PRODUCING A SCHOOL POETRY SLAM

Handouts & Useful Info from Taylor Mali
Introduction

Producing a school-wide poetry slam is a massive and rewarding undertaking. Even a slam for just one entire grade level requires a tremendous amount of organization and the management of a myriad moving parts. However, if the slam is a success, your greatest reward will be that you will . . . be asked to do it every year. Or maybe even—God forbid—once a month!

The most important elements to remember:

1. **Have the support of the Language Arts teachers!**
   This so important that I wouldn’t advise taking on the organization of a poetry slam without it. For one thing, you need to outsource the supervision of the creation of the poems. Even if the LA teachers only turn their attention to writing poems once a week on Fridays, give them six weeks to talk with their own students about what makes for a successful spoken word poem (there are some good assignments for them to use below). Have them show examples from YouTube and teach the first three lessons of public speaking (Louder. Slower. Clearer). In an ideal world, each Language Arts class could have a Qualifier Slam—you should be one of the guest judges in every class for continuity—and only the top finisher(s) would advance to your Final Slam. If you rely on volunteers, you might not get many. Sure, some students might have something to read tucked in a journal of their own, but everyone benefits from watching everyone else produce good poems!

2. **Have an awesome host/emcee**
   The best emcees are comfortable in front of crowds but not show-stealing attention grabbers addicted to the spotlight. Sometimes an emcee will be called upon to delay the show while some wrinkle in the format is ironed out, but the rest of the time their job is to introduce poets, read scores, and keep the show moving and the crowd happy.

3. **Use non-student judges**
   In my experience, students just can’t be trusted to ignore the popularity of other students in scoring their poems. Better to have five impartial adults (an administrator, the head of the PTA, the popular custodian, a PE teacher, and the lunch lady). The students will consider that to be the
most fair. Maybe you could have one representative student as a judge, but if you do, be sure to have private scoring.

4. **Make the scoring private**
   Normally in a slam, each judge holds up his or her score until the emcee announces it to the crowd, at which point the crowd boos and jeers the judge for their idiocy! Since that can get out of hand very quickly, I don't recommend it in a school setting.¹ A better practice is to provide each judge with a handful of blank index cards on which they can quickly write their score. Then they pass their cards to the emcee who reads them in no particular order. The audience can still boo the low scores, but they won't know who gave them.

5. **Don't announce the total score**
   To keep the show running smoothly, have the emcee announce the five scores that a poet has received from the judges, and then go straight to the next poet. Calculating the final score for each poet involves dropping the high & low scores and adding the three in the middle, and it can take a lot of time. Furthermore, such calculations can be more accurately performed & checked by the scorekeeper(s) quietly while the next poem is being performed.

6. **Do away with the time limit and the timekeeper**
   The National Poetry Slam limits all poems to three minutes (with a 10-second grace period) after which ½ a point is deducted for every 10 seconds the poem is overtime. In a high school slam, the poems almost NEVER go more than two minutes. So I suggest simply doing away with the time limit altogether. No penalties, no timekeeper, no stopwatch, no time limit. Have two or three scorekeepers instead. If the rare student reads a four-minute poem, so be it. It could be a magical moment.

7. **Encourage memorization but don’t require it:** Not everyone at the National Poetry Slam memorizes their work. Some never do and always have the paper with them. But they still manage to perform their work. The rules don’t say anything about giving higher scores to poets who have memorized their work (but it TOTALLY helps!).

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¹ Nevertheless, somewhere below I've included instructions for printing off an awesome set of slam score cards. Use them if you'd like.
“Hold up. Remind me what a poetry slam is.”

A poetry slam is a competitive original poetry reading judged by folks who may not know anything about poetry at all, but they know what they like, and that’s about it. Judges are usually picked from the audience at the beginning of the slam (but I recommend something slightly different at the high school level). As for the poems performed, there are no rules governing what kind of poem can be used because . . .

There is no such thing as “slam poetry.”

The guy who invented the poetry slam in the mid 1980s was a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith.² He’d attended a few literary poetry readings and found them ridiculous. He thought “they had nothing to do with the lives of ordinary working people.” So he invented a new format for enjoying poetry. But he didn’t invent a new poetry style. As Marc Smith says, “a slam is a noun, not an adjective.” That said, over the years, it’s become apparent that certain types of poems work better than others.

