State TheatreNJ.org

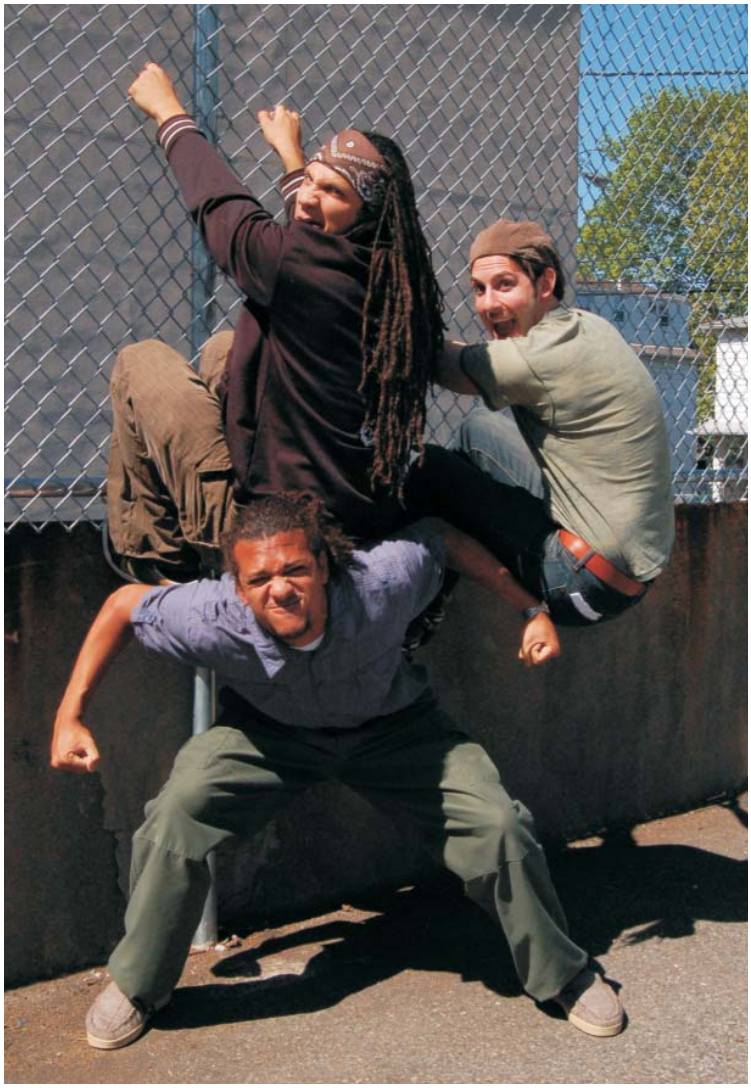
Keynotes

Mayhem Poets

Welcome!

The State Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey welcomes you to the school-day performance by the Mayhem Poets. These New Jersey natives combine hip-hop, poetry, and current issues in a show that is fast-paced, funny, creative, and thought-provoking. We hope that you'll leave the show with a new appreciation for the power of well-chosen and well-spoken words—and motivation to write your own spoken-word pieces.

These *Keynotes* provide information and activities that will help you prepare for the performance. They include the Mayhem Poets' tools and tips for generating words and ideas, transforming them into poetry, and performing them like a slam champion!



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The State Theatre, a premier nonprofit venue for the performing arts and entertainment.

Meet the Mayhem Poets

Kyle Sutton

Kyle was born in Michigan and raised in New Jersey, where he received his Bachelors degree in Spanish from Rutgers University. He is a two-time Grand Slam semifinalist at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City.

Scott Tarazevits

Scott, a 2005 Bowery Poetry Club Slam Finalist, is a poet and actor who co-wrote and performed in two spoken-word plays. The New Jersey native received his Bachelors degree in journalism and theater from Rutgers University. While at Rutgers he co-founded/hosted the performance poetry open mic, Verbal Mayhem.

Mason Granger

Mason, originally from Willingboro, New Jersey, began his writing career as a freshman at Rutgers University in 2000. This mutiple slam winner is the former co-host of Verbal Mayhem, the longest-running open mic in New Jersey.

