

poetic | license



from the filmmaker

While working overseas as a journalist, the only images I had received of American teenagers were of them being whisked away in police cars, ducking through metal detectors at school, and skateboarding through malls. Upon my return to the United States, a friend told me about an exciting poetic movement taking root with a new generation of young writers that contradicted these pessimistic images of teens. Spoken word (also known as slam poetry) was becoming popular with young people, allowing them to find their voice and powerfully express what it was like growing up in America today.

In January 1998, I walked into my first youth poetry reading in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Immediately, I was blown away by the power of this poetry. I witnessed a collection of young writers holding a mostly adult audience spellbound with their intelligence and creativity. They spoke poignantly about tough themes like tolerance, ethnicity, and sexuality. I realized right then the need for a film that would communicate and document the passion and talent of this generation.



the teen poetry movement

There is a historic movement taking place today among teenagers in America: poetry is becoming popular again. Crossing gender, ethnic, and geographic lines, teenagers all over the country are discovering poetry and spoken word, finding refuge in an outlet that nurtures and celebrates their voice. While much of this recent attention to language stems from the beats and rhythms of Hip-Hop, the poetic wave is reaching nearly every type of American youth. From the dusty roads of the Navajo Nation to the crowded streets of New York City, teens are grabbing hold of the microphone and finding their voice.

In addition to blazing a new poetic path, the teens in POETIC LICENSE are also connecting to the rich history of oral poetry and storytelling. Whether it is the Griots of West Africa, Native American elders, or the free spirits of the Beat generation, the young writers in POETIC LICENSE represent the most recent point on a long historical continuum.

Poetry slams began during the 1980s in Chicago. A local construction worker named Marc Smith embarked on a mission to take poetry back from “the academics and ivory towers” and return it to its rightful owners: the people. To underscore his belief that anyone can be both a poet and a judge of poetry, Smith picked people randomly from the audience and asked them to score the poems on a scale of 1-10.

Today, poetry slams are being held in nearly every city and town in America. While most of these events are geared towards adults, increasingly teens are being drawn to the slams and other noncompetitive readings. At these events, teen poets use performance poetry to create a dialogue not only with other young writers, but with the adult audience members as well.



the film and guide

The documentary film POETIC LICENSE captures dynamic young writers as they perform their work and discuss their poetic influences and inspirations. This film and guide are intended to serve as a catalyst, providing an initial spark to get young people interested in writing. After seeing the teen poets on-screen, we hope that youths in the audience will be inspired to pick up the pen and discover their voice.

This guide is for adults and youth alike. Although the writing exercises are designed with a facilitator in mind, we have intentionally addressed the discussion points directly to young people. It is our hope that teens will use this guide to initiate a conversation with their peers, probing and discussing some of the issues presented in the film.



*What are the words you do not yet have?
What do you need to say?*

audre lorde

discussion points

Before watching the film....

- How were you first introduced to poetry?
- What do you think of when you hear the word “poetry”?
- Who are some of the poets you have read? What did you like about their poetry?
- What comes to mind when you hear the words “poetry slam”?

After watching the film...

- Whom did you identify most with in the film? Why?
- What do you think about poetry slams? Would you like to participate in one?
- How is performance poetry different from other poetry you’ve heard or read?
- What do you think about the idea that poems can be judged and scored?

At the end of the 19th century, adults like Mark Twain were writing in the voice of youth. Young people were supposed to “be seen, not heard.” Now, 100 years later, youth are using spoken word to discover their own voices. What do you think has contributed to this change? Why is it easier to express yourself today?

In her poem, Kassy says, “I can see clear now that I’ve managed to take these blinders off/No longer eating at the trough of mass media/If I believed everything I was told, I’d scold myself for being gay or weighing over 90 pounds.” How do you think the mass media portrays youth today? Why does the media portray youth in this way? What are some of the images that you see most often associated with youth? How can poetry be an effective tool in combating negative images?

In his poem, Niles talks about being categorized simply because of his race. “Insinuating glares that burned holes into my soul/they posed the biggest question, Are you half or are you whole/Are you white? No man, he’s Latino. Maybe he’s Asian. Naw, he could be black/My eyes respond confused, asking all these questions back...” What do you think this poem says about race in America? How do some of the other teens in the film use poetry to address issues of diversity and tolerance? How can poetry help you to define yourself?