What scores well with most judges?

Humor, anger, politics, intelligence, artistry, nuance, confession, anything with passion, especially if it is well-rehearsed passion! Literary merit counts, certainly, but performance counts at least as much. In fact, I suspect it counts a little more (although no one likes to admit it); nine times out of 10, a brilliantly performed mediocre poem outscores the mediocre performance of a brilliant poem. At a poetry slam, you are likely to hear a lot of poetry that can best be described as Spoken Word.

What is “spoken word poetry”?

I define Spoken Word as “poetry written with the specific intent that the first time it is ever experienced it will be heard rather than read.” Most spoken word poetry is actually never read. You hear it recited live or on YouTube, and maybe you love it so much you buy the poet’s self-published chapbook, riddled with typos, with an awkward biography of the poet wrote himself in the third person.

² Whenever Marc’s first and last names are mentioned together, tradition dictates that the entire audience is supposed to yell back “So what?!” Not sure how that started, but I pass it on (as annoying as it can be if you let it)!
When people say "slam poetry," what they usually mean is the type of poem that typically does well in a slam. That's what spoken word is. It doesn't rely on sight rhymes or clever line breaks because an audience will not see those things.
Running the show

Gather the poets 30 minutes before the show starts
If you’re using a microphone, let them practice adjusting it. Tell them there’s nothing inherently awkward about adjusting a microphone, but if you’ve NEVER done it, you think you look ridiculous.

Make sure the scorekeepers have their score sheets and calculators ready
And make sure you have plenty of blank index cards and markers for the judges. Figure out how you’ll get the index cards to the emcee. Perhaps you have a “runner” especially for that task?

If you’re picking judges from the audience, here’s what you say:
“Do you have a favorite who you hope will win? No? How’d you like to be a judge? You don’t have to know anything to be a judge other than what you like and what you don’t like. And you have to be able to resist the booing of the audience because they will probably boo you no matter what you do! Here’s what’ll happen: Several poets will take the stage to read a poem. After each one, you’ll come up with one COMBINED score between 0 and 10 that takes into account both literary merit AND performance. Some judges like to reserve five points for each, most judges just come up with a gut score. Watch out for what we call score creep, which is the tendency for scores to rise as the slam progresses. Just make sure that the better poets get the better scores.”

Will you have five judges? Or only three?
Dropping the high and low score is pretty important for “normalizing” the final score, so five judges is preferable. But if you wanted to move things along quickly and simplify the scoring calculations, have only three judges. After dropping the high and low scores, the poet’s final score will be . . . the middle judge’s score! Done. Next!

Give the judges some written guidelines
On the next page, you’ll find something you can copy and hand out.
Guidelines for Judging a Poetry Slam

• First of all, thank you for being a judge.
• You don’t have to know anything about poetry, just what you like and what you think is not so good. You’re likely to hear all different kinds of poems tonight—rhyming, non-rhyming, musical, angry, funny, political, sad, and just plain WTF—so just go with it. Live and learn. And judge it all as best you can.
• You can use whatever criteria you want, but most judges use some combination of literary merit, performance ability, and originality; other judges just use their guts. However you do it, each poem gets just one score from each judge.
• Be consistent. Don’t let your scores creep higher and higher as the night progresses. That’s unfair to the early poets, but it often happens because . . .
• No matter what score you give the poets, the audience will yell Boo! and complain vociferously, so just ignore them and smile. There’s no shame in being The Hater Judge (as long as you hate everyone equally!)
• The high and low scores will get dropped, but never make a “funny joke” out your score—such giving a poem about pie a 3.1 (get it? π?)—and assume that it doesn’t really matter because “it’ll get dropped anyway.” The judges are not part of the show even though there could be no show without them.
• Lastly and most importantly, enjoy the show! And thank you once again.
The very first person on the microphone should be you
Just to explain what a slam is and who helped make this one possible. Then introduce the emcee for the slam.

