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Poetry in Motion



Classroom photo by Rich Sofranko

STUDY GUIDE

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Artists on Tour

A POETRY SLAM

From Poetry Slam Inc.'s website, www.poetryslam.com

A poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry. It puts a dual emphasis on writing and performance, encouraging poets to focus on what they're saying and how they're saying it. It is an event in which poets perform their work and are judged by members of the audience. Typically, the host or another organizer selects the judges from the audience, who are instructed to give numerical scores (on a 0 to 10 or 1 to 10 scale) based on the poet's content and performance.

Basic Rules:

Each venue may alter or add, but these are the basic guidelines. The key rule in slam is that judges are selected from the audience, and those scores are used to determine who advances. How many competitors advance and how many rounds are determined at each venue.

- 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 the poet receives from the five judges, the highest and lowest scores are dropped, and the middle three are added together, giving the poet a total score of 0-30.

A HISTORY OF POETRY SLAM

Poetry Slam began in the mid-eighties in Chicago as a way to enliven poetry readings. Marc Smith, a construction worker and poet, decided to revamp the standard open mic poetry format by placing more emphasis on performance. He may have been influenced by poets who, in the late-seventies and early-eighties, had performed poetry readings dressed in boxing gear as if their readings were a bout. In Chicago there was an atmosphere of not only making poetry readings more entertaining but gaining the interest of people who would not normally go to poetry reading. Generally, poetry readings were attended by academics and other poets. The poetry slam tried to change that. Since its inception there has been tension between academic poets and slam poets.

In 1984, Marc Smith started a poetry reading series at Get Me High Lounge, a Chicago jazz club. He "wanted to maintain the idea of the responsibility the poet had to communicate effectively" and sought to balance poetry with performance (www.e-poets.net/library/slam/converge.html). A year later, he started the Chicago Poetry Ensemble, an informal group of poets interested in learning about performance.

SOURCES

- "The History of Poetry Slam Timeline" on Poetry Slam Inc.'s website, www.poetryslam.com/timeline.htm
- "An Incomplete History of Slam" www.e-poets.net/library/slam

Dave Jemilo, who also owned Green Mill and Déjà Vu clubs, bought the Get Me High Lounge. Smith approached Jemilo about continuing the poetry readings. Jemilo agreed and offered the Green Mill as a venue, beginning in July 1986. Smith had the whole Sunday evening to organize as he willed. He divided it into three sets with a break in between each. The first set was an open mic format, where anyone could sign up to read their poetry. The second set was reserved for featured poets, and the third set was the responsibility of the Chicago Poetry Ensemble. However, a problem soon arose. The Ensemble was saddled with the task of developing new poetry every week to encourage a regular crowd to return each week. Smith developed the idea of a poetry competition, or slam, to keep regular customers entertained. “The Uptown Poetry Slam” was born, and it continues to this day.

Filmmaker Paul Devlin filmed the 1996 Poetry Slam Nationals for his documentary SLAMNATION. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

The first slams were more exhibitions than a competition to select an overall winner. The poets would even create pseudonyms and costumes like wrestling. The judges were selected from the audience. After each poet presented their poetry, the judges held up score cards. The audience as a whole was also encouraged to express its opinion of the poetry. The winner was whoever had the highest score after totaling the judges’ scores.

The idea of a poetry slam quickly spread throughout the country. Ann Arbor, Michigan set up a slam in 1987 and was followed by New York, San Francisco, and Fairbanks, Alaska. The Nuyorican Poets Café in New York’s East Village became one of the best known places for slam. In 1990 the National Poetry Association organized a national festival including a slam. There were team and individual competitions. However, only two teams were invited—Chicago and San Francisco—with Chicago winning the title. Chicago’s Patricia Smith won the individual competition. Within the next year, she



moved to Boston and established its slam. In 1991, Chicago hosts a National Poetry Slam with eight cities competing. The three-minute rule is introduced but rescinded under protest; it is reestablished for future years. The National Poetry Slam becomes an annual event, hosted by a different city each year. The number of teams participating continues to grow with each competition.

POETRY SLAM! AN INTRODUCTION

LENGTH OF LESSON: One or two class periods

SUMMARY

A poetry slam is a competition in which poets get up in front of the audience, perform an original poem and receive “Olympics” style scores from a group of judges. This lesson plan brings the excitement of a poetry slam to the classroom.

This lesson plan will involve students in defining, composing, practicing, performing and judging poetry. It will help them realize that poetry is a living art form—not just words on a page. Once students are introduced to various poetry devices, techniques, and forms, they are exposed to the origin, rules, judging, performance skills, and scoring involved in a poetry slam competition.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. practice and become familiar with writing poetry in many forms
2. become familiar with the origin, rules, judging, and techniques of poetry slams
3. improve their reading, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar skills
4. work cooperatively to organize, judge, and participate in the poetry slam
5. become more confident in group interactions and in their ability to write poetry

MATERIALS

Internet access (Bookmarking Extra’s poetry site would be helpful):

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june00/poetry.html>
www.poetryslam.com

Paper, pencil, dry erase boards, and markers

PROCEDURE

1. **Introduce the lesson:** by explaining the concept of a poetry slam. (You can get the basics from Extra's Poetry Page on the Spoken Word.)
2. **Introduce the mechanics of a poetry slam:** To learn more about poetry slam competition, students should visit Extra's poetry page, read the material on poetry slams (go to <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/jan-june00/poetry.html> and click on the microphone). Encourage students to click on the links on this page for more detailed NewsHour coverage of poetry slams including a video file. Assist students in listening to the MP3 files as examples of performance poetry. (NOTE: TEACHERS PLEASE PREVIEW AS THE AUDIO FILES CONTAIN MILD PROFANITY).

