

Poetry slam

A **poetry slam** is a competition at which poets read or recite original work. These performances are then judged on a numeric scale by previously selected members of the audience.

History

Marc Smith is credited with starting the poetry slam at the Get Me High Lounge in Chicago in November 1984. In July 1986, the slam moved to its permanent home, the Green Mill Jazz Club.^[1] In August 1988, the first poetry slam was held in New York City at the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe and hosted by Bob Holman.^[2] In 1990, the first National Poetry Slam took place in Fort Mason, San Francisco, involving a team from Chicago, a team from San Francisco, and an individual poet from New York. As of 2010[3], the National Poetry Slam has grown and currently features approximately 80 certified teams each year, culminating in five days of competition.^[4] Da Poetry Lounge was started in Hollywood, CA in 1998.^[5]



Nuyorican Poets Cafe, New York City

Slams have spread all over the world, with slam scenes in Hawaii, Ireland, Nepal, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Israel, Ukraine, Russia, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Portugal, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia, Bosnia, Denmark, Latvia, South Korea, Japan, India, Greece, Spain, Mexico, France, Madagascar, Azerbaijan, Morocco and Moldova. Wikipedia:Citation needed

Format

In a poetry slam, members of the audience are chosen by an M.C. or host to act as judges for the event. In the national slam, there are five judges, but smaller slams generally have three. After each poet performs, each judge awards a score to that poem. Scores generally range between zero and ten. The highest and lowest score are dropped, giving each performance a rating between zero and thirty points.

Before the competition begins, the host will often bring up a "sacrificial" poet, whom the judges will score in order to calibrate their judging.

A single round at a standard slam consists of performances by all eligible poets. Most slams last multiple rounds, and many involve the elimination of lower-scoring poets in successive rounds. An elimination rubric might run 8-4-2; eight poets in the first round, four in the second, and two in the last. Some slams do not eliminate poets at all. The Green Mill usually runs its slams with 6 poets in the first round.

The Portland Poetry Slam (Portland, OR) takes a different approach; it uses the 8-4-2 three-round rubric, but the poets go head-to-head in separate bouts within the round. Instead of five judges giving points, the audience decides who moves on to the next round by a loud, enthusiastic popular vote.

Props, costumes, and music are always forbidden in slams,^[6] distinguishing this category from its immediate predecessor, performance poetry. Additionally, most slams enforce a time limit of three minutes (and a grace period of ten seconds), after which a poet's score may be docked according to how long the poem exceeded the limit.

Competition types

In an "Open Slam," the most common slam type, competition is open to all who wish to compete, given the number of slots available. In an "Invitational Slam," by contrast, only those invited to do so may compete.

Poetry Slam, Inc. holds several National and World Poetry Slams, including the Individual World Poetry Slam, The National Poetry Team Slam and The Women of the World Poetry Slam. The current (2013) IWPS champion is Ed Mabrey. Ed Mabrey is the only three-time IWPS champion in the history of the event. The current (2013) National Poetry Slam Team champions are Slam New Orleans (SNO), who have won the competition for the second year in a row. The current (2014) Women of the World Poetry Slam Champion is Dominique Christina.

A "Theme Slam" is one in which all performances must conform to a specified theme, genre, or formal constraint. Themes may include Nerd,^[7] Erotica, Queer, Improv, or other conceptual limitations. In theme slams, poets can sometimes be allowed to break "traditional" slam rules. For instance, they sometimes allow performance of work by another poet (e.g. the "Dead Poet Slam", in which all work must be by a deceased poet). They can also allow changes on the restrictions on costumes or props (e.g. the Swedish "Triathlon" slams that allow for a poet, musician, and dancer to all take the stage at the same time), changing the judging structure (e.g. having a specific guest judge), or changing the time limits (e.g. a "1-2-3" slam with three rounds of one minute, two minutes, and three minutes, respectively).

