



An Educator's Guide To

slam poetry

How To Use Slam
Poetry In Schools

Rik Leaf

Making Slam Poetry Easy To Use in Schools

Are you looking for a way to get your students excited in creative writing? Are you looking for ways to help them gain the confidence they need to face the challenges in their life? If you are, then you're definitely going to be interested in slam poetry.

An Unlikely Combination for Success

Many students feel like they could never be creative writers. And almost all of them are nervous about speaking in front of people. So how in the world can slam poetry, which is the combination of creative writing and creative performance, possibly work in schools?

I'm so happy you asked!

Personality Has Nothing to do With It

Over the last decade I've taught slam poetry to thousands of students across Canada and online with schools around the world. It doesn't matter if I'm in a small school in a remote community or in a tough inner city school. Slam works. I want to share why it works and let you know about some resources that will make it easy for you to use with your students.

Also...just as an added bonus for those of you who don't like poetry, I've had teachers confess that the poetry section of the curriculum was always their least favorite to teach, but with the addition of slam, had become their favorite module. Hopefully this will be your experience.

We Start By Breaking The Rules

I've never met a slam poet who got into writing because they wanted to learn grammar and punctuation. We get into slam to share our ideas, our hopes and dreams. And to have fun doing it. For many poets, the act of writing is a powerful way of processing their feelings and emotions.

Struggling with the rules of writing is one of the top reasons students feel like they can't be creative writers. They feel like a failure before they even try. And I'm not OK with that. So when I introduce slam I tell students not to worry about the rules. Breaking the rules removes a huge obstacle. When those obstacles are removed students are able to see themselves with new eyes. They discover a world of possibilities they never knew existed.

Have Fun First & Everything Else Will Follow

In a Pro D session I was leading years ago, I shared my 'Rule Breaking' approach and one of the teachers actually got upset. But he was a sports guy, and I found a hockey analogy that explained it in a way that he totally understood.

I don't think any Canadian kid ever played hockey because they wanted to do power skating drills and run bleachers for dry land training. Kids fall in love with hockey because someone put a stick in their hand and let them race around a sheet of ice with some friends. They had fun.

We need to have fun! Having fun leads to discovering passion, and once we're passionate about something we're willing to put the time into learning the fundamentals. When little hockey players recognize that power skating and puck handling skills are important to getting better, they show up and do the work. It's the same with creative writing and slam poetry.

Discovering Emotional Learning

The combination of creative writing and creative performance makes slam poetry a unique language for self expression. It's not like rap or hip-hop because there is no music or beats. It's not like theatre or acting because there are no costumes or props. It's just about words, and using words to share our story in a powerful way.

And let's be honest, life is complicated, especially for students trying to navigate their path with very little experience. Along comes Slam Poetry...and suddenly, it's OK to talk about anything. About everything. They can be frustrated. Angry. Discouraged. Sarcastic. Hilarious. Sad. All the emotions are valid. And everyone has a story to tell.

Here's The Secret Ingredient of Slam Poetry

A traditional poet writes to be published. Their poetry is going to be read by their audience, so following the rules is important. A slam poem is only experienced by an audience when the poet performs it.

And this is the secret ingredient to why slam poetry is so successful in schools. If a poet doesn't spell a word correctly, it doesn't matter (*you know what I mean*) because they're the only ones reading it. As long as they know what word they meant, they can perform it.

Because it's a performance based art form, students learn to write a performance copy that 'shows the flow' of how they want the words to go when they get up and perform it. Students learn performance elements like how to use speed, volume and tone to match what they're describing with how they're describing it.

They learn how to focus on their audience. How to write and read their words in a way that will transport their audience to see what they see and feel what they feel. This is a skill they can apply to any performance or presentation they give.

The Last Piece of the Poetry Puzzle

A Poetry Slam describes the event where slam poets perform. These events are loud and fun. When the Slam Master calls a poet to the stage the audience erupts into cheers and clapping. We know most people are nervous about speaking in public, so we make the space as encouraging as possible. When the poet gets to the mic, we're dead quiet. We want to hear what they have to say. But one of the really unique things about Poetry Slams is that the audience is an active participant. If you like something the poet says, or how they said it, you communicate that by snapping your fingers.

It doesn't interrupt the poet and you're still able to hear the next thing they say, but it offers immediate feedback. Now it might sound funny, but if you're the poet reading your poem and you get some snaps from the class, it is ridiculously encouraging. It teaches students to be active listeners. To appreciate what their classmates have to say. The feedback is also non verbal. You don't have to say what you liked or why you liked it, you can just snap a few times.

The Transformation of Classroom Culture

This transforms the classroom and empowers risk-taking. There is always one or two students willing to go first and break the ice. But soon there becomes a pattern. I ask who'd like to go next, and someone puts up their hand and the whole class claps and cheers and whistles while the poet walks to the front. There becomes this exciting supportive energy...and the students who struggle with confidence, subconsciously want to put their hand up so everyone will cheer and clap for them.

We All Need a Safe Place to Take a Creative Risk

I don't care who you are or how old you are...we all need a safe and supportive space to take a risk. To step out and try something new. Poetry Slams provide that for students, and transform the culture of a classroom.

I've spent a decade refining the lessons that walk students through all the steps of creative writing. From brainstorming and the initial generation of ideas. Exploring imagery that paints a picture with words. Identifying how they want their audience to feel. Matching their emotions with their delivery. Learning basic presentation skills that transfer to any public speaking situation.

You'll find these lessons available here in the members section of my website.

Starting with The Power of Words. These 8-9 minute video lessons are Ready-to-Go. Just press play and I will explain the writing prompt and walk the students through the exercise. Each lesson comes with a pdf printout and a 'Sample Slam' where I perform a poem using the writing prompt so students can see and hear what their poem will sound like.

I wish you and your students lots of slam success...have fun!

Rik

Rik Leaf

Award-Winning Poet Laureate

Rik Leaf is the Poet Laureate for Tribe of One, a national collective of Indigenous & settler artists. Rik was the winner of the Spirit of Canada: Poetry, Spoken Word and Singer/Songwriter Contest in 2011.

Winning the televised series came with recording sessions which produced, *Beyond The Glass Ceiling*, an album of slam poetry featuring Mohawk.Tuscarora writer Janet Rogers, Victoria's Poet Laureate, 2012-14.

Rik is the author of, *Four Homeless Millionaires - How One Family Found Riches By Leaving Everything Behind*

He's also an accomplished songwriter whose music can be found on Spotify, Apple Music, Bandcamp