In his poem, Jeremy talks about the destructive influences that he feels are infesting Hip-Hop: “I’m gonna represent hip-hop and try to stop negativity takin’ over like weeds in our crops/Opportunity knocks if we can put away our glocks and unlock the potential that’s twisted up in knots.” What are your feelings about Hip-Hop? How is spoken word similar to rap? How is it different?

resources

Organizations

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH
www.ncte.org
(800)369-6283

NCTE is a professional association dedicated to improving the quality of English language arts instruction at all levels.

POETRY SLAM, INC.
www.poetryslam.com
(810)231-5435

Poetry Slam, Inc. seeks to advocate, promote, support, witness, and/or perpetuate the art of performance poetry, as well as to enhance the perception of literary merit and legitimacy of performance poetry as an art form.

POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA
www.poetrysociety.org
(212)254-9628

The PSA conducts a variety of interconnected programs that are designed to introduce culturally and aesthetically diverse poets to an expanding audience and that represent all levels of literary involvement.

URBAN LIBRARIES COUNCIL
www.urbanlibraries.org/youth.html
(847) 866-9999

Public Libraries as Partners in Youth Development Initiative challenges public libraries to work with youth to develop innovative, high-quality educational and cultural enrichment programs for low-income youth during non-school hours.

WRITERS CORPS
www.dcwriterscorps.org
(202) 332-5455

Writers Corps alliance is a group of independent organizations that use literary arts to help participants strengthen literary skills, discover alternate modes of expression, expand cultural boundaries and hone communication skills needed for future opportunities.

WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS
www.neosoft.com/~wits/
(713) 523-3877

WITS promotes the love of the written word through classroom experiences with poets, fiction writers, and playwrights. WITS also mentors other writers-in-schools programs and designs writing curricula.

YOUTH SPEAKS
www.youthspeaks.org
(415) 661-6927 (San Francisco)
(212) 691-6590 (New York)

A nonprofit literary arts, education, and cultural resource center for teenagers with bases in San Francisco and New York, Youth Speaks presents teen poetry slams and other noncompetitive events, conducts free after-school writing workshops, and puts on schoolwide assemblies.

Books

ALoud! VOICES FROM THE NUYORICAN
POETS CAFE

(edited by Bob Holman, Miguel Algarin, and Nicole Blackman, 1994)

An anthology of the poetry from the Nuyorican Poets Café. It contains works by some of the leading spoken word poets in the country and is a celebration of diversity.

Brave New Voices: Youth Speaks Guide
to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry to
Teenagers

(Heinemann Press, Fall 2001)

This guide offers teachers and after-school directors a detailed road map for the teaching of performance poetry.

Nikki Giovanni in the Classroom

(by Carol Jago, National Council of the Teachers of English, 1999)

Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of
Performance Poetry

edited by Gary Mex Glazner, (Manic D Press, 2001)

Critically acclaimed titles of cutting edge poetry by emerging and established writers.

Magazines

NO COMMENT

Published in Ann Arbor, MI, *No Comment* is a national magazine on youth spoken word.

Websites

www.poeticlicense.org
www.freshpoetry.com/

www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/5165/index1.html
www.poetrytodayonline.com/TeenPoetry.html

about ITVS and this guide

POETIC LICENSE was produced and directed by David Yanofsky in association with the Independent Television Service (ITVS) with funds provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information about ITVS, contact us at (415) 356-8383. To find out when POETIC LICENSE will air in your community, please check out our website at www.itvs.org.

This guide was created by James Kass, Marc Bamuthi Joseph and David Yanofsky. Special thanks to Dale Allender, Kenneth Carroll, Paul Engman and Kurstin Finch-Gnehm. To purchase POETIC LICENSE, contact New Day Films (888) 367-9154 or www.newday.com



how to put on a poetry slam

Poetry slams are Olympic-style mock competitions, where poets are judged by their peers on the quality of the performance and work. A panel of five judges rates the performances on a scale of 1-10, keeping both the quality of writing and the presentation in mind. However, the focus should not be on the competition. The motto of the poetry slam is "It's not about the points, it's about the poetry!"

