slam Family. We must all remember that we are each tied in some way to someone else’s efforts. Our individual achievements are only extensions of some previous accomplishment. Success for one should translate into success for all.

The National Slam began as a gift from one city to another. It should remain a gift passed on freely to all newcomers.

Suggested Activity: Poetic Perspective

[Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Speaking and Listening Standards 6-12: Comprehension and Collaboration 1. Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions a, d; PA Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening: 1.4. Types of Writing 8.C. Write Persuasive pieces.]

This exercise is designed to help you experiment with spoken word poetry and alter your perspective on historical events and contemporary issues.

The practice of oral storytelling and theatrical lyricism has roots in centuries old traditions. From the recitation of ancient Greek myths to live productions of Shakespeare's works across rural and urban England, appreciation for the oral performance of the written word is deeply engrained in cultures around the world. As early as the 20th century, artists began experimenting with unconventional forms of expression, to use the spoken word to explore both social issues and personal convictions. Although slam poetry was at first held in disdain, the acceptance of hip hop as a legitimized music and art form thrust spoken-word poetry into the cultural spotlight.

The Mayhem Poets are spoken-word artists on a mission to change individual lives and reshape society's views on poetry by mixing a contemporary hip-hop aesthetic with a culturally aware message.

1. Choose a current event occurring after 1960, or a social/personal issue that interests you.
2. Write down five words that best summarize that event or issue.
3. Using each of the five words, construct a five-line poem that puts a creative and analytical spin on your topic.
4. An alternate approach is to create your own poems by putting together words cut from newspapers. Take a handful of pre-cut words from a bag or box and glue the words to a piece of paper.
5. Read poems aloud in the poetry slam format. Be as dramatic as possible when you read your poems.

Discussion:

How can poetry change the way we view a particular event or issue?

Did orally presenting your poem change your experience either of what you wrote about? Explain.

Suggested Activity: Boast Rap, Figures of Speech, and the Poetics of Hip-Hop

This activity meets the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Writing Standards 6-12: Text Types and Purposes 3a,b,d; Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Reading Standards for Literature 6-12: Craft and Structure 4; PA Academic Standards Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening: 1.3. Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literatures C. Analyze the effect of various literary devices; PA Academic Standards for Arts and Humanities 9.2. Historical and Cultural Contexts D. Analyze a work of art from its historical and cultural perspective.

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. You may be most familiar with this form through listening to rap music. For an example, watch this video of the Mayhem Poets performing “My Name Is”,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bDkfwXfpwHl>.

1. Write a boast rap about yourself to share with the class (be as serious, funny, creative, or honest as possible).
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?
3. Choose a Shakespeare sonnet (e.g., “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day”) and read it together.
4. Use the *Mechanics of Poetry* handout in the Appendix to discuss mechanics of poems. Explain that the form that Shakespeare adapted for his sonnets from the Petrarchan sonnet which was characterized by an octet (eight lines) followed by a sestet (six lines). In the octet section, the poet would open with a strong statement or an intellectual or emotional question. In the sestet section, the poet would come to a resolution about the topic posed in the beginning of the poem.
5. Now ask students to brainstorm different forms of poetry and write them on the board (e.g., free verse, sonnets, sestinas, odes, etc.)
6. Discuss why or why not hip hop is as a form of poetry. Referencing the *Mechanics of Poetry* handout in the Appendix, discuss the characteristics in common that poetry and hip hop have. Explain to students that Shakespeare wrote using vocabulary popular during his day, and similarly, hip hop artists incorporate “urban” slang into their lyrics. Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter whereas rap artists often write in sixteen-bar stanzas, normally followed by four-to-eight bar hooks. Draw comparisons to the Petrarchan sonnet you read together and the sample of hip hop (above). Decide as a class if it follows the traditional form of hip hop.

Suggested Activity: Shakespeare Connection

This activity meets the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Writing Standards 6-12: Text Types and Purposes 3a,b,d; College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Speaking and Listening: Comprehension and Collaboration 1; Reading Standards for Literature 6-12: Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity 10; PA Academic Standards 1.3 Reading, Analyzing and Interpreting Literature D Identify poetic forms; 9.1 Production, Performance and Exhibition of Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts D. Demonstrate knowledge of at least two styles within each art form through performance or exhibition of unique works.

Work with students to explore the writing of another poet of performance poetry, William Shakespeare.

1. Working with your students, choose your favorite Shakespeare monologue or soliloquy and print it out in a large point size (18 pts.). Number the lines of text so that each number corresponds with a thought or idea (it should be one or two lines of text per idea). If necessary, you may need to break one line into two so that each number represents just one thought or idea.
2. Cut the paper into strips, each strip representing a thought or idea, keeping the numbers intact with the strips so that you know the order of the monologue or soliloquy. You need to have one strip of paper (and only one) for each student in your class. (If you have more lines than students, just put them aside, it won't take away from this activity.)
3. Give each student a numbered strip of paper and have them stand in a circle in the same order of the lines of the monologue or soliloquy. Then, have students read their line, one at a time, 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.

The goal is to help students understand Shakespeare's language, and the elements of performance.

