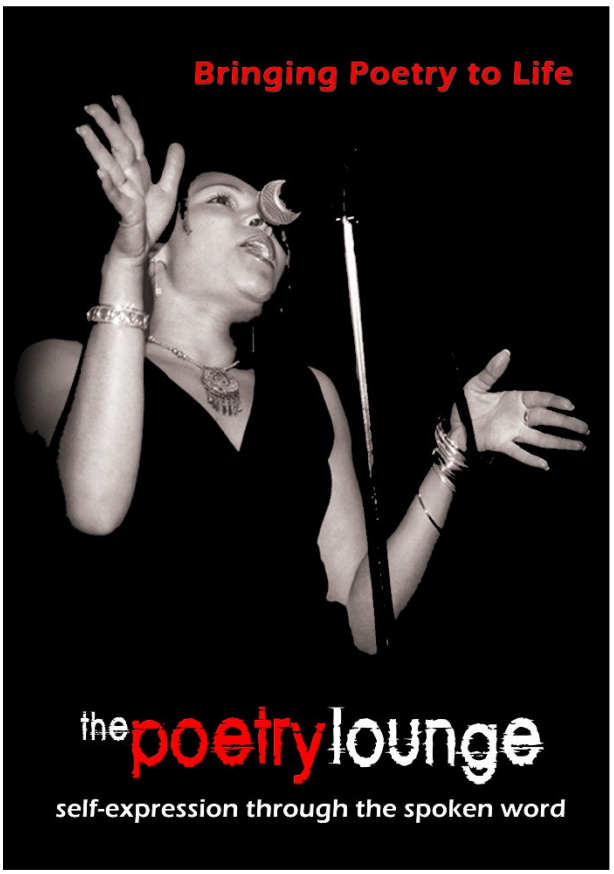
THE POETRY LOUNGE
SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH THE SPOKEN WORD



STUDY GUIDE & LESSON PLAN

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THE POETRY LOUNGE: SELF-EXPRESSION THROUGH THE SPOKEN WORD

Learning and Writing Poetry: Study Guide

Mona Van Duyn, the first woman Poet Laureate of the United States, once commented on the state of poetry today by saying that few people buy it, more attend readings of it, but when it comes to writing it, "Everyone wants to be a poet."

It's true that the idea of writing a poem has a great appeal to many of us. Perhaps it's because of the shortness of the form. Even though poems can be quite long (think "Canterbury Tales" or "Paradise Lost"), a lot of poems say what they have to in a dozen lines or less. Therefore, unlike a novel or a screenplay— other literary forms that many people fantasize about writing—a poem doesn't demand a long-term commitment of months or years. Still, it's easy to confuse brevity with simplicity. Considering that a word in a poem might be chosen with the same care as an engagement ring or that a phrase might be polished like a new sports car, we can't say a poem is "simpler" than any other type of writing. Actually, it can be a lot more complicated.

Whatever the reason, the urge to versify is in a lot of us. And for those of us who haven't felt that impulse, poetry might be something to consider. It's a way to get things off our chest, to examine our emotions and feelings, to address others, to reflect upon our experiences, to work with language in an intellectually stimulating manner, to feel part of a tradition as old as antiquity, and many other motives.

Poets who get serious about the art might even want to participate in poetry events (or "poetry slams"), in which poets read their works in front of an audience, sometimes in an open-microphone format. A good example of this vibrant scene is Da' Poetry Lounge in Los Angeles, which is the nation's largest weekly poetry venue and the home of the 2004 National Poetry Slam Champions (see the "Web Resources" section below).

One issue often raised by would-be poets is "What should I write about?" The great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe once remarked that he never wrote a poem unless it was "occasioned"—that is, a poem, for him, was caused by something: something he saw, experienced, or felt. And that's a pretty good place to begin. But there are many resources, both in print and online, that offer suggestions. For example, the website "High School Hub" (see below) presents a list entitled "Fifteen poems you can write now", which is as follows: "1) Talk to animals (and stars), 2) Shift perspectives, 3) Take a snapshot, 4) Use these words, 5) Write a one-sentence poem, 6) Write a no-sentence poem, 7) Tap your internal language, 8) Tell a story, 9) Collect fabulous realities, 10) Write a "how to" poem, 11) Begin, "When I . . ., 12) Get deductive, 13) Start with an epigraph, 14) Follow a metaphor, and 15) Meditate" (all of these are explained in detail).

