

Speak Your Peace: Spoken Word Activity

Grades: 7 and up

Students will:

- develop written, oral and media literacy skills; create spoken word poetry addressing an issue of social justice; learn about global situations where conflict exists and peace is needed.

Materials:

- Pen, pencil, paper, word processor, recording device, microphone (optional)

Time:

- Two to three 60 minute lessons

Spoken word involves one or more people performing a poem, using voice, gesture, rhythm and pacing to enhance its meaning. In the late 1980's, Marc Kelly Smith, a Chicago poet and construction worker, introduced spoken word *poetry slams* as a platform for social commentary. There are no formal rules or structure to writing spoken word poetry; informal language and free verse can be used for deliberate effect. Rules of grammar are not mandatory as long as the message is clear. Spoken word poetry can be about any topic, but lends itself well to social justice issues such as *peace and conflict*. It can be a tool for advocacy, allowing people traditionally without a voice to be heard in a forum where words are the main currency.



Ethiopian children read AIDS poetry. World Vision, 2009.

Your Assignment

Create a one or two minute spoken word poem about ending conflict and promoting peace (or some other social justice issue). Research topics of interest such as a war or conflict in a specific country or write about the concept of peace. Visit the **World Vision Canada** website at www.worldvision.ca for information on the effects of conflict on children. Perform your spoken word piece for your class or a broader audience to enjoy.

Refer to the tips below on how to write and perform spoken word poetry.

Writing a Spoken Word Poem

1. Begin by researching a number of spoken word performances. Deconstruct the artists' use of language, pacing, rhythm, voice intonation, facial expression, and gesture. Memorize their work and imitate their style. Here are some suggestions:
 - a) **YouTube**
 - *A Single Rose* by 12 year-old Mustafa Ahmed;
 - *Sudanese Children* by Shannon Leigh;
 - *Never Let Me Down* by J. Ivy;
 - *Speak With Conviction* by Taylor Mali;
 - *What I Will* by Suheir Hammad.
 - b) **bum rush the page: a def poetry jam**. Medina, Tony and Louis Reyes Rivera, eds. Three Rivers Press. New York, 2001. (available at chapters.ca)
 - c) **SlamNation** (1998) DVD and Education Guide (available in censored version for classroom use at <http://www.slamnation.com/sales.html>)
 - d) **Attend a local poetry slam**. They exist in almost every major city. Check out the Calgary International Spoken Word Festival 2009, Toronto Poetry Slam and Canadian Festival of Spoken Word
2. *Write without editing*. Write fast or slow, but don't pre-judge your ideas. Write from your own honest observations, experiences and thoughts. The point is to get something down on paper to edit and polish later. You don't even have to write your thoughts in order; random lines or verses can be organized for coherence at the editing stage.

3. *Rewrite.* Few people write a masterpiece in one sitting, so edit and re-edit your work. Play with the flow and beat of the lines, use lots of concrete images (nouns and adjectives) and active verbs, and choose precise words or phrases to make your meaning clear. Try to make the poem about one specific thing. Set it aside for a day or two and go back to it with fresh eyes.
4. *Read your poem out loud.* After all, it is “spoken” word! Know how the words feel in your mouth and sound in your ears. Commit them to memory. You’ll be performing at some point, so be critical of the poem’s strong and weak elements. Record your voice and listen to it in order to make changes or improvements.
5. *Read to a trusted friend or partner.* Once you are satisfied your poem is the best it can be, share it with someone whose opinion you trust. Ask for honest feedback on improving both the poem and your performance. Be receptive to suggestions, but remember it is your decision whether or not to make any changes.
4. *Audience awareness.* Be aware of your audience and speak to them. You are confiding your thoughts and asking them to relate. Think about Shakespeare’s use of asides and soliloquies to draw the audience into a character’s confidence.
5. *Technical elements.* This includes keeping to time limits, microphone use, and use of stage (blocking).

Organizing a Poetry Slam or Concert

A poetry slam is an event where artists battle it out at the microphone and may be judged by the audience on their performances. Although some slams incorporate a competitive angle, the real point of the slam is to experience the poets and their words. Check out [How to Plan a Spoken Word Contest](#) or Marc Kelly Smith’s [Stage a Poetry Slam: Creating Performance Poetry Events](#) for more ideas.

Performing a Spoken Word Poem

(see *Spoken Word Performance Rubric* on p. 3)

1. *Voice.* This is your most important and powerful performance tool and all you need to carry the poem off well. Work on pitch (high or low sound tone), intonation (the melody established by varying patterns of pitch), and pace (the speed of speech, which sets mood and tone). In pure spoken word performance, costumes, props and instruments are not allowed. While this may seem intimidating (or even boring), think of performers you admire whose voices mesmerize the audience.
2. *Body language, gesture and facial expression.* Use your body to convey the nuances of the poem. Enhance the words with facial expression, [hand gestures](#) and movement, exuding confidence through your placement on stage and use of voice and/or microphone.
3. *Memorization.* Reading from a paper is allowed...so is memorizing! Memorization allows you to make eye contact with the audience, pay attention to your delivery, and appear confident on stage.

Spoken Word Performance Rubric

Criteria	Level 4	Level 3	Level 2	Level 1
Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent use of voice qualities such as pitch, intonation and pacing • Voice projection is clear and audible • Fluent and coherent delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good use of pitch, intonation and pacing • Voice projection is mostly clear and audible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some use of pitch, intonation and pacing • Voice projection is sometimes clear and audible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little use of voice qualities to enhance performance • Voice is too quiet to be heard throughout performance space • Low level of clarity
Body Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent use of facial expression, gesture and body language to enhance poem • Body language adds meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good use of facial expression, gesture and body language to enhance poem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some use of facial expression, gesture and body language to enhance poem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal use of body language to enhance poem • Meaning of poem depends on script alone
Audience Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes strong eye contact with audience • Consistently involves the audience throughout • Audience is highly and visibly engaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good use of eye contact • Involves audience for most of the performance • Audience is engaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some eye contact made • Involves audience in some parts of performance • Audience is sometimes engaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No attempt to make eye contact with audience • Does not involve audience • Audience is not engaged
Memorization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fully memorized without reliance on script 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mostly memorized • Some reliance on script 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some parts memorized • Mostly relies on script 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not memorized • Reads completely from script
Technical Aspects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong and conscious use of stage blocking • Performs within time limit or 10 second grace period • Very comfortable with microphone and uses it for effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good use of stage blocking for effect • Within 20 seconds over time limit • Uses microphone appropriately 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional use of stage blocking for effect • Within 30 seconds over time limit • Some proper use of microphone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stage blocking is weak (e.g. turns back to audience while speaking) • Exceeds both time and overtime limits • Improper or ineffective use of microphone