

What is spoken word poetry?

Spoken word poetry is poetry that is written on a page but performed for an audience. Because it is performed, this poetry tends to demonstrate a heavy use of rhythm, improvisation, free association, rhymes, rich poetic phrases, word play and slang. It is more aggressive and “in your face” than more traditional forms of poetry.

What should I keep in mind when writing a spoken word poem:

Use of Concrete Language – Use words and phrases that project on the minds of the listeners vivid images, sounds, actions and other sensations. If your poem is rich with imagery, your listeners will see, smell and taste what you’re telling them.

Repetition – Repetition is a simple but powerful poetic device. Sometimes just the repetition of a key phrase or image, with extensions of image and thought for each repetition, can help a writer generate exciting poems.

Rhyme – Rhyming can enrich your poems and performance if used with skill, surprise and moderation.

Attitude – “No attitude, no poem!” Feelings and opinions are the “stuff” poetry is made of – Each poet has a unique perspective and view of the world that no one else has. It is important that a spoken word poem embodies the courage necessary to share one’s self with the rest of the world.

Persona – Spoken word poetry allows you to be anyone you want to be. You can write a poem in the “voice” of someone or something other than yourself or with a personality trait that is different from your own.

Performance – Remember, spoken word poems are written to be performed. After your poem is written, practice performing the poem with the elements of good stage presence in mind...

- **Posture** – Stand up straight, shoulders back, chin up, head held high. If you approach the stage with your head hung low and your shoulders slumped, the audience won’t be interested in listening to you.
- **Eye Contact** – Don’t stare at the floor, or hide behind whatever it is that your reading from whether it’s a book or a piece of paper. From time to time, look into the eyes of the different people in the audience to hold their attention.
- **Projection** – Speak loudly and clearly so that your voice can be heard from a distance.
- **Enunciation** – Don’t mumble. Speak clearly and distinctly so that the audience can understand what you are saying.
- **Facial Expressions** – Smile if you’re reading something happy. Don’t smile if you are reading something serious. Use the appropriate facial expressions for the various emotions expressed in the poem.

- **Gestures** – Use hand motions and body movements to emphasize different elements of your performance. However, don't rock back and forth or wave your hands about carelessly or the audience will become distracted.

Memorization – Committing a poem to memory is a wonderful exercise. If you have a poem memorized you can focus more on the performance of the poem. However, so far as performance is concerned, it is more important to **“learn your poems by heart.”** If you are really in touch with the meaning and the emotional content of your poem, even if you forget a word or a line you can keep going. Learning by heart allows you to incorporate improvisation (*freestyle*) into your poem which is one of the most important elements of spoken word poetry.

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