



The Bread Loaf School of English
**Toolkit for Teaching
Spoken Word & Slam Poetry**

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Contents

Spoken Word Jargon in Plain English

History of Spoken Word & Slam Poetry

Resources for Your Classroom

Lesson Plans

Make-It-Your-Own

Bibliography

Spoken Word Jargon in Plain English

Spoken Word (n.): A form of performance poetry that emerged in the last 1960's from the Black Arts movement. It owes its heritage most directly to the Beat Poetry of the 1950's and 1960's and the Jazz Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance (1920-1940). It calls directly upon the African American Oral Tradition for much of its aesthetic and spiritual power (Lorenzo 308).

Slam Poetry (n.): Spoken word poetry that fits into the aesthetic requirement of poetry slams, most notably, the three-minute time limit (Glazner 13). In this paper, the term "slam poetry" is used interchangeably with the word "slam."

Poetry Slam (n.): A competition of spoken word artists in which poets are judged by lay-people in the audience. Audience judges hold up cards scoring the poets from 0.0 to 10.0. Poets must perform their own work and must finish under a three minute time limit. Slam poets compete for cash (Glazner 13-14).

Slam (n.): A shorthand way of saying "slam poetry" or of referring to the structure, rules, and culture of poetry slams.

Slammaster (n.): The Master of Ceremonies at a poetry slam (Glazner 20).

On deck (adj.): A term from slam poetry that describes the poet who will perform after the next poet due on stage. For example, after each slam poet performs, the slammaster announces two names, the poet who is immediately next on stage, and the poet who will follow that poet in performance order. This allows the "on deck" poet time to compose him or herself and prepare for their turn on stage. The phrase is appropriated from Karaoke.

To Kick (v.): Appropriated from the rap music phrase "to kick a rhyme," meaning to rap. When used in this paper, "to kick" means to perform a spoken word poem.

Slam Poet (n.): Someone who writes and performs slam poetry. Like so many of the artists in the spoken word scene, slam poets often consider themselves to be both spoken word artists and social activists.

Collective (n.): A group of spoken word artists.

Piece (n.): A term borrowed from graffiti art and originally short for "masterpiece," a piece is a written or performed poem. The terms "piece" and "poem" are used interchangeably in this paper ("Words").

Group Piece (n.): The collaborative performance of a spoken word poem (Glazner 214). The term "group piece" is used interchangeably the term "collaborative piece."

The Audience (n.): Those who come to see spoken word performances. Because spoken word poets perform their poetry in their own local communities, this term is sometimes used interchangeably with “community” in this paper.

Spoken Word (n.) vs. Freestyle Rap (n.): Rap is one of the four elements of hip hop culture (the others are DJ’ing, breakdancing, and graffiti art) in which a person performs poetry to music in such a way that the beat of the music forms the rhythmic pattern that his or her words fit into or onto (Rose 22)). In freestyle rap, these words are created extemporaneously and fit into the rhythm of the music. In spoken word performance, even if music is involved, the words themselves constitute the rhythmic pattern. Consequently, spoken word artists are less concerned with fitting their words into or onto the rhythmic pattern of the music¹.

Spoken Word Artist (n.): A term which encompasses various types of oral performers: rappers, slammers, spoken word poets, and even some performance artists claim this title. Stanford Spoken Word Collective poets often use this term interchangeably with “spoken word poet,” “spoken word performer,” and “poet.”

To Stage (v.): As in drama, this term refers to the transitioning of a text into performance through the addition of movement, timing, and positioning of the performers.

To Cut (v.): To divide a single text into multiple voices. This is often done on computer word processors by bolding or color-coding poets’ lines.

¹ For a good discussion of the different aesthetics of spoken word poetry and rap music, see Saul Williams’ discussion in the VHS *Slammation* (Paul Devlin, 1999)

A Brief History of Spoken Word and Slam Poetry

What do New York's Nuyorican Poetry Café, South Africa's Feelah Sistah Collective, and the Annual International Poetry Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden have in common with your classroom? Each are literacy communities dedicated to the craft of writing, speaking, and presentation. Spoken word poetry encourages students to write about their own lives in their own voices and to perform these stories before an audience of their peers. One third literacy, one third rhetoric, and one third theater, spoken word can open up new possibilities in your classroom.