New Jersey's Mayhem Poets met as students at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, drawn together by a shared passion for wordplay and open mics. Their poems comment on everything from literature and school to politics and fast food. They have performed from New York City to Ireland and even appeared on *The Today Show*. Eager to spread their enthusiasm for their art form, they have run a poetry day camp with writing, performance, rapping, rhyming, hip-hop dance, graffiti art, and hip-hop culture classes. In 2007, Mayhem Poets won the Microsoft Idea Wins challenge, a national competition looking for innovative ideas for new small businesses. They used the prize to open Slam Chops, a spoken-word poetry club in New York City.

www.myspace.com/mayhempoets www.mayhempoets.com www.slamchops.com

Spoken Word/Slam Poetry

Spoken-word poetry has been around for thousands of years. Before there was written language, oral poets were the keepers of the history and mythology of their people. Epic poems such as Homer's *Iliad* and the Scandinavian saga *Beowulf* were passed down orally for generations before they were finally written down. West Africa has the griot (pronounced GREE-oh), a storyteller and historian who speaks or sings the history of his people. William Shakespeare is probably the world's best-known performance poet; his plays were written in verse and were meant to be performed, not read. It was Shakespeare's actors who wrote down the text of his plays; if they hadn't done so, we would not be studying and performing these works today.

America in the 20th century saw the rise of spoken-word poetry among the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, the Beat Generation, and the hip-hop scene. These artists used poetry to interpret and comment on the social upheaval of their day and to encourage ordinary people to tell their stories. Today's spoken-word poetry is heavily influenced by these earlier movements.

Slam poetry, an interactive poetry competition, is thought to have begun in Chicago 1985 at a jazz club called the Green Mill. A construction worker named Marc Smith, a.k.a. "Papi" created a lyrical "boxing match," pitting poets against each other one-on-one. The judges were randomly-chosen audience members, who scored the poets on a scale from 0-10. From there, slam poetry caught on in cities such as New York and San Francisco. In New York's East Village, the Nuyorican Poets' Café became the mecca of performance poetry. Slam teams sprang up all over the United States and Canada; the best go on to compete in the National Poetry Slam, an annual event occurring every summer since 1990.

Slam poetry uses elements of theater, hip-hop, music, and stand-up comedy, as poets work to impress the crowd with entertaining, imaginative poetry. Poets sometimes wear costumes, incorporate songs, music, or chants in their poetry, and can have a funny, serious, or political message. Official slam rules require a poem to be no more than three minutes in length. In competition, props, costumes, and music are not allowed.

This American-born art form has spread all over the world. You can find poetry slams in such diverse countries as Australia, Austria, Bosnia, Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Nepal, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland, Singapore, and Macedonia. In this country, performance poetry can be seen on television and even on Broadway, where *Russell Simmons Def Poetry Jam* won a 2003 Tony® Award for Best Special Theatrical Event.

SLAM POETRY: poetry in performance, merging theater, hip-hop, music, and stand up comedy

Shakespeare wrote over 100 sonnets with Sonnet 18 as the most recognizable. Take one of his sonnets and rewrite it as a spoken word piece using some of the tools on the following pages.

Slam Poetry isn't the first time artists have used word play to get a message across to their audiences. Rap musicians do it all the time, but even they weren't the first. Singer-songwriters Bob Dylan and Bruce Springsteen have been using wordplay for years, and they are only some of the latest in a long line of that tradition. The next time you listen to your favorite song, see if you can pick out some of the techniques discussed in this guide.

SLAM—

1. *v.*— to shut with force and noise.
2. *v.*— to strike, knock, throw, slap down, etc., with violent and noisy impact.
3. *v.*— to criticize harshly; attack verbally.
4. *adj.*— excellent, good. (slang)
5. *n.*— a poetry competition where the participants perform their work aloud and are judged by the audience.

Why do you think a poetry competition is called a "slam"?

Writing Your Own Poetry

When the Mayhem Poets begin writing a new piece, the poem doesn't just magically appear. They have a process that they use to work out their ideas and then put them into creative, powerful language. The exercises outlined on the next couple of pages were developed by the Mayhem Poets to help students get their creative juices flowing and begin to think like poets. Here are the basic steps:

1. Warm up your imagination.
2. Find your words and rhymes.
3. Make a personal connection.
4. Use the Poet Tree.
5. Get ready to perform.
6. Hold your own poetry slam!

