

Poetry Out Loud Best Practices

Developed by University of Arizona Poetry Center staff & teaching artists: Logan Phillips, Matthew Conley, Sarah Kortemeier, Renee Angle, Allie Leach, Hillary Gan, and Laura Miller. This list of best practices is not a prescription for how you must conduct the program at your school. They are merely a list of suggested strategies that we have found yield strong poetry performances. Each teacher and school should feel free to adapt these practices and implement the program in the manner that will work best for your students and school.

Guiding Principles--Best Practices for Teaching Poetry

- We encourage teachers and students to encounter poems in a variety of contexts and to use poems for a variety of purposes, avoiding using poetry strictly for teaching close reading/analysis, grammar, and mechanics. In this way, the Poetry Out Loud program can be an asset to Language Arts classrooms in that it provides a different entry point into a poem while still requiring students to make use of their analytical skill.
- The primary goal the Poetry Center's Poetry Out Loud residencies are to make poetry accessible to general audiences and to cultivate "poetic literacy" in our community. Research shows that by engaging people with poetry and literature, we encourage a lifelong habit of reading and writing as well as a general involvement in the artsⁱ.
- Poetry's unique gift is that it fosters an ability to see the world with fresh eyes and to reinforce our sense of humanity—traits which help to build a highly engaged, productive, and imaginative citizenry.ⁱⁱ
- Many students develop negative attitudes towards the art form. Providing students with active, creative engagement strategies, like Poetry Out Loud, can help shape students' experiences with the genre. If students' only exposure to poetry is through being taught skills that primarily involve either complex analysis or rote memorization, the art form quickly loses its luster and appeal.ⁱⁱⁱ

Poem Selection

- Work towards an overall goal of having students pick a wider variety of poems.
- In order for students to differentiate their performances, they need to pick wildly different poems from their peers. Students who recite the same poems as a peer in a competition are often at a disadvantage. (Asking students to survey, read, and carefully select their poems allows them to become more familiar with the genre of poetry, its variety of forms, perspectives, and voices. Student's early research can inform and provide them with additional background knowledge to bring to a focused and studied performance of their selected poem.)
- Give students class time to read broadly. Schedule visits with your school library to accomplish this. Or, if your school has the resources, consider visiting the Poetry Center for a field trip built around poem selection.

- Showcase a real range of poems by reading a poem from the anthology at the start of every class, or on the school PA system, or incorporate into bell work, journals, or other daily tasks you already ask students to engage in.
- Ask students to articulate their reasons for choosing a particular poem by asking them to make connections with their own lives, their own studies and interests.

Memorization

- Use some class time for poem memorization and require that it be accomplished within a one to three week timeframe. Highly focused, quick paced memory work retains student interest in the program and student performances are often of higher quality.
- Consider giving students a grade for memorization only (and then evaluate performance at a later date).
- Talk about memorization techniques with your students. Share a range of techniques so they can pick what works best for them.

Performance Practice

- Participate in the performance workshops and the dialogue that develops.
- Memorize and perform a poem alongside your students. Understanding what you are asking them to do on an internal level will make you a better coach.
- Watch performers at all different skill levels. TYPs You Tube Channel & the Poetry Center's performance primer, are good places to find models of interesting performances that aren't necessarily at the master level. Showing only national performances from the Poetry Out Loud website can be intimidating for some students.

Student Engagement

- Make as many entry points for as many students at your school to learn about and participate in the program as possible. (Some students may not know that they're interested until they see poets performing in an introductory assembly, or until they're accountable for results.)
- Raise the stakes on student participation in the classroom competitions by assigning a letter grade to performances.
- Keep Poetry Center performance workshops to 30 participants or less.
- Reserve POL performance workshops only for students who will be competing at some level.
- Select students who will attend workshops with teaching artists and coaches with a lottery or other chance method. In this way, you are increasing the chances of reaching students who have yet to discover for themselves that they have talent for or interested in the endeavor.

Competition

- Create an event that will help prepare students to compete at the semi-finals. The semi-finals typically features a large audience, use of a microphone, and music. (Consider trying to partner with music or a drama teacher to include a jazz band that plays between student performances or between rounds, or a one-act play performed at intermission, a DJ, or other elements can make the competition more rewarding and highlight student accomplishments.)
- Create stakeholders. Encourage your entire departments to participate, invite your entire school to attend the school competition, as well as to the semi-finals competition. Keep you school updated on the progress of the regional, state, and national results.

ⁱ National Endowment for the Arts

ⁱⁱ As discussed in Gordon Pradl's *Literature as Democracy: Reading as a Social Act*, 1996.

ⁱⁱⁱ As discussed in Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration*, 1995.