All the great poets began by studying the works of their predecessors, and many of today's leading poets are keen students of the poetry of others, both living and dead. That's why the more poems you read, the more ideas you will have and the wider view you will acquire of poetry's range and possibilities.

RESOURCES

The following resources will aid you in locating an abundance of fine poetry to read and study and will also help you find advice on how the poet's craft is mastered.

Poetry Collections

- Harold Bloom, ed., *The Best Poems of the English Language: From Chaucer Through Frost*, (HarperCollins, 2004).
- Roy J. Cook, ed., *101 Famous Poems*, (McGraw-Hill, 1984). Richard Ellmann, ed., *The New Oxford Book of American Verse* (OxfordUniversity Press, 1976).
- Margaret Ferguson, et al., eds., *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).
- Helen Gardner, ed., *New Oxford Book of English Verse, 1250-1950*, (Oxford University Press, 1972)
- William Harmon, ed., *The Top 500 Poems*, (Columbia University Press, 1992). Roger Housden, ed., *Risking Everything: 110 Poems of Love and Revelation*, (Harmony, 2003).
- David Lehman, ed., *The Best American Poetry 2004*, (Scribner, 2004). J.D. McClatchy, ed., *The Vintage Book of Contemporary American Poetry*, (Vintage, 2003).
- Czeslaw Milosz, ed., *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, (Harvest Books, 1998).
- Ed J. Paine, ed., *The Poetry of Our World: An International Anthology of Contemporary Poetry*, (Perennial, 2001). Jahan Ramazani, et al., eds,
- *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry, Third Edition* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2003). Katherine Washburn, et al., eds. *World Poetry: An Anthology of Verse from Antiquity to Our Time*, (W.W. Norton & Company, 1998).
- Oscar Williams, *Immortal Poems of the English Language*, (Pocket, 1983).

Books on Writing and Understanding Poetry

- Kim Addonizio and Dorianne Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 1997).
- Robin Behn, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises From Poets Who Teach*, (Harper Resource, 1992).
- Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form*, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1979).
- John Hollander, *Rhyme`s Reason: A Guide to English Verse*, Third Edition, (Yale Nota Bene, 2001).
- Steve Kowit, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, (Tilbury House Publishers, 1995).
- Myra Cohn Livingston, *Poem-Making: Ways to Begin Writing Poetry*, (HarperCollins, 1991). (For younger readers).
- Frances Mayes, *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*, (Harvest/HBJ Book, 2001).
- Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook*, (Harcourt, 1995).
- Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide*, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999).
- Susan G. Woolridge, *Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words*, (Three Rivers Press, 1997).

Compact Discs

- **All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s** – Includes 35-track CD of audio clips of poetry readings (University of California Press; 2003).
- **The Caedmon Poetry Collection: A Century of Poets Reading Their Work** (Harper Audio, 2000).
- **Poetry Speaks: Hear Great Poets Read Their Work from Tennyson to Plath** (Sourcebooks Mediafusion, 2001).