1 Imagination Warmup

Standing in a circle, toss a ball to someone across the circle. As you throw the ball, say a random word out loud. The person catching the ball then throws it to someone else, saying a word completely unrelated to the initial word. Keep tossing the ball around the circle and saying your words until your group has mastered the exercise.

THE NEXT STEP:

The ball is tossed and every time it is thrown, the words must be within a specific ENVIRONMENT (for example: circus, bowling alley, DMV, aquarium, beach, baseball game, classroom). As the words are spoken, your teacher writes them down on the board. Keep this as a vocabulary list for writing your own slam poems.

Time for Rhyme

Did you know there are all kinds of rhymes? Using different types of rhymes will make your poems more interesting to the listener. Varying your rhymes will also give you the freedom to pick the best words for the lines instead of choosing a word only because it fits a particular kind of rhyme.

Here are some different types of rhymes:

There are **normal rhymes**, words like

gutter/butter/stutter

There are **slant rhymes**, where either the vowels or the consonants of stressed syllables are identical. Slant rhymes look like this:

Hellman's mustard/General Custard/Mother Hubbard

There are **multi-syllabic rhymes**, used most often in hip-hop with a background beat:

I'm here to melt your ears with hot sounds
To grab the kids with adjectives and spit-on-the-spot nouns

Here's an example of multi-syllabic rhyme in spoken word poetry that also that uses **alliteration** (repeating the same beginning consonant sound in two or more words in the same line), **onomatopoeia** (where a word or phrase imitates the sound it is describing), and **internal rhyme** (rhyming words within a single line):

I'm a blend of my friends, N'sync with their idiosyncrasies
Merely mimicking their ticks and tocks
like Timberlake shaking and talking
while moon-walking like Michael.

Here are some additional suggestions for using rhyme in spoken word poetry:

- Don't stick to using only end rhymes (couplets).
- Vary the rhyme scheme and rhythm to keep your poetry from becoming "sing-songy."
- Don't settle for a particular word just because it rhymes. Choose the word or phrase that best expresses what you want to say.
- Remember: absence of rhyme is not an absence of rhythm. Pay attention to crafting a good rhythm for your poetry.
- Listen to hip-hop (mainly for rhythmic pattern).
- Memorize lyrics.
- Read aloud whenever possible.

2 Find Your Rhymes.

Using the word list you created in the ball-toss exercise on the previous page, create some different types of rhymes.

Rhyming Resources

Glossary of Poetic Terms

RhymeZone Rhyming Dictionary and Thesaurus

Lyric-Pro Slant Rhyme website

The Poet's Toolbox

Spoken word poetry uses lots of other tools besides rhyme to play with words. Here are some literary devices and alternate ways of putting words together outside of rhyme or in conjunction with rhyme.

Acronyms are letter abbreviations for proper names and common phrases. (Text messaging has made acronyms a big part of our language!) Spoken word poets sometimes create their own versions of existing acronyms. For example:

KFC meant to me that I'd Kill For Chicken.

Clichés and popular phrases are a great way for a poet to get creative. The best part about playing with these well-known sayings is that your audience will recognize them immediately. There are lots of creative ways to play with clichés:

- You can ADD YOUR OWN ENDING to them.

A stich in time saves nine...
pair of pants from embarrassing a group of 13-year-olds at the school dance.

- You can CHANGE parts of them.

Stink bombs bursting in air giving proof through the school that the drag is still there...

- You can USE ONLY PARTS of them.

Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light,
that the chronically late have a date
for Saturday detention while the honors student
will never get suspension.

Puns are another technique for playing with words. For example:

Lord of the Ringmaster

2 Find Your Words.

- Redefine these familiar acronyms:

LOL _____

CIA _____

BFF _____

- Add your own ending to these clichés:

People in glass houses _____.

Don't put all your eggs _____.

Sticks and stones _____.

- Now try changing around the clichés above or use your own.

