# Slam poetry resources

## What is slam poetry?

Every person has something that they want to say, but we often are too scared to stand out, or make a mistake. Sometimes we are too keen to fit in. Slam poetry provides the chance to say exactly what you want to say, about anything! This is one way for people to speak their truth.

Slam poetry is just one type of performance poetry. This is poetry that is written to be performed to an audience, rather than to be printed in books. Performance poetry is now one of the most popular forms of modern poetry, with a huge online following.

Slam poetry itself, combines writing, performance, competition and audience participation. It is generally performed at events called ‘poetry slams’ or just ‘slams’. The name slam comes from the way the audience can praise or destroy a poem during the performance and the high energy way the poem is delivered.

At a ‘poetry slam’, poets perform their work and five judges (usually random members of the audience) give them a score between 0 and 10. The lowest score and the highest score are ruled out and then the three other scores are added together to give the final score. Whoever has the highest score at the end of the competition is the winner.

Slam poetry is usually about the personal experiences of the poet and or often very emotional. They are very powerful poems and the poets don’t just use words, but their voice, facial expression and body movements to convey meaning.

### This is my voice – Shayne Koyczan

This is my voice   
there are many like it   
but this one is mine  
and it’s a fine line   
when you’re trying to define   
the finer points of politics   
politics being a latin word   
poli meaning many  
tics meaning blood sucking bastards   
but too many live in countries   
where it’s bullets instead of ballots   
where gavels fall like mallets   
when held in the hands of those   
whose judgments can be bought   
as easily as   
children can be taught to covet  
and the only ones willing to speak up   
are forced to live so far beneath the radar   
that the underground is considered above it

this is for the ho chi minhs   
and the michael collins   
for the marquis de sades   
and the muted gods

this is my voice   
there are many like it   
but this one is mine   
and this time it’s for the sons and daughters   
who watch mothers and fathers drown in shallow waters   
while panning for the american dream   
in the polluted creek called the mainstream   
this is for the homeless people sleeping on steam vents  
making makeshift tents out of cardboard and old trash  
trying to catch 40 winks in between the crash of car wrecks   
risking their necks by surviving another day   
so that they can starve   
so that famine can carve their body into a corpse   
before their heart stops beating   
so that men in a board room meeting   
can make it harder for them to get welfare or healthcare   
it’s no wonder some of them pawn off their own wheelchair   
and every time I walk by I can’t help but feel at fault,   
that maybe I didn’t search myself hard enough

for the control alt s  
so I could save the world.   
I’ve got to cash in my reality cheques   
so I can drop the world some spare fantasies   
because the most valuable thing I’ve ever learned   
is to believe people when they say please

so don’t tell me there are no heroes   
this is for them   
the women and the men  
for helen keller who against all odds found a voice   
for the choice veronica guerin made   
for martin luther king who stayed just long enough   
to share his dream with us   
this is for that day on a bus with sister rosa parks  
this for the joan of arcs who believe even in the face of sparks   
becoming flame this is for the game louis riel refused to play   
for the day the dalai lama finally goes home  
for dr. jeffrey wigand who alone stared down big tobacco  
for nelson mandela who continues to go the extra mile   
for the trial that finally found a man guilty of shooting medgar evers dead   
this is for everything malcolm x said  
remembered by   
athletes who left the olympics double-fisted   
for arthur miller blacklisted for calling a witch hunt what it was   
for galileo locked up because he said the earth revolves around the sun  
for anyone who was told to be quiet but instead had their say  
and imagine if we could still hear john lennon play   
this is for the someone who stood up today and said no  
for edward r. murrow who shut down McCarthy  
this is for salman rushdie   
mahatma Gandhi  
you   
me  
this city  
this country  
we will always have a choice  
when you stand up to be counted   
tell the world this is my voice  
there are many like it but this one is mine