The emcee's first official responsibility is to read the Official Emcee Spiel
After a bit of banter, it's time to start things off with the following official spiel that is read before all bouts at the National Poetry Slam (edit as needed):

“Ladies and Gentlemen, today is [say the date clearly including the year] and this is the [event name] coming to you from [City, State]!! My name is [say your name clearly] and I will be your emcee for the evening. The poetry slam is a competition invented in the 1980s by a Chicago construction worker named Marc Smith³ in which performed poetry is judged by five members of the audience. Poets have three minutes to present their original work and may choose to do so accompanied by other members of their team. The judges will then score the piece anywhere from 0 to 10, evaluating such qualities as performance, content, and originality. The high and low scores of each performance are tossed, and the middle three are added giving the performer their score. Points are deducted for violating the three-minute time limit. We beseech the judges to remain unswayed by the audience—audience, try to sway the judges—and score each poet by the same set of criteria, ignoring whatever boisterous reaction your judgment elicits. Audience: Let the judges know how you feel about the job that they are doing, but be respectful in your exuberance; there could be no show without them. Now let me introduce you to the judges!”

It's a good idea to have a sacrificial goat poet
Also called a “calibration poet,” this person is not part of the competition, but they go first to get all the kinks and ya-yas out of the system. They should be scored and everything. When they are done, the slam begins for real!

Is your slam more than one round?
If you’re feeling ambitious, or if you have a small number of motivated participants who all have several poems in the repertoire, you could have a two-round slam. Everyone reads in the first round, and then maybe only the highest-scoring finishers read in the second round? If you only have six poets

³ "So what?!" some people may shout in response to Marc’s name. Because that’s a thing and always has been. Smile and keep going.
total, you could probably have everyone read in BOTH rounds; then the winner would be the poet with the highest combined score.

**If you do have a second round, change the order**
My personal favorite method is ordering the second round High-to-Low, which means that the leaders go first and those with the most ground to make up get the most benefit of "score creep." There is no one way to run a slam.⁴

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⁴ Very few of the venues that send teams of poets to the National Poetry Slam run their slams the same way. After all, some are weekly and others are monthly. My old slam series ran a weekly three-round slam capped at eight poets each week. All eight read in the first round. Second round is only for the top four finishers, and they read high-to-low. Third round is only for the top two poets CUMULATIVE. But get this: because we “wipe the slate clean,” the poets read low-to-high in the last round. The leader up to that point doesn’t get to carry forward her points from the first two rounds, but she has earned the right to parlay her lead into a victory by going last.
Poetry Slam Score Sheet

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<th>Participant's name</th>
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Notes

High and low scores for each student are not counted.

Final Takeaways

1. **Your School Should Have a Student-Organized Coffeehouse-Style Open Mic More than Once a Year.** You could be the faculty adviser!

2. **Pull names out of a hat to be fair.** Sometimes it’s a good idea to let folks know who is “on deck” as well. A little harder to keep straight, but worth it.

3. **Your school should have a spoken word club.** You could be the faculty adviser!

4. **Your school should have a literary magazine.** You could be the faculty adviser!
Tips for helping the language arts teachers to generate poems for the poetry slam

Producing and organizing a fun, well-structured, and entertaining school poetry slam is challenging, but it’s infinitely easier if a few dedicated Language Arts teachers have been encouraging their classes to write some awesome spoken word poems!

Show a lot of examples in class from YouTube (but watch them all first by yourself because the “quality” varies quite a bit.

On the next few pages are some of my favorite assignments. Hopefully, they are all self-explanatory.
List Poem: What are you?

Some people believe that a part of you gets rubbed off on everything you have ever touched. Some essence of you—more than residual fingerprints or skin cells containing your DNA—stays with the things you have handled. When my first wife died, I felt her presence more when I touched soft or fragile things she had owned like blankets, stuffed animals, or an old carved wooden box she kept her jewelry in. Her spirit was less noticeable in things made of glass or metal. For instance, I still have all of her kitchen knives because I can use them without bursting into tears.

But for this poem, imagine something slightly different is also true: Everything you have ever touched still exists inside you somewhere. This poem will be a list poem. It should begin with this line: “If it’s true that I am a little bit of everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be . . .” and what follows will be a simple list of objects you have touched during your life with descriptions of varying length to help the reader visualize each one. The descriptions are important; they make the reader know that you are talking about actual specific things.

For instance, here’s a bad example from someone who either didn’t read the directions or isn’t really trying:

If it’s true that I am a little bit of everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be a pencil, money, and my clothes.

