

Poetry in Performance: An Introduction

by Sarah Kortemeier, Library Specialist, The University of Arizona Poetry Center

Grade Level: High School, University, Adult

Time Frame: 75 minutes

Objective: Students will use basic performance techniques to explore interpretive potentials in a single poem. This workshop is designed to help students prepare for a real performance in a public setting (in front of the class or a larger audience).

Prior Knowledge and Skills: No prior performance experience is required. Students should choose a poem to work on before the start of this session. Some prior memorization work on these poems is helpful, but not required.

Required Materials: Paper, pencils, and/or copies of students' performance poems. This lesson should be staged in a space where students can sit in a large circle. An open space or a large table with room for the entire group are both good choices.

Sequence of Activities

Warm-Up (One Word Story): 5 minutes

Seat everyone in a circle.

Ask students to tell a collaborative story, one word at a time, with each player providing one word in a sentence. The facilitator should end sentences occasionally by saying "period," "question mark," or "exclamation point."¹

Introduction: 10 minutes

Briefly introduce the following four performance fundamentals:

- *Breath support:* the means by which vocalists produce sustained volume without throat damage.
- *Physical/vocal energy:* essential components of dynamic performances. Note: *physical energy* does not necessarily connote excessive movement. It may be helpful to think of *energy* as a heightened state of alertness or as a sense of "centeredness" in the body.
- *Acceptance:* the assumption that every "performance idea" has value and deserves consideration/testing.²
- *Spontaneity:* in performance terms, the ability and willingness of the performer to think fluidly on stage, adapting to the needs of the moment.

Performance Fundamentals Exercise I (Breath Support): 10 minutes

Have students go through the following physical motions:

- Breathe normally. What part of the body is expanding and contracting?
- With feet shoulder-width apart, stretch upwards and breathe in. Then, holding feet in the same position, breathe out and flop the torso downward. Hands and head should hang, completely relaxed. Take several breaths from this position.
- Roll upwards very slowly, "vertebra by vertebra," until you reach a standing position. How did the positioning of the breath change as you did these exercises? (Breath should have shifted deeper, coming from the diaphragm instead of the chest.)
- Practice breathing from the diaphragm: place one hand on your stomach. Breathe deeply. Try to move your hand visibly in and out with each breath. Note: only the stomach muscles should move. **Do not move shoulders.**
- Lie on the floor. Place one hand on your stomach and repeat the exercise. Breathe deeply and memorize where your body engages the breath.

¹ This exercise usually has humorous results. Icebreakers are particularly helpful in a performance workshop, where less-experienced participants may feel nervous initially. This exercise also helps the facilitator to introduce the concepts of *acceptance* and *spontaneity*.

² This definition of *acceptance*, a foundational concept of improv theater, is adapted from a definition given on improvcyclopedia.org. "Accepting." 2002-2007, improvcyclopedia.org. Web. 20 June 2012.

- Stand. With one hand still on your stomach, say “ha” by using the diaphragm to push air out. Then say a line from your chosen poem. (You should be able to see your hand move visibly as you speak.) Note the sound and feel of the voice when it’s properly supported by the breath.

Performance Fundamentals Exercise II (Circle Listening³ and Emphasis): 25 minutes

Show students a written version of a very familiar line (“To be or not to be, that is the question” works well). Ask students: how do you think this line “should” be said? Solicit responses from volunteers.

Then admit that this is a trick question. Preparation for performance does involve careful reading, and some choices will be made in advance—but if we try to predetermine or “memorize” the delivery of a line, the performance will not always be convincing. This is where the concept of *spontaneity* comes into play. Tell students that the following exercises will help them to listen to the text as they speak it, so that they’re open to making discoveries about the text in the moment of performance.

- Students work in pairs. Student A says a line from her chosen poem. Student B repeats it back to her *with the same inflections*. Student B repeats the line again *with a different inflection* (ideally emphasizing different words). Student A repeats the line, mirroring Student B’s new inflections. Switch (so that Student B leads off with a line from his poem) and repeat.
- Ask students: what happened to the lines of poetry as they were repeated with different inflections/emphases? Did you hear anything surprising?
- Extend this exercise to the full circle. Begin with a line from a volunteer’s recitation poem. Continue around the circle: each person repeats the line, mirroring the previous speaker, then speaks the line with different inflection/emphasis to the next person in the circle. Repeat with lines from other students’ recitation poems as time allows.
- Conclusion: these kinds of discoveries happen most easily when the performer is listening to the text as s/he speaks it—and when the performer makes a discovery, so does the audience.

Performance Fundamentals Exercise III (Turning Points and Specificity): 15 minutes

Briefly introduce the idea of *specificity* in performance (that is, the idea that text can be effectively communicated when the speaker performs a close reading for the audience, highlighting individual words and turning points in the text of the poem).⁴

- Ask students to write down at least two turning points in the poems they have chosen to perform.
- Ask students to practice by themselves: read the poem aloud quietly at least 3 times. How many ways can you communicate these turning points? Experiment with different word emphases, pauses, etc.⁵
- Ask students: did any new turning points occur to you as you practiced?

Closing (Ritual Out/Shut Up): 10 minutes

Quickly sum up the main ideas students will take with them today:

- Breath support and voice projection
- Physical relaxation/energy
- Listening in the moment/acceptance and spontaneity
- Identification and communication of turning points and surprise moments in a text

Ask students how they feel about performance. Are they nervous? Excited? Bored?

“Ritual out”⁶ of the performance workshop by playing a game called “Shut Up,”⁷ in which performers articulate (and push back against) any fears they carry into their upcoming performances. Go around the circle of students. Each

³ Adapted from a listening/repetition exercise originated by renowned acting teacher Sanford Meisner.

⁴ Note: a demonstration of two performances of a short text (one “general,” one “specific”) can be useful here. I often use Jane Hirshfield and Mariko Aratani’s translation of the Izumi Shikibu poem “Although the wind...” for this purpose, reciting it once “hopefully,” and then reciting it again with attention to the turning points that I hear as I speak the poem.

⁵ As time permits, students might also practice communicating the turning points in their chosen texts by reading in small groups.

student will turn to the next person in the circle and articulate a fear or worry (this may directly concern the performance, or not, as the student prefers). The person next to her in the circle repeats the worry. The first student says, "Shut up." Continue around the circle until everyone has articulated a worry, had it repeated, and said "Shut up."⁸

Close by thanking students for their time and attention and wish them luck in their upcoming performances.

⁶ I first encountered this idea in a workshop titled "Performance in the Classroom" run by storytellers from Chicago's 2nd Story and instructors from the creative writing program at Columbia College Chicago.

⁷ This activity comes from a workshop at The University of Arizona Poetry Center ("And Then a Plank in Reason Broke: Poetry, Uncertainty, and the Creative Process") facilitated by poet and Poetry Center Summer Resident Genine Lentine.

⁸ This exercise can be cathartic.