_____

_____

_____

- Take your own cliché, popular song, or phrase, and reinvent it.

_____

_____

_____

More Tools

Pop-culture references are another tool for connecting with your audience. Take several well-known names, characters, titles, etc. and put them together by free association.

> Daniel Day Lewis and Clark Gable
>
> Wheel of Fortune Cookie Monster Mash with Alan Alda
>
> Imagine U R Kelly...Clarkson on MTV, BET VH1 o6 and Park.

Similes and metaphors find ways to relate seemingly different words and phrases. You can use the following template to create your own similes:

> Life is like a _____, which is like a _____, which is like a _____.

For example:

> Life is like a nose, which is like a downward ski slope, which is like the Batman franchise of movies thus far.
>
> Life is like a remote control, which is like replaying of events, which is like a dream, which is like becoming a movie star. which is like passing a kidney stone, which is like fitting into a mouse hole.

Breaking down words is a type of punning. Pick two words at random and look for alternate meanings of each word or some part of the word. For example, the sentence below plays on the word "parent" that is contained inside "apparent."

> It was apparent that the relationship between my father and me was sinking.

Want to take it a step further? Here are some other literary devices you can use:

Alliteration
Antithesis
Hyperbole
Onomatopoeia
Oxymoron
Personification

2 Find Your Words.

- Take a pop-culture icon, TV show. song title, etc. and free associate.

_____

_____

_____

- Write your own "Life is like a..." word association:

Life is like a _____,
which is like a _____,
which is like a _____.

- Pick two of the words from the list below to use on your own in a sentence or two, by breaking down the words and exploring their alternate meanings:

deceive	demonstrate	goodbye	self-esteem
canteen	in-sync	mystery	period
steal	mall	lapse	macaroni
righteous	nights	professor	hostile

_____

_____

_____

Explore more literary devices here.

3 Making a Personal Connection

No matter how well you write, the best way for your poetry to resonate with an audience is for it to have a personal meaning for you. By writing about specific ideas, issues, places, and things that matter to you, you are opening yourself up to your audience and connecting with them on a personal level. How do you write about things that have a personal connection for you? Start by making a list of things you feel strongly about, whether they are positive or negative. Use this as a starting point and use the exercises on this page to explore the topic further.

Exploring Your World

Explore your connection to an environment. Pick a specific place that you have something to say about. Free write about home, school, your job, a favorite place you like to hang out and see where that leads you.

The Place You Come From

Fill in this poem about yourself. It does not need to rhyme, it does not have to make literal sense—it just needs to be true. (Think of it as one of those "Mad Libs.") When you are finished, you will have a poem that you can draw from to help with your slam poem, or it can be a poem all on its own.

I am from _____. (where home is for you)
I am from _____. (where you feel most comfortable)
I am from _____. (your favorite thing to do)
I am from _____. (something from your childhood)
I am from _____. (your plans for the future)

You can add as many lines as you want and fill them in with whatever you want. This poem is all about YOU.

Group Identity

Working in a group of 3-5, write a "boast rap" about yourselves or a "message rap" about something you strongly believe. Share it with the rest of the class.

Personal Connection + Imagination

Using the worksheet below...

1. In column A, list five things that hold power in your life, and choose one or two to expand upon if you feel it's too general.

   Example: Family (relationship to my brother, my dad getting remarried).

2. In column B, list five things you'd find in three different environments (five things total).

   Example: ENVIRONMENTS - circus, the shore, a mall / THINGS - cotton candy, seashells, clothing stores, sale

3. Using something from column A, craft a few lines of poetry using something from column B. (Use something from B to describe something from A.)

