

Getting Started with Original Spoken Word Poetry



Original Spoken Word Poetry is a new supplemental event where students will write and perform original poetry. Original Spoken Word Poetry is poetry written for performance to express ideas, experience, or emotion through the creative arrangement of words according to their sound, their rhythm, their meaning. The maximum time limit is 5 minutes with a 30-second grace period. The delivery must be memorized, and no book or script may be used. No more than 150 words of the original poetry may be direct quotation from any other speech or writing. A successful performer will craft a piece that elicits critical thought, reflection, or emotion. As opposed to traditional Poetry, Spoken Word Poetry is created to be performed aloud and may feature rhythmic flow, vivid imagery, word play, gestures, lyrical elements, and repetition.

Spoken Word is special because it allows the performer to pull from generations of oral tradition and performance. Spoken Word combines elements of rap, hip hop, storytelling, rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play. It allows the performer the liberty to tell their story creatively. Spoken Word can be about any topic the performer wishes to speak about, and it often highlights issues that directly affect the performer like social justice, race, politics, community, inequality, gender, identity, or mental health. At its core, it's all about heart and the emotions and opinions of the performer.

Getting Started

CHOOSE A TOPIC

The more meaningful your topic is to you, the more powerful the message will be. When selecting a topic, start broad. The overall theme could be family, but the message or story could be about a particular aspect of your family such as the dynamics or love or altercations that exist within your family. Spoken Word should embody your unique experiences and outlook on life. Don't focus on what others might think about the issue, only what you feel about the issue and what you have lived through. Everything you experienced is valid, so put it into your poem. Spoken Word isn't about other people, it's about YOU and YOUR emotions and reality.

FIND THE GATEWAY

The **gateway line** is the line that tells your audience what the poem is about. It's not always the first line, but often it is in the very beginning so you can spend the rest of the poem reinforcing, supporting, and expanding on the issue or theme. The gateway line is the line that the rest of the poem stems from, so it should be enticing to the audience. Think of it like your hook or bait for the audience, and the rest of the poem is the actual fishing and reeling in the audience. When you watch the video, pay attention to how it begins. Poets will typically give you just a hint of the overall topic. Sometimes they connect to a motif in the poem. **Motifs** are repetitive details that add to the work's larger meaning. There can be several motifs, but typically the poet picks one emotion—one word or one line that represents that emotion—and repeats it throughout the work so the emotion becomes ingrained in you until you feel and experience the poem as the poet does. A great example of this is in the poem *Black Privilege by Crystal Valentine*. The gateway line "Black privilege is the hung elephant swinging in the room" sets up the overall motif of what Black privilege is and causes you to keep thinking about that beginning line throughout the poem, which only enhances the motif and its implications for the larger meaning of the poem.



BRAINSTORM AND OUTLINE

You want the audience to experience what you're experiencing. You are verbally crafting a scene, so WRITE VIVIDLY. Focus on sensory details. It's not just about hearing the poem, it's about feeling the poem. Describe what you felt, heard, saw, tasted, and smelled in order to create impactful, memorable images that will help the audience live the experience through you. Collect every detail you can remember and then write them all down. Even though this is Spoken Word, you need to have the poem in a form that you can manipulate. The poem may not be the same each time you perform, but it's details and message should be. The best way to achieve that is to write the bare bones out and then add in your performance details as you're speaking.

UTILIZE WORDPLAY

Wordplay is a clever mixture of pictures, emotions, and sounds often used in Spoken Word to make the poem more dynamic. It can enhance the meaning of the piece to show that the piece is not just about an issue, but applicable to a bigger picture topic. Wordplay gives the poem a more sophisticated and creative feel that draws the audience in, but be careful not to use so much wordplay that the message becomes muddled. Reading your poem through the lens of pure meaning rather than the poem as a whole will help determine if there is too much wordplay.