Although theme slams may seem restricting in nature, slam venues frequently use them to advocate participation by particular and perhaps underrepresented demographics (which vary from slam to slam), like younger poets and women.

Poetics

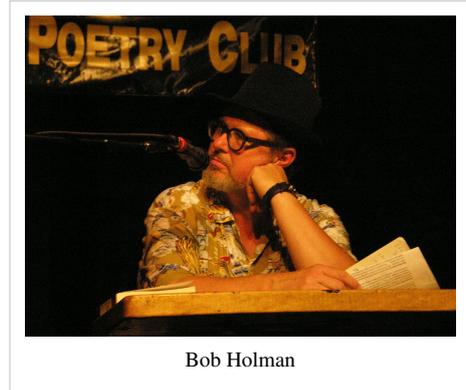
Poetry slams can feature a broad range of voices, styles, cultural traditions, and approaches to writing and performance.

Some poets are closely associated with the vocal delivery style found in hip-hop music and draw heavily on the tradition of dub poetry, a rhythmic and politicized genre belonging to black and particularly West Indian culture. Others employ an unrhyming narrative formula. Some use traditional theatric devices including shifting voices and tones, while others may recite an entire poem in ironic monotone. Some poets use nothing but their words to deliver a poem, while others stretch the boundaries of the format, tap-dancing or beatboxing or using highly choreographed movements.

What is a dominant / successful style one year may be passe the next. Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, slam poet and author of *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*, was quoted in an interview on the Best American Poetry blog as saying:

“One of the more interesting end products (to me, at least) of this constant shifting is that poets in the slam always worry that something — a style, a project, a poet — will become so dominant that it will kill the scene, but it never does. Ranting hipsters, freestyle rappers, bohemian drifters, proto-comedians, mystical shamans and gothy punks have all had their time at the top of the slam food chain, but in the end, something different always comes along and challenges the poets to try something new.”^[8]

One of the goals of a poetry slam is to challenge the authority of anyone who claims absolute authority over literary value. No poet is beyond critique, as everyone is dependent upon the goodwill of the audience. Since only the poets with the best cumulative scores advance to the final round of the night, the structure assures that the audience gets to choose from whom they will hear more poetry. Audience members furthermore become part of each poem's presence, thus breaking down the barriers between poet/performer, critic, and audience. Bob Holman, a poetry activist and former slammaster of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, once called the movement "the democratization of verse."^[9] In 2005, Holman was also quoted as saying:



Bob Holman

“The spoken word revolution is led a lot by women and by poets of color. It gives a depth to the nation's dialogue that you don't hear on the floor of Congress. I want a floor of Congress to look more like a National Poetry Slam. That would make me happy.”^[10]

Slam critics

In an interview in the *Paris Review*, literary critic Harold Bloom said about slamming:

I can't bear these accounts I read in the *Times* and elsewhere of these poetry slams, in which various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other. The whole thing is judged by an applause meter which is actually not there, but might as well be. This isn't even silly; it is the death of art.^[11]

Kip Fulbeck, who teaches Spoken Word at the University of California, Santa Barbara, said, "I don't like the idea of competition and art being put together. I think it often distills the quality of work down to a caricature of itself. Seeing poetry slams often reminds me of watching *American Idol*. You've got a series of judges, an audience that comes in looking for a certain shtick that they want to see and that's what they're going to cheer for."^[12]

Poet and lead singer of King Missile, John S. Hall has also long been a vocal opponent, taking issue with such factors as its inherently competitive nature^[13] and what he considers its lack of stylistic diversity.^[14] In his 2005 interview in *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*, he recalls seeing his first slam, at the Nuyorican Poets Café:

“...I hated it. And it made me really uncomfortable and... it was very much like a sport, and I was interested in poetry in large part because it was like the antithesis of sports.... [I]t seemed to me like a very macho, masculine form of poetry and not at all what I was interested in.”

The poet Tim Clare offers a "for and against" account of the phenomenon in *Slam: A Poetic Dialogue*.