Post-performance Discussion

This activity meets the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts: Writing Standards 6-12: Comprehension and Collaboration 1a,d; PA Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities 9.3.B. Analyze and interpret specific characteristics of works in the arts within each art form.

What were you surprised by?

What do you remember?

What was your favorite part?

What do you consider to be a meaningful live art experience, and does coming to see the performance of The Mayhem Poets count?

In what sort of environment do you like to experience art?

Do you have a hobby or do you practice art, and if so, what is it?

After seeing The Mayhem Poets, would you consider doing spoken word yourself?

Other Resources

Websites

The website www.mayhempoets.com provides more information on the Mayhem Poets.

The website <http://teacher.scholastic.com/writeit/fiction/publish/competition.htm> has student publishing opportunities.

The website www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html is a great resource for organizing a classroom slam. It has useful lesson plans for language arts teachers. Also includes links to other useful sites for poetry slam ideas.

The website www.poetryslam.com has general information on slam poetry.

The website www.poetryteachers.com/index/html describes tips for teaching poetry to children and having students perform poetry.

The website of the College Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSE) <https://www.acui.org/poetryslam/> has information on slams.

Books and Reviews

Smith, Marc Kelly., and Mark Eleveld. *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*. Naperville, IL: Source MediaFusion, 2004. Print.

Glazner, Gary Mex. *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*. San Francisco: Manic D, 2000.

Interview with Tricia Brown, author of *The Hip Hop Wars: What we Talk about When We Talk about Hip Hop and Why it Matters*

<http://www.browncolumnmagazine.com/content/view/2310/40/>.

Films

SlamNation is a documentary film by Paul Devlin about the National Poetry Slam. Their website and a youtube video can be found at <http://www.slamnation.com/home.html> and at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMJAVmzoxmk>.

Spoken Word by Victor Nunez is a film about a successful spoken word artist and his struggles when he comes home. The website is <http://www.spokenwordmovie.com/>.

Appendix 1: A Few Hints Toward the Making of Poetry

From *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (Gwendolyn Brooks, 1975)

Language – ordinary speech. Today we do not say “Thou saintly skies of empyrean blue through which there soarest sweetest bird of love.” Forget ecstasy, ethereal, empyrean, woudest, canst. Do not use ‘neath, e’er, ne’er, ‘mid, etc.

If you allude to a star, say precisely what that star means to you. If you feature a garden, speak of that garden most personally. If you have murdered in a garden, the grass and flowers (and weeds) will mean something different to you than to someone who has only planted or picked.

Try telling the reader a little less. He’ll/she’ll love you more and will love your poem more, if you allow him to do a little digging. Not too much, but some.

Avoid clichés: gentle flowers – sad lament – deepest passion – the wind howled.

Occasionally a cliché can be redeemed:

The gentle flowers shrieked and killed the sun. The sad lament was lovely, and I laughed.

In a poem (and I believe in any piece of writing) every word must work. Every word, and indeed every comma, every semi-colon (if such are used – they needn’t be). Every dash (and poets should use few dashes; they are usually indeterminate, weak) has a job to do and must be about it. Not one word or piece of punctuation should be used which does not strengthen the poem.

Loosen your rhythm so that it sounds like human talk. Human talk is not exact, is not precise. Sometimes human talk “has flowers,” but if it “has flowers,” those flowers (as I have said in my poem “Young Africans”) “must come out of the road.”

You must make your reader believe that what you say could be true. Think of your efforts to be convincing and entertaining when you are gossiping. You use gesture, touch, tone-variation, facial expression. Try persuading your wordage – SOMEHOW! – to do all the things your body does when forwarding a piece of gossip.

Remember that ART is a refined and evocative translation of the materials of the world!

Gwendolyn Brooks (b. 1917) has been the poet laureate of Illinois since 1968. She grew up in the Chicago neighborhood called Bronzeville and became the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1950 for *Annie Allen*. Brooks began writing poetry when she was seven. Her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published in 1945, and from there she went on to have a number of other poems published, as well as a book of children’s poetry and an autobiographical novel.

Appendix 2: Poetry Mechanics

Poetic Devices

The following devices are commonly used in poetry and other writing to help the writer convey and the reader/listener understand more clearly various emotions, images and sensations.

Alliteration: The repetition of words with the same initial sound.

Claire continued cutting carrots carefully.

Puns: The use, sometimes humorous, of a word in a way that suggests two or more interpretations.

"I've always regarded archery as an aimless sport," he said with a quiver.

Rhymes: Words that have the same ending sounds.

*The tiny bird in the tree
Was singing songs just for me*

Metaphors: A figure of speech in which things are compared by stating that one thing is another.

The clouds are cotton balls in the sky.

Similes: A figure of speech in which things are compared using the words " like " or "as ".

The surface of the water looked as smooth as glass.

Onomatopoeia: Words that sound like the objects or actions to which they refer.

A pesky mosquito buzzed around my head.

Personification: A figure of speech in which objects are given human qualities.

The sun played peek-a-boo with the clouds.

Assonance: The repetition of words with the same vowel sounds.

Mold only grows on old objects.

Repetition: The repeating of words, phrases, lines, or stanzas.

There's no place like home, there's no place like home, there's no place like home.