FOCUS ON SOUND

Spoken Word is meant to be read aloud, so the way it sounds is just as important as the actual words you're speaking. Utilizing poetic devices such as **onomatopoeia** (using words that imitate sounds), **alliteration** (use of the same consonant at the beginning of each word), **assonance** (the repetition of similar vowels in successive words), and especially **rhyming** (correspondence in the final sounds of two or more lines) and **repetition** (the act of saying or repeating a word or phrase more than once) can affect the feel of the words you write and enhance the sound of the words when spoken. Repeating phrases and lines create the motif and allow the performer to really drive home the message of the poem. As you write your piece, read it out loud as much as possible to gauge how it sounds. It should move you. When you speak the words, you should be able to feel it in every part of your body and soul.

EMPHASIZE YOUR MESSAGE

A **power line** is an impactful line that sticks with your audience long after you've performed your poem. The power line should emphasize the most important concepts and should be the moment you want the audience to feel the most. You should have several power lines throughout the piece to drive home the message, especially as you reach the climax of the poem. One power line should absolutely be at the end of your poem. The last line should be something that really sticks with the audience and makes them stop and think about your message well past the end of the poem. ***I Won't Write Your Obituary by Nora Cooper*** (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE) is an exemplary example of this. The last line of this poem pulls together all the aspects of the poem into one line and leaves you with raw, unbridled emotion.

WELCOME HUMOR

Don't be afraid to use humor, even with serious subjects. Humor is a way for a lot of people to cope, and the audience will be able to connect with you. Humor also produces levels in your poem and makes it more dynamic. Humor can often break up the serious tone and give you a reprieve from the emotional toll a poem can take on you and the audience.

Skill Building

CREATE COHESION

Your poem should tell a story. That doesn't mean it should be narrative, but the poem should be told in a way that the audience sees the big picture. Just because it's Spoken Word, with expression of emotion and character, doesn't mean it shouldn't have a point. As you write, try to express your message through a story arc. Tell the audience what happened, vividly, but tell it in a fluid way.

PRACTICE PACING AND INTONATION

Pacing and tone are skills that have to be practiced over and over again to make them natural. Every time you write, even if you never intend to perform the piece, you should say it out loud to practice how it would sound. What emotions are you trying to convey? At what speed should you speak? Should you be soft and heartfelt or loud and furious? Should you be speeding through to express the franticness of the words, or should you be taking the words slowly and pausing in abundance? These things take time to master. You'll only know what feels right once you speak it into existence.

WRITE REPEATEDLY

The best way to improve your poems is to write as many as possible and perform every single one, even if it's just for yourself. Practice brainstorming topics or ideas and then breathe life into them by speaking about them. Then write down those thoughts and turn them into one meaningful, cohesive poem that you can practice and perform. Much of what you write will never make it into a final poem. Write it down anyway. Follow the path of your experiences and emotions and see where they take you.

Don't forget to set the poem aside and come back to it with fresh eyes. Working nonstop on a poem until you feel like it's finished can actually hurt it. Stop and put it away, then come back and revise. Once you step back, you'll be able to get a feel of the poem as an audience member, not just a writer, because you're experiencing it all over again as if for the first time.

FIND THE FLOW

Spoken Word is all about emotion. If you forget a word or get caught up in the moment, don't be afraid to improvise. Go with what feels right for the poem. Speak your truth no matter what and make the poem flow at all costs. Freestyle is one of the most important elements of Spoken Word, and being able to perform what fits even if it's not what's written is an important skill to master.

MEMORIZE

One major aspect of performing your Spoken Word poem is to be completely memorized. If you're struggling to remember the words or reading from a piece of paper, you lose a huge part of the performance aspect of Spoken Word. Spoken Word is about feeling, the more you struggle to get through or spend time reading the less emotion you're able to incorporate into the performance.

MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT

One of the most important things about performing your Spoken Word poem is to maintain eye contact with the audience, whether they are in person or through a camera. Eye contact is one of the main ways you connect with your audience. When you break eye contact, the emotional connection is broken. Essentially, the moment you're having is gone. When performing, hold eye contact for an entire thought, and then you can move on. Avoid scanning the room trying to make eye contact with everyone. Make meaningful eye contact by selecting a few people and hold those moments with them to really convey the emotion and meaning.