① Subject Matter and Props

Poems can be on any subject and in any style. Each poet must perform work that she/he has created. Poets are allowed to use their given environment and the props it offers - microphones, mic stands, the stage itself, chairs on stage, the aisle - as long as these items are available to other competitors as well.

② Team Pieces

Duos, trios, and quartets (otherwise known as team, group, or collaborative pieces) are allowed, even encouraged, so long as all of the primary authors perform them.

③ Rounds

Usually, there are two rounds in a poetry slam at which two different poems are performed. (The scores from both rounds are then added together to produce the final results.) However, this rule should also be applied flexibly. Depending on the number of participants, it may make more sense to have only one round.

④ Judging

All efforts shall be made to select five judges who will be fair. The judges will give each poem a score from 0 to 10, with 10 being the highest or "perfect" score. They will be encouraged to use decimal points (9.3 for example) to reduce the likelihood of ties. Each poem will get five scores. The high and the low scores will be dropped and the remaining three scores will be added together.

⑤ Time Limits

Generally, poets are given a time limit of three, four, or five minutes. However, this should be a flexible rule.

⑥ Emcees

The emcee at a poetry slam is "the master of ceremonies." He/she introduces each poet, announces the scores, and keeps the event moving along. An ideal emcee will be energetic, entertaining, and engaging. He/she should encourage the audience to participate with their reactions - poetry slams, at their best, produce a dialogue between the poet and the audience.

⑦ DJ's

Having a DJ at the event is strongly encouraged. There are many natural breaks at poetry slams (for example, when scores are being handed in and tabulated or when the poets are coming up to the stage) and music can move these breaks along. In addition, good DJs can set an energetic and positive mood, creating a "safe space" for teen poets to share their work.

⑧ Final Ceremony

At the conclusion of the poetry slam, we suggest bringing all of the participants back on stage for a final ceremony. In addition to acknowledging the winners, this gives the audience an opportunity to acknowledge the group as a whole and thank the poets for sharing their words.

writing exercises

Section 1 I Am...

Poetry is a great tool for teens to define themselves in the world as well as define the world around them. As Sekou Sundiata says in the film, a teen poet or spoken word artist “is someone who is telling us, as honestly as possible, how it is with them. How they see the world.” The goal of this section is to encourage students to think about who they are: through an environment that encourages creative self-expression, teenagers can find and develop their voice.

exercise I Am Poem

One of the keys to good writing is developing confidence in your voice - finding out who you are and what you want to say.

Note: In the creative writing classroom, it is important that every voice is invited to be a part of the discussion. Students should be encouraged to read their work out loud, but should also be allowed to say “pass” if they are not yet comfortable.

- ① Students write down five words they would use to describe themselves.
- ② On the board, the teacher creates a table like the one below, listing six broad categories across the top. (We have suggested some categories, but feel free to use whatever titles you like.)
- ③ Students copy the table into their notebooks.
- ④ The class as a whole calls out and fills in each of the columns with descriptive words.
- ⑤ Students copy those words into their notebooks and circle four of the words in each column. Those words, combined with their original five words, will compose their poetic pallet.
- ⑥ Students then use these words to create a poem. (They can use any other words as well, but they must use the words that they wrote down and circled.)
- ⑦ The first words of the poem must be: “I am...”

ANIMALS	MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS	MYTHICAL/POPULAR CHARACTERS	WEATHER	PLACES	COLORS

Note: For more advanced work, change “I am” to “I was” or “I will be.” Also, the students can use for their pallet the words that they did not circle.

take-home assignment Find Your History

America is a collection of immigrants: nearly all of us have come from someplace else. In the film, Chinedu talks about his experience being raised in Nigeria, explaining that it has connected him to his culture. The aim of this activity is to have students trace their history and then write about it. Students can ask their grandparents, parents, or older relatives about their family’s history; or look at old scrapbooks and family photo albums; or do research in the library and on the Internet. Remember, everyone has a story to tell.