### Super six – This is my voice

| **Predict**  How do you think the poet wants us to feel after reading this poem? | **Connect**  The poet mentions a lot of people in this poem. Have you heard of any of them? What do you know? | **Question**  Why do you think that there is no punctuation in this poem? What did the poet intend? |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Monitor**  There are many names in this poem that you might not have heard of or have difficulty reading. How can you deal with that when reading? | **Visualise**  How do you imagine the poet would read this poem? Have a go at reading a few lines in the voice that you think he would use. | **Summarise**  Explain in one sentence, what you think this poem is all about? |

### Voice observation

Slam poets typically use four major voice techniques that you are going to watch for in performances and include in your own:

1. Slow down and use a deeper tone – this is used when you want your audience to really pay attention to what you are saying. It demonstrates that a point is very important.
2. Speed up and get louder – this is used when you want your audience to really understand the emotions that you are feeling.
3. Short pauses – these are used to let the audience think about a point that you have just made. Don’t rush!
4. Long pauses – these are often used after a very important point, or to signal a change in direction or mood in your poem.

Watch the performance of ‘Stuck in the Middle’ by Laurie May and take some notes below about where you notice her using these techniques.

“Poet, breathe now,” by Adam Gottlieb

Everybody’s got something to say about poetry  
because rhymes peak in meaning shedding light on our unspeakables.  
For an ample example,  
take the other day when I sat not knowing how to write a poem  
and assuming I was fruitlessly booming the thin air,  
I yelled and spat my frustration:  
“How do I start?”  
And my dog looks up from her water dish and says,  
“I hate to encroach on your ‘artistic space’  
‘cuz I know you're like ‘in-the-zone’ or whatever,  
but if you really want my advice, here it is,”  
and then my dog says,

“Poet, breathe now –  
because it’s the last thing you’ll ever do for yourself.

Poet, breathe now because there’s a fire inside you that needs oxygen to burn,  
and if you don’t run out of breath, you’re gonna run out of time.

Poet, breathe now because once the spot gets packed  
you gotta save that air for screamin, your --  
inhalation takes saviorisms to sky-highs  
you gotta go with the flowin’ of your own voice.

Poet, breathe now because once you spit, you won’t even need air,  
you'll be rockin’ rhymes respiratory,  
you’ll breathe poetry, baby.

You breathe now, and you’ll never forget that breath.  
You got --  
pulsasive passages passing the mic  
and hot hallelujahs when verses you write  
and your sin is your savior your song is your life  
and your words are like wonders to wandering fifes pipin’ ceremony:  
poets, you’re man, words your wife  
and your honeymoon orbits around your love like metronomic metros  
keepin’ time to the heartbeat of your heavenly drums –

Poet, breathe now because you might have something to say  
because peace might depend on your piece  
because you breathe  
and that air might help your brain tell your heart to keep pumping  
one more cycle and that blood might help your lips form one last word  
that hits the audience hard –  
because we are all made from the same elements  
and we all breathe the same air  
so celebrate our mutual recipes of existence  
by persisting to stay alive  
ducking sageless luckless ages  
like intellectual hippies!

When you take a breath  
the universe rings out like circular beats –  
landing planets are seraphim  
storms are spit –  
stars are soulcandles!  
and you breathe like chest rebounds  
even when all hope seems lost  
our sounds pound mics  
like hope-stars  
like “we’re still here” hollas!  
we make angels of our nightclubs,  
bards of our bums,  
outlooks of our outcasts  
and infinity of our sums,  
we are the children of empathy,  
the pathos of slums,  
we heal like helios  
like cyclical drums  
we enlist life from listless  
and sometimes  
even get things done

Poet, breathe now  
because once you start your piece  
you can die behind that microphone  
and  
death may be breathless  
but poetry’s deathless  
so breath be  
our savior  
eternal.

Poets, breathe once with me now.  
That’s one poem we all wrote.

### Using active voice

Sentences are written in either an active or a passive voice. Here are two examples:

**Active** – I read the novel in one day.

**Passive** – The novel was read by me in one day.

**Active** – The kangaroo carried the baby in her pouch.

**Passive** – The baby was carried by the kangaroo in her pouch.

1. What differences can you see? What makes one active and one passive?

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1. Turn these passive sentences into active ones:
   1. The car was driven by my Dad.