PROJECT

When you're performing Spoken Word, words sometimes get drowned out in a room. The tone and emotion can affect volume and, as a result, it is incredibly important to project your voice. This does not mean you have to be loud or yell. It means you speak from your diaphragm and make every word hold weight in your voice. When you speak from your diaphragm, you should feel your stomach expand, and your abdominal muscles should support every breath you take. Make sure you're standing or sitting up straight unless blocking dictates otherwise. Concentrate on breathing. Every breath should come from your stomach, and it should contract and expand as you breathe and speak.



ENUNCIATE

Saying every word is important because every word is carefully chosen to enhance the flow and sound and meaning of the poem. Skipping over a single word can completely change the poem by messing up the flow and sound. This is especially important if your pacing is fast to express the emotion. In order to convey the meaning, not just the emotion, you need to hear every word.

UTILIZE EXPRESSION AND GESTURES

Expressions are not just limited to voice. Your face and body should represent the tone and meaning behind your words. Facial expressions are especially important. The use of your eyes and eyebrows can tell an entire story without even uttering a word, so utilize those assets to enhance the emotions you're conveying.

Make your body as open as possible. Don't be afraid to be big and bold. Let your gestures emphasize your emotions. Don't over gesture; let them flow naturally from your body. Your body is an accessory to the poem. Gestures should complement the other aspects of your piece. As your body expresses emotion, your voice should, too—and, in turn, the emotion in your voice should match what your body is doing. If your tone is timid, your movements should be small and shy. If you're being loud and overtly expressive, your movements should be big and firm.

EVALUATION

In supplemental events at the National Tournament, student performances will be evaluated by judges based on their performance, vocalization, and originality. Check out a sample ballot and continue to build your skills!

Learn from the Community

Spoken Word has been around for generations, and there are endless performances online for you to watch. We especially recommend the following resources to learn about storytelling and performance.

- [*Power Poetry*](#)
- [*Brave New Voices*](#)
- [*Button Poetry*](#)
- [*TED Talk: If I Should Have a Daughter by Sarah Kay*](#)

As you seek out performances, remember that Spoken Word is often about deeply personal experiences and powerful emotions. Many poems include adult language and themes, and triggering subjects are common. Learn what you can from titles, and if a poem is leading you toward a topic you aren't comfortable hearing, it's okay to stop and talk to an adult about what you're feeling. The poems below are just the tip of the iceberg, but represent a range of subjects, perspectives, and styles.

- [*9 Things I Would Like to Tell to Every Teenage Girl* by Melissa Newman-Evans](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*10 Honest Thoughts on Being Loved by a Skinny Boy* by Rachel Wiley](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*14 Lines from Love Letters or Suicide Notes* by Doc Luben](#)
- [*Angry Black Woman* by Porsha O.](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*Black Boy Auditions For His Own Funeral*](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE, N-WORD)
- [*"Capitalism"* by Porsha O.](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*Cuz He's Black* by Javon Johnson](#)
- [*Dear Straight People* by Denise Frohman](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*Dear Ursula* by Melissa May](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*Depression is Funny Like That* by Reagan Myers](#)
- [*Explaining My Depression To My Mother* by Sabrina Benaim](#)
- [*Factory Defects* by Desiree Dallagiacomo](#)
- [*Falling in Like* by Big Poppa E](#)
- [*God is Gay* by Elliot Darrow](#)
- [*Healing* by Jae Nichelle](#)
- [*Just Take a Shower* by Jared Singer](#)
- [*Mother of Dragons* by Tai Weinman](#)
- [*My Mother Explains My Depression to Me* by RJ Walker](#)
- [*Notes on Loving a 5 Time Felon* by Desiree Dallagiacomo](#)
- [*Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*](#)
- [*Shrinking Women* by Lily Myers](#)
- [*Slavery Auditions for the Role of Jesus in a Movie Called America* by Damien McClendon](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE, N-WORD)
- [*The Correct Spelling Of Father*](#)
- [*Thighs* by Desiree Dallagiacomo](#) (EXPLICIT LANGUAGE)
- [*When the Fat Girl Gets Skinny* by Blythe Baird](#)