Web Resources

- **http://www.hti.umich.edu/a/amverse/**: The American Verse Project of the University of Michigan, which is assembling an electronic archive of volumes of American poetry prior to 1920.
- **http://eir.library.utoronto.ca/rpo/display/index.cfm**: Hosted by the University of Toronto, this large collection of verse can be searched by poet, title, first line, and last line.
- **http://www.promo.net/pg/**: The website of Project Gutenberg, the Internet's oldest producer of free electronic books, whose collection ranges over a wide spectrum of world literature in many languages. Although it contains mostly prose works, it also has an extensive poetry library.
- **http://www.poetrymagic.co.uk/**: From Great Britain, a very useful site entitled "Poetry Magic," which claims to be the "largest resource centre anywhere for poets, aspiring poets and students of poetry."
- **http://teenwriting.about.com/library/weekly/aa041403a.htm**: Specifically targeted at teenagers, this site offers a "Beginner's Guide" to writing poetry.
- **http://highschoolhub.org/hub/english.cfm**: From a site called "High School Hub," which calls itself "a free online interactive learning center for high school students," a section aimed at teenagers that is full of ideas, lessons, and suggestions for writing poetry. It also has a useful online rhyming dictionary.
- **http://dmoz.org/Arts/Writers_Resources/Poetry/**: From the Open Directory Project, a Web page containing a long list of hyperlinks to poetry-related sites. For example, it includes a poetry cafe driven by bilingual/bicultural Hispanic/Latino writers, a directory of online resources for poetry writers and publishers, sites on which you can post your own work and read that of others, and a site called the Poetry Super Highway, which features new poets online every week, contests, and a poetry chat room.
- **http://www.dapoetrylounge.com/** and **http://www.greenwayarts.org/**: Information on Da' Poetry Lounge, the largest weekly poetry venue in the United States.
- **http://www.poetryslam.com/**: The Web site of Poetry Slam, Inc., which oversees official poetry slams, registers slam series, and codifies rules.

LESSON PLAN

Holding Your Own Poetry Slam

Objective

To use the concept of a "poetry slam" to

- Allow students to become familiar with poetry, its different forms, and how it is written.
- Help students become more self-assured when speaking before others.
- Help students improve their reading, spelling, vocabulary, and other language skills in keeping with the national standards for language arts (English), especially the following:

NL-ENG.K-12.1: Reading for Perspective

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.

NL-ENG.K-12.2: Understanding the Human Experience

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

NL-ENG.K-12.4: Communication Skills

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

NL-ENG.K-12.5: Communication Strategies

Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

NL-ENG.K-12.6: Applying Knowledge

Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.

NL-ENG.K-12.8: Developing Research Skills

Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

NL-ENG.K-12.9: Multicultural Understanding
Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.

NL-ENG.K-12.11: Participating In Society
Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.

NL-ENG.K-12.12: Applying Language Skills
Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

What is a Poetry Slam?
A traditional poetry slam is a contest in which poets recite their poems in front of an audience, usually in a public performance space such as a café, and a panel of judges rates the performances by giving them numerical scores. Poetry slams began in Chicago in 1984 when a poet and construction worker named Mark Smith launched a poetry reading at a jazz club called the Get Me High Lounge. Two years later, Smith arranged with another club, the Green Mill, to hold weekly poetry competitions. The idea took hold, spread to other cities, and the first national competition was held in Chicago in 1990. Official poetry slams are today overseen by Poetry Slam, Inc. (www.poetryslam.com), which registers slam series and which has gradually established a set of rules. Among the rules are these:

- The poem must be the poet's own.
- Poems can be on any subject and in any style.
- Each poet gets a maximum of three minutes.
- Props, music, or costumes are not allowed. High and low scores from the five–person judging panel are discarded and the remaining three scores are added together.
- Collaborative pieces in which two or more poets perform together are not only permitted, but also encouraged.

These rules, however, do not necessarily apply to classroom slams. For example, since the judges in poetry slams are not known to the poets, the results can be objective. If judges are selected from the class, however, it is likely that judges will cast votes for friends. It is recommended, therefore, that the classroom slam be a performance and not a competition and that judging not be used. Also, a three-minute poem may be too long for both composition and performance, and, therefore, two minutes is suggested.

Slam poetry is no different than other poetry, although it is written to be heard. It is not to be confused either with hip-hop, which nearly always consists of rhymed couplets, or with, as Poetry Slam puts it, "loud, in-your-face, vaguely poetic rants."