Spoken word poetry is a form of radical performance poetry emerging out of the political urgency of the Black Arts Movement (1965-1975) (Salaam 1). In the wake of the killings of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., many civil rights activists lost faith that non-violence alone would influence the United States to reform its policy of racism at home and war abroad. To the "left" of the civil rights movement, organizations like Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) began to organize sit-ins at colleges in New York and San Francisco demanding the creation of black studies departments (Sundiata 03/03/05). Black artists joined the call to arms by declaring war on racism through their art. As part of their fighting oppression, black artists also engaged in raising the "consciousness" of black people by spreading messages of black unity, power, and nationalism. Mobile units of performance poets and drummers, spoken word collectives responded to the call by spreading the real news about black revolution and social empowerment on street corners, in community parks, and Black Arts "revolutionary theaters" (Sundiata 03/03/05). The New York-based Last Poets (1968) and LA-based Watts Prophets (1965) are the two Black Arts poetry collectives widely credited with the popularization of the spoken word style (Redmond 320).

Slam poetry is a business structure that puts spoken word poets in mock competition for cash prizes (Glazner 11). Invented in 1989 by white Chicago construction worker and bar owner Marc Smith, poetry slams mock the competition in which "real" poets compete for arts grants, MFA's, and literary prizes (Glazner 35). City-based slam venues are connected to one another through Poetry Slam, Inc., a company that manages

a national bracket system through its internet website. On the collegiate level, the national slam is organized through the website of the American College Union. At poetry slams, five audience members are chosen at random by the slammaster, the master of ceremonies for the poetry slam. The audience members are given a set of numbered scorecards and asked to judge individual or group performances of poetry on a scale of 0.0 to 10.0. The scores are recorded by the slam's scorekeeper, an audience member or volunteer. Poets must perform their own solo or collaboratively written poetry, without props, and in a maximum time of three minutes and ten seconds. If the poet goes over the time limit, points are deducted from the poets overall score. Time penalties are severe and so serious slam poets are careful to rehearse their poems to make sure they finish without penalty. The poet or team of poets with the highest score after a round or two of poems emerges the victor.

Although some spoken word artists bemoan slam poetry as a commercialization of a politically revolutionary art form², slam poetry is responsible for securing a national and international audience for spoken word poetry. For example, the American Academy of Poets, which has seen its membership burgeon from 2,000 in 1994 to over 10,000 in 1999, openly credits the increased interest in poetry to the rise of spoken word and poetry slams³. In addition, a great deal of slam poetry is political engaged. For example, when over one hundred and twenty student poets (including six poets from Stanford's Collective) convened at the 2005 Collegiate National Poetry Slam held at West Chester University, Pennsylvania, the overwhelming majority of their competitive slam poetry was unabashedly politically progressive, feminist, culturally engaged, and queer friendly.

Every poem performed at a poetry slam is technically a spoken word piece. Spoken word is the name of an art form while poetry slams are a competitive structure in which spoken word artists perform. The term "slam poetry" is the name given to spoken word poetry that conforms to the rules of slam poetry, most notably, the three-minute time limit. Slam poems are in-your-face and fast-paced because poets have only three

² In their edited anthology, *Bum Rush the Page*, Tony Medina & Louis Reye Rivera, poets who were active in student protests during the Black Arts movement, are explicit about their dislike of "commercialized" slam. Acclaimed spoken word poet Sekou Sundiata, also an activist in New York during the 60's, echoed the same sentiment when I interviewed him on March 3rd 2005.