Where are the short descriptions? Which pencil? What money? Which items of clothing? If you asked the kid who wrote the line above those questions, he would say, “I don’t know. I just meant those things in general.” And that’s part of the problem as well. No one cares about things in general. It’s the specific things that are memorable. The stories that make them singular and interesting.

Here’s another problematic example:

If it’s true that I am everything I have ever touched and held in my hands, then I must be the wisdom of the professional shoe shiner.

When I read that, I asked the writer if she had touched a professional shoe shiner? She laughed and said, “No. I was a professional shoe shiner!” Do you see how she missed the point of the assignment? It’s a common mistake. But look at how much better her revision is:

I must be the leather wingtips of businessmen and the cracked, old, dance shoes of cleaning ladies I shined as a professional shoe shiner.

So go ahead and write a list of things you are. What are you?
Abandoned Farmhouse

by Ted Kooser

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
a tall man too, says the length of the bed
in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
but not a man for farming, say the fields
cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
covered with oicloth, and they had a child,
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
Money was scarce, say the jars of plum preserves
and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
And the winters cold, say the rags in the window frames.
It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
say he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
in the cellar say she left in a nervous haste.
And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

Directions: Write a poem like this in which the abandoned objects of a certain place are
almost like clues left behind at the scene of some accident, crime, or mystery. Describe
the surroundings by providing “snapshots” of it in the same way a police photographer
might record the placement of objects at the scene. Pretend you are the only
“detective” who can hear what the objects have to “say.” What are they telling you
happened here? Maybe there’s something they’re not telling you?

Ideally, you should describe a scene from your own life that actually happened.
Something true and real, in which the only “invented” details are little things you’ve
added for drama and memorability. Most of the facts are 96% accurate, and the only
“embellishments” are little things that maybe you don’t actually remember. If,
however, you decide to describe a scene you’ve made up entirely, please DON’T make
it the scene of a murder or some other violent crime (“Someone was tortured here,
says the bloody severed human thumb.”)
Have you ever dared to be happy?

This prompt will help you write a poem like one by Mary Oliver. But there are five things you must complete first before reading her poem and drafting your own. Don’t worry about artful phrasing, diction, or beauty. You’ll have time to draft and revise later.

1. Imagine a colorful drawing of a significant moment in your life as it might appear if it had been drawn by a happy, well adjusted child. Think crayons and stick figures. The moment can be dark (an accident, a fight, a divorce) but the depiction should be innocent and colorful.

2. Describe the child’s drawing objectively as an adult would. "The house is a square, and each window has a perfect cross through the middle. The flames are yellow, orange, and red, and the littlest figure can be seen in mid-jump from one of the second story windows into the arms of a red-hatted firefighter." Make at least three unsentimental observations about the child’s drawing.

   a)

   b)

   c)

3. Unrelated to the above (except not really), finish AT LEAST ONE of the following with a few words or phrases of your own:

   a) On my good days ________________. And on my bad days ________________.

   b) The worst of me ________________. But the best of me ________________.

4. Now answer these questions: Is the world ever exactly what at least some part of you wanted? Which part? When?

5. What’s the greatest thing you have dared to do? What’s the greatest thing you have never dared to do?

6. If you’ve done all of the above, read Mary Oliver’s poem on the other side.
Morning Poem

by Mary Oliver

Every morning the world is created.
Under the orange sticks of the sun
the heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again

and fasten themselves to the high branches—
and the ponds appear like black cloth
on which are painted islands of summer lilies.

If it is your nature to be happy, you will swim away
along the soft trails for hours, your imagination
alighting everywhere. And if your spirit

carries within it the thorn that is heavier than lead—
if it's all you can do to keep on trudging—
there is still somewhere deep within you a beast

shouting that the earth is exactly what it wanted—
each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered

lavishly, every morning, whether or not
you have ever dared to be happy,
whether or not you have ever dared to pray.

7. Write a poem like this that mixes together all you have written. Move fluidly between the child’s innocent depiction and the adult’s dispassionate observations.
Lesson Title: After This, But Before That

Introduction & Background Information:
Sometimes what makes a poem memorable is the writer’s ability to evoke a certain period of time, the exact moment in which something remarkable or beautiful happened.

