

# **A Teachers Resource Guide for**



## **Mayhem Poets**

**Monday, November 16**

**10 a.m.**

**Schwab Auditorium**

**Presented By**

**The Center for Performing Arts at Penn State**

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Maya Angelou Resource Guide with Poetry Exercises  
[www.\\*poetryfoundation\\*.org/downloads/BHM\\_HighSchool.pdf](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/downloads/BHM_HighSchool.pdf)

# WELCOME

to the

## CENTER for the PERFORMING ARTS!

Thank you for participating in the 2009-2010 season of the Center for the Performing Arts Informance Series—a living laboratory of live theatre! These teaching resources provide you with information about the Mayhem Poets performance.

We encourage you to use these resources to integrate the arts into your classroom, particularly as related to the performance by the Mayhem Poets that you and your students will be attending. This will help your students receive the full benefit of the theatre experience. We hope that you will find these materials worthwhile and meaningful to your students. We have pointed out subject area connections that follow the Pennsylvania Academic Standards. Please note that these teaching resources are for your use, and we encourage you to freely adapt them to suit the needs and interests as well as the age level of your students.

By bringing your students to the *Mayhem Poets* performance, The Center for the Performing Arts fulfills its vision of enriching lives through inspiring experiences. Thank you and please let us know what you think: email Amy Vashaw at [adv1@psu.edu](mailto:adv1@psu.edu).

We look forward to seeing you in our audience!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Dupain Vashaw". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

# Role of the Audience



A theatre is a charged space, full of energy and anticipation.<sup>1</sup> When the house lights go down, the excitement level goes up! Theatres are designed so that the voices of the singers and actors and the music of the musicians can be heard. But this also means that any sound in the audience—whispering, rustling of papers, speaking, and moving about—can be

heard by other audience members and by the performers. Distractions like these disturb everyone's concentration and can spoil a performance. Think of all the hard work that went into this moment. Many people have worked for several months to bring it all together, just for you. You are the reason why this performance can take place.

## Best Practices for Audience Members

- Use the restroom before you get to your seat in the theater. There is no open food, drink or gum allowed in the theatre, also no photos (the flash can be dangerous for the actors) and no cell phones—including texting.
- Show the performers your respect by not talking or whispering during the performance.
- Please—laugh when you hear something funny! Reward the actors with your applause! At the end of the performance, the actors will return to the stage to take a bow for what's known as curtain call. At this time, if you really enjoyed the performance, you may rise from your seat to give a standing ovation.
- Enjoy! The actors are performing for your entertainment—they have worked very hard to bring you *Mayhem Poets* to share with you.
- After the performance is over the lights will come back on but stay seated until someone in charge dismisses your group.



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<sup>1</sup> PA Academic Standards for the Arts and Humanities 9.4 Aesthetic Response C. Recognize that the environment of the observer influences individual aesthetic response to works in the arts

# Mayhem Biography

"The Mayhem Poets communicated important truths about the power of words and about human values, the sorts of truths that all of us in education struggle every day to convey to our students" -

*Don Gilpin, English Department Chair, West Windsor Plainsboro South*



The Mayhem Poets are a group of young poets dedicated to making poetry more than just an art of writing. These artists use only original works of poetry and share these poems with the audience through performance. **Performance Poetry** is an accessible, appealing art form that can motivate students to foster an appreciation for both classical and contemporary poetic expression. The most notable performance poet would be none other than William Shakespeare.

The Mayhem poets tour nationally performing at schools, colleges, hospitals, poetry slams and open-mikes, among other venues. This group of young poets has performed their poetry at the Capitol Center for the Arts in Concord, New Hampshire, The Cincinnati Arts Center, The Sangamon Auditorium in Springfield, Illinois, and many other prestigious venues.

The Mayhem Poets were founded during an open-mike event at Rutgers University, where they were students. Since then they have worked to utilize hip-hop rhythms and dynamic theatrical techniques to develop a powerful performance and inspiring workshops for people of all ages and backgrounds to help enlighten students to craft and perform original poetry.