³ Weber, Bruce. "Part Art, Part Hip-Hop, And Part Circus: Slammers Shake Up an Interest in Poetry." *New York Times* 04 Apr.1999, natl. ed.

minutes to make their case (De Leon 05/22/02). When not performed at slams, spoken word poems can be any length and are performed at rallies, cultural centers, and street gatherings. The following chart, figure 1.1, details some of the differences in the origins of spoken word and the structure of poetry slams.

figure 1.1⁴

	Spoken Word Poetry	Slam Poetry
Origins	African American and Native American Oral Traditions Harlem Renaissance, Beat Poetry Movement, Improv Theater	
Important Theorists	Amiri Baraka, Harlem 1965	Marc Smith, Chicago 1989
Art inspired by	Malcolm X assassination	Boring poetry readings Nostalgia for Beat Poets
Baraka’s Politics vs. Smith’s Politics	Black Consciousness Cultural Nationalism	Democratize Art Save poetry from academics
Early Performers	Last Poets, New York 1968 Watts Prophets, LA 1965	Patricia Smith, Boston 1990 Gary Mex Glazner, SF 1990
Metaphor	Rapping Storytelling	A sporting event, Poetic boxing match
Historic Meeting	1994 - Last Poets meet national slam champion Patricia Smith at Lollapalooza’s Poetry Tent. Poetry Stage organized by slam poet Juliette Torrez. Spoken word exposed to new audiences in the Southwest and West Coast. (<i>Glazner 236</i>)	

⁴ Information the “Spoken Word Poetry” column of this chart was gleaned mostly from Amiri Baraka’s introduction to Bryant’s *On a Mission: The History of the Last Poets* (1997). Information for “Slam Poetry” column of this chart was gleaned mostly from Glazner’s *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry* (2000) and selected essays in Eleveld’s *The Spoken Word Revolution* (2003).

Resources

Video		Books	
	<p>Furious Flower I & II by California News Reel. (1998, 2005) <www.newsreel.org></p>		<p>Furious Flower by Joanne V. Gabbin (1998) <www.amazon.com></p>
<p>Furious Flower is collection of black poets from the Black Arts movement to 1998 (vol. I, 4 VHS, 32 poets, 6 hrs) and from the 1970's to 2005 (vol. II, VHS or DVD, 19 poets, 3 hours total). Each volume contains numerous interviews and performances by black poets: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Eugene Redmond, Rita Dove, Komunyakaa. These poets built modern spoken word poetry by fusing together politics, literature, and community.</p>		<p>Furious Flower, the book, comes from the same conference of black poets as the film. It captures in text and photography the poetry of the over thirty black poets who came together to honor the legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks, who in 1950, became the first African American to win a Pulitzer prize.</p>	
	<p>SlamNation directed by Paul Devlin (1998) <www.amazon.com></p>		<p>SLAM: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry by Gary Glazner (2000) <www.amazon.com></p>
<p>Devlin's film <i>Slamnation</i> chronicles the competitors from the 1996 National Poetry Slam in Portland, Oregon. The film follows the four-person slam poetry teams representing twenty-six cities as they battle and strategize through preliminary rounds. The film offers an excellent and entertaining introduction to competitive spoken word poetry. Also, it features some well written four-person collaborative spoken word poems.</p>		<p>Gary Mex Glazner produced the very first National Poetry Slam in San Francisco in 1990. This book is an anthology of poems and essays from the first ten years of the National Poetry Slam. You'll learn the history, strategy, and culture of slam while also reading some fine slam poetry.</p>	
	<p>Def Poetry Jam Season 1 produced by Russell Simmons (2004) <www.amazon.com></p>		<p>Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam by Tony Medina and Louis Rivera (2001) <www.amazon.com></p>
<p>Produced by Russell Simmons (producer of Def Comedy Jam), this popular HBO television show features spoken word artists young and old. Amiri Barka, Nikki Giovanni, and the Last Poets perform side by side with Jessica Care Moore, Beau Sia, and the younger generation of spoken word poets.</p>		<p>Edited by New York based Black Arts activists Tony Medina and Louis Rivera, this poetry anthology features, in text, many of the poets from the Def Poetry Jam DVD as well as many other emerging voices on the spoken word scene.</p>	

Lesson Plans

Duets – Students collaboratively perform a poem by an established author.

Back and Forth – Pairs of students collaboratively write a themed poem.

Found Poem – Students create poetry from the voices of their own classmates.

Word Palette – Whole class generates a set of words from which poetry is then written.

Performance Analysis – A video or live performance of a spoken word poem is used as a catalyst for students' own spoken word performances.