Consider the poem “Early in the Morning,” by Li-Young Lee, on the other side of this piece of paper. You could summarize the poem like this: ¹

At a certain time, while one thing is happening
but before other things happen,
my mother combs her hair in a certain way,
as she always has, while my father watches.
He says he likes it for one reason,
but I think he actually likes it for another.

That’s basically it, except for the inclusion of some singularly magnificent details (what are your favorite lines or phrases?). And that’s all a poem needs to be: a simple observation—my father says one thing, but I think there’s more to it than that—about a daily routine, beautifully described, and carefully placed in a moment in time. But maybe not in that order.

A) Write this part first, but start ½ way down the page: Describe one of the daily routines of someone in your family or one of your friends. How does he or she do it? What makes it curious, unique, or beautiful? Do other people witness this routine? What would they say about it? Do they get anything out of watching it? Do you? Remember to leave plenty of room ABOVE what you write.

B) Do this part second, but write it ABOVE what you’ve already written. Place the routine in time. When does it occur? After what? Before what? While what else is happening at the same time? This is what you write last, but it will be what the reader encounters first.

¹ Some folks say it’s a sin to even try to summarize a poem, that it destroys the poetry! Indeed, one definition of poetry is that it is “unparaphrasable.” Okay, fine. But if you don’t take apart the toaster, you’ll never know how it works.

Early in the Morning
BY LI-YOUNG LEE

While the long grain is softening
in the water, gurgling
over a low stove flame, before
the salted Winter Vegetable is sliced
for breakfast, before the birds,
my mother glides an ivory comb
through her hair, heavy
and black as calligrapher’s ink.

She sits at the foot of the bed.
My father watches, listens for
the music of comb
against hair.

My mother combs,
pulls her hair back
tight, rolls it
around two fingers, pins it
in a bun to the back of her head.
For half a hundred years she has done this.
My father likes to see it like this.
He says it is kempt.

But I know
it is because of the way
my mother’s hair falls
when he pulls the pins out.
Easily, like the curtains
when they untie them in the evening.
Durable Score Cards for a Poetry Slam

Directions for you

Making these cards can be a bit of a procedure and expensive (the set I made recently was about $50). But if done right, they will last a couple years at an active weekly slam. Print this entire pdf at home on decent white paper single-sided. Then, at your local copy shop, find the most patient staff member on duty! When you’re done, keep these originals in a safe place for making a new set in the future. Email me if you have any questions at taylor@taylormali.com.
**Directions for the copy shop**

**COPYING & SELECTIVE LAMINATION**

1. Make five REVERSE copies (negative/positive) of the title page (“Judge the Poetry Slam?”) on brightly colored cardstock (the coil bind will go along the top).
2. Copy the next page (“Judging Guidelines”) on the back of the title page (but not reversed) oriented so that the coil bind will go along the bottom. This will be the only double-sided page.
3. Laminate those five “front covers” using the heaviest, thickest, stiffest laminate they have.
4. Make five copies of the last page (“10”) on the same colored cardstock and laminate them as well.
5. Make five sets of the numbers 1 through 9 on the same colored cardstock.

**DRILLING/PUNCHING HOLES & CUTTING**

6. Take everything you have so far and drill/punch the necessary holes for a spiral/coil binding. They may want to drill the laminated sheets (which are often slightly larger after lamination) separately so that the holes line up better.
7. **Don’t actually bind the sets yet!**
8. Separate out non-laminated sheets, and cut the entire stack exactly in half, right through the decimal point.

**ASSEMBLING & BINDING**

9. It must be done by hand.
10. When assembling the cards in the right order—and especially while spiraling the coils through the holes—it helps to use binder clips to keep the “cut” pages together. Otherwise they tend to fall out and onto the floor.
11. Choose a slightly larger than necessary coil binding; the cards flip better that way.
Judge the Poetry Slam?

Please return these Score Cards after the slam.
Judging Guidelines

• First of all, thank you for being a judge.
• You don’t have to know anything about poetry, just what you like and what you think is not so good. You’re likely to hear all different kinds of poems tonight—rhyming, non-rhyming, musical, angry, funny, political, sad, and just plain WTF—so just go with it. Live and learn. And judge it all as best you can.
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