Here are more poetry slam links to move students toward performance poetry appreciation:

http://www.slampapi.com/default_2.htm (good for studying the history)

<http://puroslam.8k.com/rules.html> (good for viewing official rules)

<http://www.poetryslam.com/> (National Poetry Slam website) or

<http://www.okclive.com/slam/> (Oklahoma City's Official Slam Poetry Webpage)

3. **Help students choose a role:** Since not everyone will be required to perform, it's important for students to have a sense of what their role will be. Hang signs in three corners of the room. The signs will read: "listening," "reading," and "doing." Then ask students to think about which one of these three words describe the way they relate to the world. Caution them about peer pressure and encourage them "to know their own heart." When they have decided, ask them to stand in the appropriate corner.

Take note of where students are. Point out to the students that this may say a lot about how they feel about poetry. "Listeners" might enjoy poetry by reading it aloud, hearing the author or someone else read and interpret the poem, or listening to the lyrics of songs. "Readers" might enjoy poetry as a private experience or by reading it out loud to someone else. "Doers" might like to write and perform poems.

Use the above information to motivate students toward a suitable role in the slam. The teacher should make it clear that not every student has to read a poem (although you'll need about six willing students to make for a lively slam).

4. **Poetry writing (individual or group):** It's now time for students to try their hands at a poem. Allow them to choose a theme such as love, pets, or friendship and challenge them to write at least three short poems on the same subject using three different forms. In some classrooms, students might feel more comfortable writing poems with other students. You might suggest this online rhyming dictionary as a tool: <http://rhyme.lycos.com/>.

5. **The slam:** A class session will be used for the poetry readings. Students will judge the poets numerically as Olympic ice skaters are judged. Students will be judged from “0” to “10.” These numbers will be placed on cards for the five randomly chosen (student) judges to hold up. Another student will average these and keep an official score card. The teacher may decide on prizes for the winner— in real slams the prize is either something silly or a small amount of money (\$10 or less). The lesson will culminate with declaring a poetry slam winner.

EXTENSION

- Students could hold their “poetry slam” class meeting in a local restaurant or coffee shop.
- Students could view and discuss the film *Slam* (available on video). The film follows a bright, young man living in an urban ghetto who gets arrested for marijuana possession. While in jail, he uses spoken poetry as a coping mechanism. He meets a teacher who introduces him to poetry slams when his bail is posted. (Note: Teachers should preview the film first. A teacher may choose to show only parts of the film.)
- Students could attend/participate in an actual poetry slam. (Check the links above to find poetry slams in your area.)
- Students could begin to keep their poetry collections in a notebook or booklet.
- Particular poets, authors and song writers could be studied.
- Local Poet Laureates or other writers could be invited to speak, or even to listen and comment on the students’ poetry.
- Students could hold weekly or monthly poetry slams.
- Students could create a classroom poetry booklet.
- This project could easily be adapted for younger students by concentrating on only one device or on a few select poetry forms and/or scaling down the size of the project.

POETRY TERMS

alliteration
allusion
apostrophe
assonance
blank verse
cacophony
euphony
connotation
denotation
couplet
free verse
hyperbole
iamb
iambic pentameter
imagery
imperfect rhyme (vs.
perfect rhyme)
internal rhyme (vs.
end rhyme)
irony
metaphor
metonymy
onomatopoeia
personification
rhyme scheme
simile
sonnet
speaker (of the poem)
spondee
trochee

LEARNING STANDARDS:

1. Phonemic Awareness, Word Recognition and Fluency Standard
2. Acquisition of Vocabulary Standard
4. Reading Applications: Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text Standard
5. Reading Applications: Literary Text Standard
6. Writing Process Standard
7. Writing Applications Standard
8. Writing Conventions Standard
10. Communication: Oral and Visual Standard

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

STANDARDS OUTSIDE THE ARTS:

- ◆ English Language Arts Standard: 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: 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: 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.

SLAM/SPOKEN WORD POETRY RESOURCES

www.poetryslam.com

The official and most comprehensive website dealing with poetry slam. Extensive information on the history as well as current information about where and how to participate in poetry slams all over.

*Resources courtesy of
the Mayhem Poets*

www.slampapi.com

The official site of Marc Smith affectionately dubbed the Slam Papi. Excellent information here about and from the perspective of the father of the slam, including slam philosophies.

RELATED SITES

www.gotpoetry.com

misc. news, events, happenings, etc.

www.nuyorican.org

home site of one of the premier spoken word/poetry venues in the nation

www.brickcity.net

fun site for anyone to check out and post their own work, improvised or otherwise

www.defpoetryjam.com

home site of the television show bringing spoken word into millions of homes all over

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html

Here are several articles/pages with ideas/instruction(s) for the practical use of slams, the study of the poetry slam and spoken word with a wide range of grade levels.

http://bostonteachnet.org/irwin/sigproj.htm

This page presents rationales for using a poetry slam in the classroom, including standards, materials, and career connections.

www.educationworld.com/a_curr/voice/voice069.shtml

A teacher reflects on a poetry slam held in her classroom. Scroll down for links to additional information. You will find classroom, community, and career activities here.

http://students.uta.edu/jw/jwj1084/spoken_word/lessonplans.html

This lesson plan will help the teacher introduce his or her students to the concept of spoken word poetry, and the affect it has on both the audience and the poet.