These poets have worked in conjunction with agencies such as HBO Def Poetry, Arts Power National Touring Theater, and Young Audiences of New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

## ***Poet Biographies***



**Kyle "Black Skeptik" Sutton** was born in Michigan and raised in Jersey, where he learned how to "lyrically split atoms" and "Kill-em with Concepts." His smooth flowing, hard-hitting hip-hop style and dynamic theatrical presence have garnered him poetry slam victories across the nation, and brought him all the way to the Grand Slam finals at the legendary Nuyorican Poets Cafe' in New York City. Skep's recent solo hip hop project is currently being shopped to major as well as independent record labels, and includes songs featuring the likes of superstars KRS ONE and BUSTA RHYMES. With a B.A. in Spanish from Rutgers

University, Skep can communicate with a multitude of audiences and has led writing and performance workshops around the globe. He dedicates all of his artistic endeavors to the memory of his mother, Barbara Sutton.



**Scott Raven** was drawn to the stage since birth; his pacifier his first microphone. As a teen he quickly became active in the local Jewish community giving Shabbat speeches and histrionic-filled haftarah portions, assuring his Jewish identity would remain an important part of his writing and career. His penchant for performance led him to Rutgers University where he studied Theater and Journalism. After graduation, he co-created Mayhem Poets blending his love for acting and writing. Since then he has co-authored and performed in two full length Spoken-Word Plays, Masque (2001) and New Street Poets (2005), has

taken Shakespeare and Voice classes at the Stella Adler Acting Studio, and studied improv with the UCB. He is currently working on a collection of Shakespearean "Sconnetts", a fictional novel loosely based on his touring experiences throughout elementary and middle schools, and recently finished shooting both a commercial and two independent films.



Originally from Willingboro, NJ, **Mason Granger** took his exceptional SAT marks & perfect score on the Math section of the NJ High School Proficiency Test and, rather than parlaying them into an ivy league scholarship, instead took them to Rutgers University to pursue a life of poetry. Once there, Mason infused academia into his creative writings, resulting in a style that both Einstein and Emerson would admire.

Sweeping thru the collegiate poetry scene like a breath of fresh air, Mason hosted the campus open mic Verbal Mayhem for 3 years, eventually becoming the poet laureate of Livingston College. He's been described as

everything from "brilliant" to "a sexier version of Barack."

# What Is Slam Poetry???



***“the competitive art of performance poetry”***

The poetry slam was established in the mid-1980's. Originally its purpose was to heighten public interest in poetry readings. Today, slam poetry is that and so much more. Slam poetry is an international art form emphasizing audience involvement and poetic excellence.

Specifics of a slam vary from slam to slam, however certified slams follow the following basic structure: Generally a slam series would take place weekly or monthly in a public space. Poets who decide to compete sign up with a host. The host is responsible for finding five audience members who would be interested in serving as judges. The judges judge each poet on a 0 to 10 scale. They are asked to consider both content and performance. While performing the poets must follow three rules: 1) The poems must be originally composed by the performer. 2) The poets may not use any props, costumes, or musical instruments. 3) They must stay within the three minute time limit (with a 10 second grace period). When judging the poets, the high score and low score will be dropped, the middle three scores becomes the score for the poet. When doing slam poetry there is supposed to be some degree of audience involvement. Therefore the host encourages the audience to respond to the poet in an appropriate manner.

All poets read one poem in the first round. The top-scoring poets go on to a second round, and those top scorers go onto the third and final round. Cash and other prizes are offered to the winner as congratulation for performing well. In some cities, the slam series will have a final slam at the end of the season to determine which poets will represent the city at the *National Poetry Slam*.

Poetry slams have become some of the best-attended poetry events. Slam's purpose is to target the community – addressing the audience has made slam poetry more inclusive – with a more diverse audience than a typical poetry reading. The marriage of poetry and competition slam has allowed non-traditional audiences a tangible and intriguing avenue for experiencing poetry.

# Poetry Slam

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is a poetry slam?**

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

### **Who gets to participate?**

The vast majority of slams are open to everyone who wishes to sign up and can get into the venue. Though everyone who signs up has the opportunity to read in the first round, the lineup for subsequent rounds is determined by the judges' scores. In other words, the judges vote for which poets they want to see more work from.