Ironically, slam poetry movement founder Marc Smith has been critical of the commercially successful Def Poetry television and Broadway live stage shows produced by Russell Simmons, decrying it as "an exploitive entertainment [program that] diminished the value and aesthetic of performance poetry".^[15]

Academia and slam

As of 2011, four poets who have competed at National Poetry Slam have won National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) Fellowships for Literature:

- Hal Sirowitz (who was on the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Poetry Slam team in 1993^[16]) won an NEA Fellowship in Poetry in 1994^[17]
- Jeffrey McDaniel (who was on numerous DC and California slam teams in the mid to late 1990s) won a NEA Fellowship in Poetry in 2003
- Adrienne Su (who was on the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Poetry Slam team in 1991) won a NEA Fellowship in Poetry in 2007^[18]
- Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz (who was on the NYC-Urbana Poetry Slam team in 1998, 2001, 2003 and 2010) won a NEA Fellowship in Poetry in 2011^[19]

A number of poets belong to both academia and slam: as noted above Jeffrey McDaniel slammed on several poetry slam teams, and has since published several books and currently teaches at Sarah Lawrence College; Patricia Smith, a four-time national slam champion, went on to win several prestigious literary awards, including being nominated for the 2008 National Book Award, and being inducted into the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent in 2006; Bob Holman founded the Nuyorican Poetry Slam has taught for years at the New School, Bard, Columbia and NYU; Craig Arnold won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition and has competed at slams; Kip Fulbeck, a professor of Art at the University of California, Santa Barbara competed in slam in the early-1990s and initiated the first spoken word course to be taught as part of a college art program's core curriculum; and poet/academics such as Michael Salinger, Felice Belle, Javon Johnson was national slam poetry champion in 2003 and 2004, wrote his dissertation on slam poetry and recently published an article in text and performance quarterly about black masculinity and sexism in the slam community, Susan Somers-Willett wrote the book *The Cultural Politics of Slam poetry, exploring the relationships between slam, identity, and politics*,^[20] Robbie Q. Telfer, Phil West, Ragan Fox writes about his ten years of experience as "a gay slam poet",^[21] Marie Fleischmann Timbreza, and Karyna McGlynn have devoted much attention to the merging of the poetry slam community and the academic community in their respective works.

Some renowned poets have competed in slams, with less successful results. Henry Taylor, winner of the 1985 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, competed in the 1997 National Poetry Slam as an individual and placed 75th out of 150. [Wikipedia:Citation needed](#)

While slam poetry has often been ignored in traditional higher learning institutions, it slowly is finding its way into courses and programs of study. For example, at Berklee College of Music, in Boston, Slam Poetry is now available as a Minor course of study.^[22]

Youth poetry slam movement

Slam poetry has found popularity as a form of self-expression among many teenagers. The World Poetry Bout Association [23] sponsored the earliest slam poetry workshops for teenagers, through its "Poetry Education Project" in Taos, New Mexico, in the early 1990s. The first statewide competition for high school students was held at Taos High School in 1993, with the top teams and individual participants awarded plaques. Members of Taos' competitive teams earned athletic letters annually up until 2008. [cf. *The Taos News*, Taos, NM, articles, 1993 to present.] Youth Speaks Youth Speaks^[24], a non-profit literary organization founded in 1996 by James Kass, patterned the slam competitions at the annual Brave New Voices festival after that seminal Taos event. Youth Speaks serves as one of the largest youth poetry organizations in America, offering opportunities for youth ages 13–19 to express their ideas on paper and stage.

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Another group offering opportunities in education and performance to teens is URBAN WORD NYC ^[25] out of New York City, formerly known as Youth Speaks New York. URBAN WORD NYC holds the largest youth slam in NYC annually, with over 500 young people. The non-profit organization provides free workshops for inner-city youth ran by Hip-Hop poet and mentor, Michael Cirelli.

