

## Intro to Poetry Slam: How to “Read” Poetry

*Objective: I can describe what slam poetry can look like and how to begin as a slam poet.*

Some poems are meant to be written and read silently, but most are not! Poetry used to be entirely spoken; writing them down is only a modern necessity for publishing purposes, and even then, many poets are returning to speaking their poems since technology has improved audio recording.

Spoken word poetry and performance poetry are terms for any poetry that is intentionally written with the goal of being read aloud. Slam poetry is performance poetry that is specifically performed in a competition. (“Open mic nights” are usually not competitive and are not the same thing.)

At a typical slam, poets read their original work one at a time; the readings are very dramatic on purpose, and poets use their bodies and facial expressions to enhance their vocals. Sometimes poets are scored by a judge, who uses a point system; other times, the winner is decided based only on the audience’s reactions (snapping, cheering, shouting, “Mmhmm,” etc.). Unlike formal readings of other literature, which are quiet, in most poetry slams, the audience is not just allowed, but ENCOURAGED to make noise to show their approval.

“A slam itself is simply a poetry competition in which poets **perform** original work alone or in teams before an audience, which serves as a judge. The work is **judged** as much on the **manner and enthusiasm of its performance** as its content or style, and many slam poems are not intended to be read silently from the page.”  
(poets.org, bolding mine)

### So, what do these poems sound like? How do I recognize a slam poem if I see or hear one?

There’s no formula for slam poetry. It can include rhyming and unrhyming verse in any meter or scheme. Though most slam poetry is modern, sometimes people will perform past and present poems written by others, too.

Slam poems range from vulnerable, heartbreaking stories of pain and injustice to humorous near-comedy. Be careful not to generalize or stereotype what “is” or “isn’t” slam poetry. **The performance is what makes it a slam, not the words themselves.**

DISCUSS: Why do you suspect people participate in, and/or join an audience for, a poetry slam?

### Poem #1: “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

Text and audio recording by author: <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15433>

We real cool. We  
Left school. We  
Lurk late. We  
Strike straight. We  
Sing sin. We  
Thin gin. We  
Jazz June. We  
Die soon.

Wow – that’s a short poem! And yet still effective.

**What do you notice** about the way she reads this poem out loud, compared to how it appears on the page? Is it what you expected?

**Poem #2: "Totally like whatever, you know?" by Taylor Mali**

Text source: <http://www.taylormali.com/poems-online/totally-like-whatever-you-know/>

Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SCNIBV87wV4>

FYI – the video and the text don't perfectly match. **Why do you think that happened?**

In case you hadn't noticed,  
it has somehow become uncool  
to sound like you know what you're talking about?  
Or believe strongly in what you're saying?  
Invisible question marks and parenthetical (you  
know?)'s  
have been attaching themselves to the ends of our  
sentences?  
Even when those sentences aren't, like, questions?  
You know?

Declarative sentences—so--called  
because they used to, like, DECLARE things to be  
true, okay,  
as opposed to other things are, like, totally, you know,  
not—  
have been infected by a totally hip  
and tragically cool interrogative tone? You know?  
Like, don't think I'm uncool just because I've noticed  
this;  
this is just like the word on the street, you know?  
It's like what I've heard?  
I have nothing personally invested in my own  
opinions, okay?  
I'm just inviting you to join me in my uncertainty?

What has happened to our conviction?  
Where are the limbs out on which we once walked?  
Have they been, like, chopped down  
with the rest of the rain forest?  
Or do we have, like, nothing to say?  
Has society become so, like, totally . . .  
I mean absolutely . . . You know?  
That we've just gotten to the point where it's just, like  
whatever!

And so actually our disarticulation . . . ness  
is just a clever sort of . . . thing  
to disguise the fact that we've become  
the most aggressively inarticulate generation  
to come along since . . .  
you know, a long, long time ago!

I entreat you, I implore you, I exhort you,  
I challenge you: To speak with conviction.

To say what you believe in a manner that bespeaks  
the determination with which you believe it.  
Because contrary to the wisdom of the bumper  
sticker,  
it is not enough these days to simply QUESTION  
AUTHORITY.  
You have to speak with it, too.

What do you notice about his reading in terms of voice, body, facial expression, and overall EMOTION?

**GUIDED NOTES: Becoming a Slam Poet****Become a slam poet in five steps: video by Gayle Danley, et al.**Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9f8VcV8v2LE> (3 minutes, 31 seconds)

- Step 1: Write it all \_\_\_\_\_.  
Step 2: Read out \_\_\_\_\_.  
Step 3: Cut the \_\_\_\_\_.: abandon extra words  
Step 4: Read out loud, \_\_\_\_\_.  
Step 5: Add “Flava”: power, movement, emotion

1. What do you notice about the way “Tyler” reads his poem aloud, both in his voice and his body?
2. What do you notice about the way the narrator is speaking?
3. What can you infer or conclude about the writing process for slam poetry? (For example, what makes it different from writing an essay?)

**EXIT TICKET**

1. What is slam poetry?
2. How is slam different from other forms of poetry, such as spoken word or poetry that’s meant to stay on the page?
3. What should a “good” slam poem include or sound like?