<h1>Duets</h1>	
Mini Lesson:	How do we do “duets”? Explain activity. Perform duet with another student. Video or CD can be substituted for live performance.
Group Work:	Read the following poem with a partner. Break up the poems so that each member of your group dramatizes one part of the poem.
Share Aloud:	Each group presents duets to the class
Skills:	<p>Elementary</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – participate in group meeting – prepare and deliver a presentation – Read aloud fluently <p>Middle School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – participate in group meeting – prepare and deliver a presentation <p>High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Literary Elements Addressed: tone, voice, rhyme, theme – participate in group meeting – prepare and deliver a presentation <p>College</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Relation of collaboration to meaning – Encode and decode body, voice into/from text
Materials Needed:	<p>Copies of engaging poems. Tape recorder (optional)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – “Common Dust” Georgia Douglas Johnson. – “We Real Cool” Gwendolyn Brooks. – “Put Something In” by Shel Silverstein.

Found Poem

Mini Lesson:	What is a collaborative poem? What a Found Poem?
Whole Class:	<p>Pass out copies from various books, magazine, song lyrics, poems, etc. to five students who will be the readers (we like to call these students “keepers”).</p> <p>Create a circle out of your class and have the keepers take the center in a fishbowl. Assign an order to the keepers and have them read their texts one at a time. As each keeper reads, all other students (we like to call them “finders”) write down as many words as possible, especially those words that strike them or are of interest. These words should be assembled into a collage of words, a found poem.</p>
Share Aloud:	<p>Have as many students who wish to share, share. (Optional) Tape record students and play them back their performances.</p>
Skills:	<p>Middle School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prepare and deliver performance – Synthesize Texts – Produce work that follows convention of genre <p>High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prepare and deliver performance – Synthesize Texts – Produce work that follows convention of genre
Materials Needed:	Pieces of texts, poems, song lyrics, newspaper articles, etc. Tape recorder (optional)

Back & Forth

Mini Lesson:	What is a theme-based collaborative poem? Writing on the black board, model collaborative poem with students.
Group Work:	Introduce a theme to the class. Pair students. Each pair needs one sheet of paper and two pen/cils. The goal of each pair is to create a theme-based collaborative poem about the theme. The first student should write one word and pass the paper to her/his partner. The second student should add two words to their partner's work and pass it back. This should continue for as many cycles as you want (we suggest no more than 15 words).
Skills:	Elementary & Middle School: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Deliver performance– Participate in groups– Read aloud fluently– Produce work in genre that follows conventions of genre High School <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Literary Elements: Theme– Deliver performance– Participate in groups– Read aloud fluently– Produce work in genre that follows conventions of genre
Share Aloud:	Each group stands up in front of the class and presents Back & Forth.
Materials Needed:	Paper and pen/cils. Model of collaborative poems.

Word Palette

Mini Lesson:	What is a Word Palette?
Whole Class:	Create a table with four columns. The titles of each column should be: “Things of Value,” “Places You’ve Never Been,” “Things You Want to Change in the World,” and “Myths.” Ask class to brainstorm five words for each column. Every student should be modeling/copying your chart on their own paper. Students should update their paper with each new word volunteered by a classmate.
Individual Work:	Have each student circle three words from each list that they want to write about. These words should be used in a free write poem.
Share Aloud:	Each student presents Word Palette to the class.
Skills:	Middle School: prepare and deliver performance High School: Literary Elements: diction. Prepare and deliver performance
Materials Needed:	Students need paper and pen/cils. Black board/ white board/ or chart paper.

Performance Analysis

Mini Lesson:	What is Spoken Word? (included in packet).
Group Work:	Watch a spoken word piece from video or perform a piece (or bring in a performer). Ask the class what they noticed from the performance. Add things that you think they should notice.
Individual Work:	Ask students to prepare spoken word pieces that include all of the elements noticed based on theme given by the teacher or themes that students themselves create.
Share Aloud:	Have each student stand in front of the class and dramatize her or his spoken word piece and analyze why it is a spoken word piece.
Skills:	<p>High School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Prepare and deliver individual spoken word performance. – Produce work in genre that follows conventions of the genre. – Literary Elements: genre, theme, dramatization. <p>College</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Relationship between performance and self – Self-performed vs. Non-self performed texts.
Materials Needed:	Video of spoken word poetry. Paper and pen/cils.