Monday: Lesson Plan 1
Aim: To prepare the students for Friday's poetry slam.
Motivation: What do you think a poetry slam is?
Procedure: Hand out two poems to students. One should be a conventional rhyming poem divided into stanzas and using a clear pattern of meter. The other should be a freer form without rhyme or formal stanzas. Read these examples to the class as the students read along. Explain that poetry that does not rhyme is called free verse poetry. Take this opportunity to explain some of the specifics of poetry— stanzas, meter, and rhyme. (A good source for this is Paul Fussell, Poetic Meter and Poetic Form, McGraw-Hill Humanities/Social Sciences/Languages, 1979). Ask the students which of the poems they prefer and why. Allow a few minutes for a class discussion.

Show the first two parts of the video. Initiate a classroom discussion with such questions as: What were the poems about? Where do you think Thea Monyee got her ideas? Do the poems rhyme?

Summary: For homework, ask the students to think of three topics for a poem (parents, friends, pets, school, whatever), but not to write the poem. These topics are called "seeds." If you intend to have guests at your Friday poetry slam, invite them today (parents, administrators, etc.) Have the students write a formal invitation.

Tuesday: Lesson Plan 2
Aim: To analyze poems by finding examples of figurative language
Motivation: We are going to make our language more beautiful and poetic.
Procedure: Read to the class poems with beautiful and imaginative imagery and language. Find examples of similes, metaphors, and vivid rich images in the poems and discuss what impact these devices have on the poem.

Watch the rest of the video. Ask the class: How did I read the poems? How did the poets on the video read their poems? With what kinds of expressions and gestures?

After the poetry readings, the students call out their seeds and the teacher writes them on the board. If a seed is suggested more than once, put a check mark next to it. The teacher selects the most popular topic and the class writes a poem together from the lines (sentences) that the students call out on the topic.

Zero in on a phrase and ask how to improve it. For example, friends "help you in time of need" can be expressed as a simile—"they're like rain on a dry lawn."

Summary: For homework, instruct the students to grow their own seeds using either a seed from the board or a new one. It is not necessary to write the entire poem, just to write some lines/sentences that can be used in their poem.

Wednesday: Lesson Plan 3
Aim: To create a group poem inspired by a photo or piece of art.
Motivation: We are going to practice writing a beautiful poem.
Procedure: Explain that the student's poem may use rhyme but that it doesn't have to. Do not force rhyme. Explain that there is a two-minute maximum length (although poems may be shorter). Explain that poems can be on nearly any subject, from abstract ideas like "freedom" to the most concrete (a poem about an insect or a flower, for example).

Divide the class into groups of four. Display some thought-provoking photos, drawing, or paintings around the classroom. Have the students do a gallery tour by walking around and choosing a photo, drawing, or painting that will be the inspiration for their group poem. After students choose a piece have them bring it back to their desks and have them come up with four lines that describe what they see in the photo. Instruct the students on some ground rules for writing—the language of the poems cannot be hurtful to others; the poems may not employ foul language. The students are in effect having a mini-slam and rehearsing.

The group collaborations last about 15 minutes and then there is a 10-minute sharing as each group reads its lines.

Summary: For homework, have the students finish the poems that they will be performing for Friday's slam.

Thursday: Lesson Plan 4
Aim: To polish and finish the poem. The "artistic day."
Motivation: To stage a dress rehearsal for the Friday poetry slam.
Procedure: Have the students commit their poems to paper. Use high-quality paper and encourage careful handwriting—even the addition of art, if the student wishes. Return to the original groups of four. Have the students practice reading and performing their poems within the group. The other students critique one another's performances by analyzing them according to a checklist—for example: Was the speaker's pronunciation clear? Was the pace appropriate or was it too fast or too slow?

Prepare the class for tomorrow's performance by explaining how a polite audience acts—by paying attention, by applauding, by not booing, teasing, or laughing at mistakes.

Summary: For homework, have the students rehearse their poems in front of a mirror.

Friday: Lesson Plan 5

Aim: To end the Poetry Slam project with actual performances.

Motivation: To celebrate our efforts at writing poetry.

Procedure: Welcome the guests, if there are any, and explain a poetry slam. Each student reads and performs his or her composition. After the poetry slam, the event is celebrated with refreshments. If you like, collect the written poems and bind them into a class book as a keepsake for the classroom library.

Contact

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