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* 1. The game was stopped by the Principal.

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* 1. The yummy cupcakes were cooked by my brother.

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Almost all slam poetry is written in active voice. To go with that, the poets tend to use precise, active verbs. They don’t just say I walked down the street. They ambled, or galloped or strode down the street. Slam poets don’t eat, they devour or ravage or scoff their food.

Look at the verbs below and come up with five more interesting, active verbs that give more meaning to the word.

| Said | Run | Smile |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

### Verb cards

| Run | Look |
| --- | --- |
| Jump | Eat |
| Sleep | Yell |
| Walk | Sing |

### Still I rise - Maya Angelou

1928 - 2014

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I’ll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
‘Cause I walk like I’ve got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I’ll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don’t you take it awful hard  
‘Cause I laugh like I’ve got gold mines  
Diggin’ in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I’ll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I’ve got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history’s shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that’s rooted in pain  
I rise  
I’m a black ocean, leaping and wide,  
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that’s wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

### Put something in – 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.

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### Mother to son by Langston Hughes

Well, son, I’ll tell you:  
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.  
It’s had tacks in it,  
And splinters,  
And boards torn up,  
And places with no carpet on the floor –   
Bare.  
But all the time  
I’se been a-climbin’ on,  
And reachin’ landin’s,  
And turnin’ corners,  
And sometimes goin’ inn the dark  
Where there ain’t been no light.  
So boy, don’t you turn back.  
Don’t you set down on the steps  
‘Cause you finds it’s kinder hard.  
Don’t you fall now –   
For I’se still goin’, honey,  
I’se still climbin’,  
And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.

### A dream within a dream

By [Edgar Allan Poe](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/edgar-allan-poe)

Take this kiss upon the brow!  
And, in parting from you now,  
Thus much let me avow —  
You are not wrong, who deem  
That my days have been a dream;  
Yet if hope has flown away  
In a night, or in a day,  
In a vision, or in none,  
Is it therefore the less gone?   
All that we see or seem  
Is but a dream within a dream.

I stand amid the roar  
Of a surf-tormented shore,  
And I hold within my hand  
Grains of the golden sand —  
How few! yet how they creep  
Through my fingers to the deep,  
While I weep — while I weep!  
O God! Can I not grasp   
Them with a tighter clasp?  
O God! can I not save  
One from the pitiless wave?  
Is all that we see or seem  
But a dream within a dream?

### Super six – group performance

| **Predict**  Who do you think the poet was writing this poem for? How do you know? | **Connect**  How does this poem make you feel? What emotions does it bring up? | **Question**  What are the big questions about life that this poem raises? |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Monitor**  Are there any words that you don’t understand in the poem? How can you work them out? | **Visualise**  Draw an image that reflects this poem. | **Summarise**  Write one sentence about why people should read this poem. |

### Sorry – by Prince EA

Dear Future Generations,  
I think I speak for the rest of us when I say  
Sorry, sorry we left you with our mess of a planet  
Sorry that we were too caught up in our own doings to do something  
Sorry we listened to people who made excuses  
To do nothing  
I hope you forgive us  
We just didn't realize how special the earth was  
Like a marriage going wrong  
We didn't know what we had until it was gone

For example  
I'm guessing you probably know what is the Amazon Desert, right?  
Well believe it or not  
It was once called once called the Amazon Rain Forest  
And there were billions of trees there  
And all of them gorgeous and just um..  
Oh, you don't know much about trees, do you?  
Well let me tell you that trees are amazing  
And I mean, we literally breath the air  
They are creating, and they clean up our pollution  
Our carbon, they store and purify water,  
Give us medicine that cures ours diseases, food that feeds us  
Which is why I am so sorry, to tell you that  
We burned them down  
Cut them down with brutal machines, horrific  
At a rate of 40 football fields every minute  
That's 50% of all the trees in the world all gone  
In the last 100 years  
Why? For this.