### **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, points will be deducted from the total score;
- The poet may not use props, costumes, or musical instruments;
- 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.

### **Are the rules the same from slam to slam?**

Some slams have slight variations on the rules, but most adhere to the basic guidelines. The key rule in slam is that judges are selected from the audience, and those scores are used to determine who advances.

### **Who organizes the slams?**

Slams are typically organized by poets interested in cultivating poetry in their communities. The vast majority work on a volunteer basis, and the price of admission typically goes toward either keeping the show running or toward special projects, like funding a slam team's trip to the annual National Poetry Slam.

### **What can the audience do?**

Audience members are usually encouraged to respond to the poets or the judges in any way they see fit. 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, and 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 a 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 did poetry slam start?**

In 1984, construction worker and poet Marc Smith started a poetry reading at a Chicago jazz club, 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<sup>th</sup> 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 three to five-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.

**What is the difference between slam poetry and poetry?**

That's not the right question to ask. There is no such thing as "slam poetry" even though the term "slam poet" seems to have gained acceptance. Those who use the term "slam poetry" are probably thinking more of hip-hop poetry or loud, in-your-face, vaguely poetic rants. The more useful question to ask is "What is the difference between spoken word and poetry?" Spoken word is poetry written first and foremost to be heard. At any given slam, much of the work presented could be called spoken word.

# Slam Poetry Philosophies

**“The points are not the point, the point is poetry.”** *-Alan Wolfe*

- The purpose of poetry (and indeed all art) is not to glorify the poet but rather to celebrate the community to which the poet belongs. *–Wendell Berry*
  
- The show and the show's effect upon the audience are more important than any one individual's contribution to it.
  
- The performance of poetry is an art -- just as much an art as the art of writing it.
  
- NO audience should be thought of as obligated to listen to the poet. It is the poet's obligation to communicate effectively, artfully, honestly, and professionally so as to compel the audience to listen.
  
- The Slam should be open to all people and all forms of poetry.
  
- With respect to its own affairs, each Slam should be free from attachment to any outside organization and responsible to no authority other than its own community of poets and audience.
  
- NO group, individual, or outside organization should be allowed to exploit the Slam Family. We must all remember that we are each tied in some way to someone else's efforts. Our individual achievements are only extensions of some previous accomplishment. Success for one should translate into success for all.
  
- The National Slam began as a gift from one city to another. It should remain a gift passed on freely to all newcomers.

# Activity: Breakitdown

Visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMgzjuNPXuA> and watch *Camera Phone* by The Game, ©2008 Geffen, a self-described R&B and Hip Hop song.<sup>2</sup>

What kind of stereotypes does this music video perpetuate? Do you see it as an art form or an advertisement?

Register your opinion at <http://www.breakitdown.org/home.htm>

Summary of interview between author Tricia Rose and Beth Schwartzapel (entire interview at <http://www.browنالumnimagazine.com/content/view/2310/32/>)

*The Hip Hop Wars:  
What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop  
—and Why It Matters*

Author Tricia Rose believes that what began as a spontaneous form of African American cultural expression, built from the only musical tools available to poor urban youth, has become commercialized into a dangerous commodity. What the record industry is selling, Rose argues, is not music, or fashion, or television shows like Pimp My Ride or Flavor of Love. It's blackness. It's a very particular and narrow concept of blackness that has little to do with real people and everything to do with valorizing violence, drugs, sexism, and materialism. It's a sort of modern-day minstrelsy: commercial hip-hop artists, with help from record companies, package themselves into what they think white people want to hear, and then sell it to them.

"Artists are getting rich," Rose says, "but at what cost?"

## The Birth of Hip Hop

During the 1960s and 1970s the Bronx in New York was crumbling. With the Cross-Bronx Expressway in the 1950s, built to shorten the commute time into Manhattan, homes of more than 60,000 Bronx residents were bulldozed, and more than 600,000 manufacturing jobs were lost. Many of the lower-middle-class white families moved to white-only suburbs. African-American and Latin families were left to struggle with the urban decay. Young people in the Bronx started channeling their energy and creativity into a new music form.

