

Basic Information about Poetry Slams – as provided by poetryslam.com

What is poetry slam?

Simply put, poetry slam is the competitive art of performance poetry. It puts a dual emphasis on writing and performance, encouraging poets to focus on what they're saying and how they're saying it.

What is a poetry slam?

A poetry slam is an event in which poets perform their work and are judged by members of the audience. Typically, the host or another organizer select the judges, who are instructed to give numerical scores (on a zero to 10 or one to 10 scale) based on the poet's content and performance.

What are the rules?

Though rules vary from slam to slam, the basic rules are:

- * Each poem must be of the poet's own construction;
- * Each poet gets three minutes (plus a ten-second grace period) to read one poem, if the poet goes over, 1 point per minute will be deducted from the total score;
- * The poet may not use props, costumes, or musical instruments, but (may use his/her voice to sing or rap);
- * Of the scores the poet received from the five judges, the high and low scores are dropped, and the middle three are added together, giving the poet a total score of 0-30.

How does it differ from an open mike reading?

Slam is engineered for the audience, whereas a number of open mike readings are engineered as a support network for poets. Slam is designed for the audience to react vocally and openly to all aspects of the show, including the poet's performance, the judges' scores, and the host's banter.

What can the audience do?

The official MC spiel of Poetry Slam, Inc. encourages the audience to respond to the poets or the judges in any way they see fit, and most slams have adopted that guideline. Audiences can boo or cheer at the conclusion of a poem, or even during a poem.

At the Uptown Slam at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern, where poetry slam was born, the audience is instructed on an established progression of reactions if they don't like a poet, including finger snapping, foot stomping, and various verbal exhortations. If the audience expresses a certain level of dissatisfaction with the poet, the poet leaves the stage, even if he or she hasn't finished the performance. Though not every slam is as exacting in its procedure for getting a poet off the stage, the vast majority of slams give their audience the freedom and the permission to express itself.

What kind of poetry is read at slams?

Depends on the venue, depends on the poets, depends on the slam. One of the best things about poetry slam is the range of poets it attracts. You'll find a diverse range of work within slam, including heartfelt love poetry, searing social commentary, uproarious comic routines, and bittersweet personal confessional pieces. Poets are free to do work in any style on any subject.

How do I win a poetry slam?

Winning a poetry slam requires some measure of skill and a huge dose of luck. The judges' tastes, the audience's reactions, and the poets' performances all shape a slam event, and what wins one week might not get a poet into the second round the next week. There's no formula for winning a slam, although you become a stronger poet and performer the same way you get to Carnegie Hall — practice, practice, practice.

How did poetry slam start?

In 1984, construction worker and poet Marc Smith started a poetry reading at a Chicago jazz club, the Get Me High lounge, looking for a way to breathe life into the open mike format. The series, and its emphasis on performance, laid the groundwork for the brand of poetry that would eventually be exhibited in slam.

In 1986, Smith approached Dave Jemilo, the owner of the Green Mill (a Chicago jazz club and former haunt of Al Capone), with a plan to host a weekly poetry competition on Sunday nights. Jemilo welcomed him, and the Uptown Poetry Slam was born on July 25 of that year. Smith drew on baseball and bridge terminology for the name, and instituted the basic features of the competition, including judges chosen from the audience and cash prizes for the winner. The Green Mill evolved into a Mecca for performance poets, and the Uptown Poetry Slam continues to run every Sunday night.

What is the National Poetry Slam?

The National Poetry Slam is the annual slam championship tournament, wherein four-person teams from all over North America and Europe gather to compete against each other for the national title. It has become part Super Bowl, part poetry summer camp, and part traveling exhibition. Staged in a different city each year, the National Poetry Slam has emerged as slam's highest-profile showcase.

Does slam have a motto?

Former Asheville, N.C. slammaster Allan Wolf coined the phrase, "The points are not the point; the point is poetry" prior to the 1994 National Poetry Slam in Asheville. The phrase has become a mantra of sorts, reminding poets and organizers that the goal of slam is to grow poetry's audience.

New York City poet Taylor Mali, a member of multiple championship teams, has modified the motto to read, "The points are not the point; the point is to get more points than anyone else," but we're pretty sure he's got his tongue planted firmly in cheek when he says that.