Young Chicago Authors ^[26] (YCA) provides workshops, mentoring, and competition opportunities to youth in the Chicago area. Every year YCA presents Louder Than A Bomb, the world's largest team-based youth slam and subject of a documentary by the same name.

The youth poetry slam movement will be the focus of a documentary film series produced by HBO and released in 2009.^[27] It will feature poets from Youth Speaks, Urban Word, Louder than a Bomb and other related youth poetry slam organizations.

In a 2005 interview, one of slam's best known poets Saul Williams praised the youth poetry slam movement, explaining:

“Hip-hop filled a tremendous void for me and my friends growing up... The only thing that prevented all the young boys in the black community from turning into Michael Jackson, from all of us bleaching our skin, from all of us losing it, just losing it, was hip-hop. That was the only counter-existence in the mainstream media. That was essential, and in that same way I think poetry fills a very huge void today [among] youth. And I guess I count myself among the youth.”^[28]

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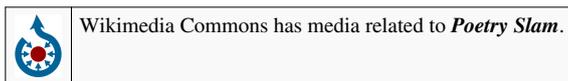
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- Marc Smith, *Crowdpleaser*
- Gary Mex Glazner, *Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*
- Susan Somers-Willett, *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*
- Cristin O'Keefe Aptowicz, *Words In Your Face: A Guided Tour Through Twenty Years of the New York City Poetry Slam*
- Big Poppa E, *The Wussy Boy Manifesto*
- Beau Sia, *A Night Without Armor II: The Revenge*
- Daphne Gottlieb, *Final Girl, Pelt, Why Things Burn, and 15 Ways to Stay Alive*
- Douglas A. Martin, *In the Time of Assignments*
- Glenis Redmond, *Backbone, Under the Sun,*
- Jeffrey McDaniel, *Alibi School, The Forgiveness Parade, and The Splinter Factory*
- Jessica Care Moore, *The Alphabet Verses the Ghetto, The Words Don't Fit in My Mouth, and God Is Not an American*
- Justin Chin, *Bite Hard, Harmless Medicine, and Guttled*
- M. Ayodele Heath, *Otherness*
- Michael Salinger, *Neon, Outspoken, and Well Defined: Vocabulary in Rhyme* (with Sam Henderson)
- Patricia Smith, *Big Towns, Big Talk : Poems, Close to Death : Poems, Life According to Motown, Teahouse Of The Almighty, and Blood Dazzler*
- Rachel McKibbens, *Pink Elephant*
- Lucy Anderton, *the flung you*
- Ragan Fox, *Heterophobia and Exile in Gayville*
- Regie Gibson, *Storms Beneath the Skin*
- Shane Koyczan, *Visiting Hours*
- Tara Betts, *Arc and Hue*

- Taylor Mali, *What Learning Leaves*, and *Top Secret Slam Strategies*
- Helen Gregory, *The Quiet Revolution of Poetry Slam: The Sustainability of Cultural Capital in the Light of Changing Artistic Conventions*. "Ethnography and Education", Vol. 3 (1): 61-71.
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- Sonya Renee Taylor *A Little Truth On Your Shirt*

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External links



- International Poetry Slam Portal (european) (<http://www.myslam.net/>)
- "An Incomplete History of Slam" at e-poets.net (<http://www.e-poets.net/library/slam/>)
- "Verbs On Asphalt: A History of the Nuyorican Poetry Slam" (<http://verbsonasphalt.com/>)
- Documentary Film about the National Poetry Slam (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=8723097898466379752&hl=en>)
- Indiefeed Performance Poetry Channel Nine-Part Podcast Series on the History of the New York City Poetry Slam (http://www.indiefeedpp.libsyn.com/index.php?search_string=WIYF&Submit=Search&search=1)
- GotPoetry.com / performance poetry and Slam Poetry web directory. (<http://www.gotpoetry.com/>)
- Prize Poem: an online poetry slam (<http://www.prizepoem.com/>)

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