Poems to Dramatize

Put Something In — Shel Silverstein

Common Dust — Georgia Douglas Johnson

We Real Cool — Gwendolyn Brooks

Entropy — Mark Otuteye

Father's Child — Andolyn Brown & Mark Otuteye

Put Something In

by Shel Silverstein

Draw a crazy picture,
Write a nutty poem,
Sing a mumble-gumble song,
Whistle through your comb.
Do a loony-goony dance
'Cross the kitchen floor,
Put something silly in the world
That ain't been there before.

Draw a crazy picture,
Write a nutty poem,
Sing a mumble-gumble song,
Whistle through your comb.
Do a loony-goony dance
'Cross the kitchen floor,
Put something silly in the world
That ain't been there before.

Common Dust

Georgia Douglas Johnson

And who shall separate the dust
What later we shall be:
Whose keen discerning eye will scan
And solve the mystery?

The high, the low, the rich, the poor,
The black, the white, the red,
And all the chromatique between,
Of whom shall it be said:

Here are the sons of Africa;
Here lies the dust of Rome;
Here lies the one unlabeled,
The world at large his home!

Can one then separate the dust?
Will mankind lie apart,
When life has settled back again
The same as from the start?

We Real Cool

Gwendolyn Brooks

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Entropy

Mark Otuteye

I didn't know so I asked my mama.
Mama? How come it's so much easier
To break something apart than to build?

I see men spend years raising a skyscraper
30 minutes to bring it down
In twin mushroom clouds
Of stinging concrete blast and dust

In God we trust I heard a Christian say
Trying to sell me a sermon of salvation
Said the devil's the reason things fall apart.

After class I asked my math + physics teacher
Why it seems to me there be a large minus sign
Riding on everything.

Well son, entropy is increasing exponentially
So soon there won't be anything beautiful
Nothing will hold together

So mama I'm confused
And I wanna hear from you
Why things break down and ain't beautiful
And why evil seems to have it so easy

She said baby
That's something you can change
She said, that's why I had you.

Father's Child

collaboratively written and performed by
Mark Otuteye and Andolyn Brown

[I am my father's child]

Slim waist, **thick hips**, dark ink **finger tips**

I am the product of two parents who once tried to
change the world **and ended up instead [with me.]**

I am [**1203 Hopkins Street**]

JJ and Keita ridin' two wheelers

Gus tryin' not to step on a crack [**and break his
mothers back.**]

I am 1410 South Pembroke Lane.

**I am [orange sunsets] and [blue sky] thrown
overhead.**

Playin' basketball **till we wear out the day** and the
stars gotta hold up the night.

I am heated tempers after Friday night rituals.

Screaming voices behind the door. Violent images
of love? [**I am my father's child**].

I am the daughter of a garbage collector. [**Hard
workin' protector**]. Does he love me? **Who cares**
he took care of me **to make me** into who I am.

I am my father's daughter.

**I am a poetic [organizer,] apathy [despiser,]
[collective eclectic poetic rhyme synthesizer]
Heating poems in heart or in hand and I work with
16 of the coolest poets [in all the land].**

I am **Bynum**, [bindin' them together] self and song.
I am Black [**Blow.**] **Me and dad playin' basketball.**
Dad says you gotta have killer instinct. [**You gotta
finish.**] **So I give him a shake** and I'm gone in a
dream at the net **with the wind.** **And one, DAD.**
Count THAT

SSShhhhh. I am southern towns, **freshly mowed
grass**, finely manicured hedges, **hot sun burnin' off
the misty haze.** I am girl scout trips, **god mothers
singin' hymns [on the back porch].** I am Saturday
mornin' pancakes, **fishin' trips [and still waters].**

[I am my father's child]

I am the product of two parents who once tried to
change the world **and ended up instead [with me.]**

*NOTE: Plain text is read by Andolyn Brown. Bold
text is read by Mark Otuteye. Bold and bracketed text
is read by both.*

Make-It-Your-Own

Mini Lesson:	
Group Work:	
Individual Work:	
Share Aloud:	
Skills:	
Materials Needed:	

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