Section 2 Oral Poetic Forms

The teens in POETIC LICENSE represent the most recent point on a long historical oral poetic continuum. These young writers are following in the footsteps of the verbal battles of ancient Greece, the Griots of West Africa, the Haiku poetry of Japan, the limericks of Ireland, the storytelling traditions of Native Americans, and the free-flowing verse of the Beat Generation, to name just a few. This section will explore some of these influences as well as introduce students to the elements of sound in poetry.

The one element that all the oral and spoken word traditions have in common is a “call and response” - an immediate dialogue between the speaker and the audience. Slam poetry, which encourages audience participation, is only the most recent form of that dialogue. Can you find other examples?

exercise The Music Poem

- ① Students volunteer names of musical categories or forms (such as jazz, rock, punk, techno, etc...). Students should copy this list into their notebooks.
- ② Students then circle the form that they most relate to.
- ③ Students write down 5 to 10 phrases that describe that musical form.
- ④ They then use those phrases to construct a poem.

Note: For more advanced work, students perform the piece in the musical style that they have chosen.

take-home assignment

Students research one of the international forms of the oral tradition, and then write a poem mimicking that style.

Section 3 Community Voice

Many writers find the material and inspiration for their work in their communities. The environment informs their voice, prompting them to observe and chronicle life around them. This section is intended to have students draw on their communities for their own work. These exercises will ask youths to observe their neighborhoods, encouraging them to notice the people and events that make up their everyday lives.

Asheena's poem "125th St. Blues" describes the characters she sees on that famous street. She also talks about how she writes only on public transportation because that's where she feels the people are most "real." **What observations can you make about your own neighborhood? What makes your neighborhood unique? Where could you be most inspired to write? Why?**

exercise The List Poem

Asheena describes her writing process this way: "Sometimes I'll just sit on the train and write what I see. Not necessarily a poem, I'll just write:

*a man with blue pants
a red hat
a little girl cries
her mother puts a pacifier in her mouth."*

Following this model, students create a list, writing down descriptive phrases. The list should describe elements of their community, whether it is their street, the school cafeteria, or their corner market.

From that list, students then construct a poem. To help get students started, you may find it helpful to offer some writing prompts:

- "Everyday on the way to school, I see..."
- "During the school day, I hear..."

exercise The Group Poem

Great writing can happen in collaboration - a process in which more than one voice contributes to the poem. In this exercise, two students work together to create one poem. (The class should be divided into groups of two.)

To start the poem, student #1 writes down the first word and passes the paper to student #2, who writes the next word. Student #1 then writes down the next two words and passes the paper to student #2, who writes the next two words. This process is repeated until they reach 10 words a piece. At that time, they should decide whether the poem is finished or whether they would like to continue writing.

Note: For more advanced work, students should try working "backwards", going from ten words to one.

take-home assignment The Persona Poem

Students identify a person that they know in their community and write a poem in his or her voice.

Section 4 A Poem for My Generation

At the end of the film, Tim Arevalo's *One Poem For Us* is a testimonial to his generation. Asking his peers to take a hard look at themselves and believe in their beauty, Tim says that the poem "was just something that I needed to say."

*...How have we managed to travel so little, but hate ourselves so much?
Ginsberg said he saw the best minds of his generation destroyed and I
have seen the same. I have seen us in our rooms, foil and lighter in our
hands, straw in our lips and nose, chasing Black Dragons, snorting White
Cobras, because 10 dollars was cheap for a double hit of Joy.
I have seen us hunched over the toilet bowls vomiting self-esteem down
the drain because Vogue and Elle always have beauty in a size three and
that was only a heave-ho and up-chuck away.
I have seen us on the corner complacent and numb, copping doom in dime
bags because we didn't know the Grim Reaper wore Filas and a hoody.
I have seen us swigging golden poison because we were fools and thought
manhood was sold in 40 ounce bottles.
I have seen us spread our legs like the horizon because some man tricked
us into accepting that love was only found on our backs.
I have seen us -
I have seen us and I see us for what we are -- nothing less than great
because we are the poets.*

- What words, phrases and/or images caught your attention? Why? What kind of statement is Tim making about his generation?

exercise One Poem For Us

Students write a poem to their peers. What message would they like to convey to other teens around the country?

For additional writing exercises and resources,
go to www.poeticlicense.org