   Example: **Yesterday I went to the GAP and tried to return my brother for a pair of loose-fit khakis, but instead I got back these ill-fitting corduroys that annoyed me more than my brother ever did.**

A. Things that hold power in your life	B. Things you'd find in 3 different environments
1.	1.
2.	2.
3.	3.
4.	4.
5.	5.

4 Using the Poet Tree

1. Pick one word or environment.
2. On a blank Poet Tree (see the next page), list 4 or more words or phrases related to that word.
3. Choose one of those words to generate some related ideas to add to the Poet Tree: clichés and puns, acronyms, pop-culture references, etc.
4. Start a rhyme bank using normal, multi-syllabic and slant rhymes.
5. Find an emotional/personal connection to something in the tree.
6. Write a simple statement about poem's overall concept. This can be the first line or last line of your poem.
7. Using your tree, begin crafting a few lines of poetry. Keep in mind you can follow this closely or more loosely as a way of generating ideas and making connections. You can start writing full lines, too, throughout the process. Here's Scott's "chicken" Poet Tree to use as a guide.

POET TREE

STATE POEM'S OVERALL CONCEPT
(and begin crafting poem's first few lines)

I was addicted to chicken.

Boston Market would spark it, Popeye's would satisfy my late-night cries, KFC meant to me that I would Kill for Chicken. I started reading Chicken Soup for the Chicken Soul. Did you see those breasts? I want to lick those legs. Still salivating over those mesmerizing thighs. Fast food wasn't enough slowly transform into a chicken...

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Love to eat, eat unhealthy, obsessive. I can make great chicken noises, etc.

RHYME BANK

finger licken, sicken, satisfy my cries, thighs, quicken, things, onion rings, stings, tender, rocking, bgocking, side, wide, confide, slide, tide ride, guide

RELATED WORDS & PHRASES

turkey, salmonella, breasts, legs, thighs, wings, marsala, murphy, fast food, Purdue, skin, golden brown, eggs, chicken comb, buffalo tenders

ACRONYMS

KFC
(Kill for Chicken)

POP-CULTURE REFERENCES

Chicken Soup for the Chicken Soul, Stella!!! to get to the other side, Roy's, KFC, Popeye's, Kenny Rogers, Chicken Holiday, Foghorn Leghorn, Back to the Future

CLICHÉS & PUNS

play with drumsticks, cock-a-doodle-doo, chicken contender, New York chickerbocker, fowl out, hens and family hatch a plan, sweating grease

© Mayhem Poets

POET TREE

STATE POEM'S OVERALL CONCEPT
(and begin crafting poem's first few lines)

PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

RHYME BANK

RELATED WORDS & PHRASES

ACRONYMS

POP-CULTURE REFERENCES

CLICHÉS & PUNS

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5 Getting Ready to Perform

Here are some activities you can do to help you get your poem ready for performance. They will help you work on: creating an interesting and varied way of speaking your poem; projecting your voice and speaking clearly so that you command the room when you speak; and creating a comfortable physical presence that enhances your performance.

Syllable/Word Stressing

1. Working with a partner, pick a favorite line from one of the poems you have written.
2. You and your partner take turns practicing your lines out loud, emphasizing different syllables and words, using different vocal inflections and stresses. Give each other feedback on your line readings until you each find the best way to present your lines.

All in the Timing

1. Working in groups of four, each person picks a joke out of a hat or comes in with one of their own.
2. Take 30 seconds to think about how you are going to deliver your joke for the best effect.
3. Take turns telling your joke to the rest of the group, rotating so each person tells her or his joke twice. Each time you tell your joke, you should change the way you say it. For example: add pauses, slow down or speed up, change the emphasis on certain words, or add a rhythm.

Enunciation

No matter how well-written your poem, it's no good if your audience can't understand what you're saying when you perform it. Use some of the tongue-twisters below to warm up your mouth before delivering your poem. Start slowly and then build up speed as they get easier.

Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.
Did Peter Piper pick a peck of pickled peppers?
If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,
where's the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?

I am not the pheasant plucker,
I'm the pheasant plucker's mate.
I am only plucking pheasants
'cause the pheasant plucker's running late.

The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick.

Red leather, yellow leather.

"Tongue-twister Telephone"

1. Work in a group of four people, sitting or standing in a line.
2. The first person in line is given a tongue twister. She or he whispers it into the ear of the next person, who then passes on the message, until it reaches the last person, who says it aloud.
3. Put two groups together and try it again. Then try it with the entire class in one group.

Learn to Project.