And that wouldn't make me so sad  
If there weren't so many pictures of leaves on it  
You know when I was a child  
I read how the Native Americans had such consideration  
For the planet that they felt responsible  
For how they left the land for the next 7 generations  
Which brings me great sorrow, because most of us today  
Don't even care about tomorrow  
So I'm sorry, I'm sorry that we put profit above people  
Greed over need, the rule of gold above the golden rule  
I'm sorry we used nature as a credit card with no spending limit  
Over drafting animals to extinction  
Stealing your chance to ever see their uniqueness  
Or become friends with them  
Sorry we poison the oceans so much that you can't even swim in them  
But most of all, i'm sorry about our mindset  
'cause we had the nerve to call this destruction  
"Progress"

Hey Fox News, if you don't think climate change is a threat  
I dare you to interview the thousands of homeless people in Bangladesh  
See, while you was in your penthouse nestled  
Their homes were literally washed away  
Beneath their feet due to the rising sea levels  
And Sara Palin, you said that you love the smell of fossil fuels  
Well I urge you to talk to the kids of Beijing  
Who are forced to wear pollution masks just to go to school  
See, you can ignore this, but the thing about truth is  
It can be denied, not avoided  
So I'm sorry future generation  
I'm sorry that our footprints became a sinkhole and not a garden  
I'm sorry that we paid so much attention to ISIS  
And very little how fast the ice is melting in the arctic  
I'm sorry we doomed you  
And I'm sorry we didn't find another planet in time to move to  
I am s...

You know what, cut the beat, I'm not sorry  
This future I do not accept it  
Because an error does not become a mistake  
Until you refuse to correct it  
We can redirect this, how?  
Let me suggest that if a farmer sees a tree that is unhealthy  
They don't look at the branches to diagnosis it  
They look at the root, so like that farmer  
We must look at the root  
And not to the branches of the government  
Not to the politicians run by corporations  
We are the root, we are the foundation, this generation  
It is up to us to take care of this planet  
It is our only home, we must globally warm our hearts  
And change the climate of our souls  
And realize that we are not apart from nature  
We are a part of nature  
And to betray nature is to betray us  
To save nature, is to save us  
Because whatever you're fighting for:  
Racism, Poverty, Feminism, Gay Rights  
Or any type of Equality  
It won't matter in the least  
Because if we don't all work together to save the environment  
We will be equally extinct

Sorry

### Concept cards

| Beauty | Ugliness |
| --- | --- |
| Calm | Chaos |
| Civilisation | Wilderness |
| Light | Dark |
| Fact | Fiction |
| Good | Bad |
| Hot | Cold |
| Poverty | Wealth |

### Super six questions – History is an ocean

**Monitor** – Were there any parts of the poem that you didn’t understand? What strategies could you use to work it out?

**Question** – If you could ask Arielle one question about her poem, what would it be?

**Summarise** – What was this poem all about?

**Connect** – How did the poem make you feel? Did it connect to your experiences?

**Visualise** – Arielle used a lot of hand gestures and facial expressions to show how she felt. How could you convey the idea of succeeding in life, using hand gestures and facial expressions.

**Predict** – What do you think it is that Arielle wants us to do or think after watching her performance?

### Slam poetry criteria

1. Poems must be between 1 and 2 minutes in length.
2. Don’t just read your poem. Know it! By heart if possible.
3. Your poem can rhyme or not rhyme.
4. Poems must not include inappropriate language or derogatory language.
5. Stay on track, stay on topic.
6. Use long and short pauses.
7. Use eye contact with your audience.
8. Think about how you want your audience to feel after your poem.
9. Use hand gestures and facial expressions.
10. Include some places with a low, slow voice.
11. Include some places with a fast, loud voice.
12. Stand in the middle of the stage.
13. Include some juxtaposition in your poem.
14. Include at least one metaphor and one simile in your poem.
15. Have fun and speak your truth!!