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<sup>2</sup> PA Academic Standards for Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening 1.2. Reading Critically in all Content Areas  
A. Read and understand essential content of informational texts and documents in all academic areas.

# Activity: Recitation to Performance

Shakespeare as a form of performance poetry <sup>3</sup>

Choose a Shakespearean monologue or soliloquy (see <http://www.bardweb.net/content/readings>).

Print it out large (18 points). Cut the paper into strips with only one or two lines of text, or even shorter, so ideally each strip contains one thought or idea. Glue each strip to its own backing so that it can be easily held.

Everyone: stand in a circle and read your line(s), one-by-one. Continue going around, having each participant read the line(s) in different ways, adding a gesture or movement, and finally, paraphrasing it in your OWN language.



Learn  
More...

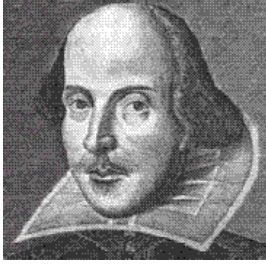
As Shakespeare believed in the power of words to create new social bonds and worlds, spoken word poetry artists Mayhem Poets come on a mission to change peoples' lives and **reshape society's view of poetry.**

Mayhem seamlessly mixes the power of personal expression with issues of diversity and acceptance. Hilariously random topics with mind-boggling hip-hop rhythms impart a hip and positive message.

Their goal is for audiences leave forever changed and, hopefully, inspired to study and write poetry themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> PA Academic Standards for Arts and Humanities 9.1. D. Production, Performance and Exhibition of Dance, Music, Theatre and Visual Arts: Use knowledge of varied styles within each art form through a performance of unique work



## Learn More

on the internet and at the library:

Mayhem Poets website:

[www.mayhempoets.com](http://www.mayhempoets.com) –

Mayhem Poets on the today show:

<http://vodpod.com/watch/1456051-mayhem-poets-on-the-today-show>

Review of Mayhem performance last April '09 in Madison, WI:

[http://77square.com/redirect\\_446433](http://77square.com/redirect_446433)

Useful lesson plans including how to organize a classroom poetry slam:

[www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html](http://www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html)

National Recitation Contest created by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation:

[www.poetryoutloud.org](http://www.poetryoutloud.org)

general information on slam poetry:

[www.poetryslam.com](http://www.poetryslam.com)

Where students can submit and post their poetry online.

[www.brickcity.net](http://www.brickcity.net) –

Great resource for organizing a classroom slam; useful lesson plans for language arts teacher. Also includes links to other useful sites that house poetry slam ideas:

[www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html](http://www.webenglishteacher.com/poetryslam.html)

Describes tips for teaching poetry and having your students perform poetry:

[www.poetryteachers.com/index/html](http://www.poetryteachers.com/index/html) --

*Black Noise*, by Tricia Rose, 1995.

A paean to rap music and all its political possibilities. The Village Voice called it "necessary reading ... for those who love hip-hop's rhymes and reasons."

Shakespeare After All, by Marjorie Garber, 2004. This book on Shakespeare's plays makes immediate connections to today's audiences.

*Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*, by M. Eleveld and M. Smith, 2005.

"This dynamic anthology embodies the thrilling and mutually beneficial rapprochement between the traditionalists and the slammers..." Chicago Tribune

*Will in the World*, by Stephen Greenblatt, 2004.

Connects themes in Shakespeare's plays to factual events of the time.

*Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry*, edited by M.G. Glazner

*Soul Train*:

[www.youtube.com/user/soultrain](http://www.youtube.com/user/soultrain)

The first black-oriented music variety show ever offered on American television. For over 35 years, Soul Train reigned as the "hippest trip in America," kicking down barriers and irrevocably changing the face of television.

## Appendix

Maya Angelou Teaching Resource Guide with Poetry Exercises

[www.\\*poetryfoundation\\*.org/downloads/BHM\\_HighSchool.pdf](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/downloads/BHM_HighSchool.pdf)