Choose a line from your poem to deliver to your teacher, who will be standing at the back of the room. While you're performing your line, the rest of your class will be talking at the same time. (Volume levels of conversation can vary to add effect.) Do your best to make your line as coherent as possible to the teacher despite the "heckling."

Get Physical.

Having trouble figuring out how to move your body during your poem? Pick one line in your poem—it can be your favorite or the one you're not sure about. Find a pose or motion to get into when you get to this line in your poem so that the line is emphasized. Practice getting into the pose and then try some different ways to get back into your normal stance. If you are doing a motion, decide when would be the best time to start and stop. What this is starting to look like? Pick another line and do the same thing. Don't get too complicated, but don't be afraid to move around and get into your poem. You wrote it, so you get to decide!

Hold Your Own Poetry Slam!

Now that you have written your own poetry, it's time to hold your very own poetry slam. Decide as a group whether or not the slam will be competitive and whether you want to award prizes for winners or all the participants. If you don't think you are ready for a poetry slam involving the whole school, have a slam within your class and have students judge each other.

Official Slam Rules:

- No more than 3 minutes.
- No props.
- No costumes.
- No music.

You will need an M.C. to host the event and a scorekeeper with a calculator. Invite other students, teachers, parents, or staff to serve as audience and judges. All a judge needs is paper and a big marker. Instruct your judges to score on a scale of 1-10, with 10 representing the best poetry performance a judge has ever heard. Contestants should be judged on the poem itself and on how effectively the poem is presented to the audience.

While the official slam rules say that poems can be no longer than three minutes and can't include props, costumes, or music, your group can have a little more fun with it. Take the time to add in props, costumes, or music to give your poem something extra. How intense can your battle get?

When the slam is over, publish a collection of all the poems that were presented and distribute it to other classes.

Self Assessment Checklist

WRITING

Rhyming and Rhythm

- ❑ Used rhyme where appropriate.
- ❑ Varied rhyme scheme and used slant rhymes.
- ❑ Used internal rhyme.
- ❑ Used alliteration.

Alternate ways of putting words together

- ❑ Used inventive acronyms.
- ❑ Took clichés and changed them around.
- ❑ Incorporated pop-culture references.
- ❑ Used puns, wordplay, etc.

Personal Connection to poems

- ❑ Created personal connections.
- ❑ Combined personal connection with imaginative/creative concepts/ideas.

PERFORMANCE

Using voice to its full capacity

- ❑ Enunciated entire poem clearly and sustained energy throughout.
- ❑ Stressed punchlines when appropriate.
- ❑ Projected so everyone could hear.
- ❑ Was aware of timing, pacing, and rhythm.

Using body to enhance performance

- ❑ Incorporated gestures and movement.
- ❑ Had poem memorized so hands were free and body open.

Connecting with an audience

- ❑ Looked at audience while performing.
- ❑ Fed off the audience's energy throughout.
- ❑ Stayed focused during disruptions and took in the unexpected.

Overall performance of poem

- ❑ Used several performance tactics throughout.
- ❑ Used own unique distinct voice.
- ❑ Took the audience on a journey from beginning to end.

Are You Ready for the Show?

Learn Your Part.

One essential collaborator needed to create a live performance is the audience. The weeks and months of thought and preparation that go into a show are directed toward creating a performance that will inspire and entertain you and the other people who are watching and listening. Your role in this artistic collaboration is very important. Make sure you know your part:

- When you arrive at the theater, follow an usher to your seat.
- Before the show begins, make sure to turn off and put away all electronic devices, including cell phones, portable games and music, cameras, and recording equipment. Keep them off for the entire performance.

Turn it off.

- Once the house lights (the lights in the part of the theater where the audience is sitting) go down, focus all your attention on the stage. Watch and listen carefully to the performance.
- Attending a play in the theater is not the same as watching television at home. At the theater, talking, eating, and moving around disturbs the performers and other members of the audience. And please—no texting or checking messages during the show!

No photos.

- If something in the show is meant to be funny, go ahead and laugh. And of course—feel free to applaud at the end of the performance if you liked what you saw.
- After the performers are finished taking their bows, stay in your seat until your group gets the signal to leave the theater.

Quiet, please!

Check Out Some Resources.

BOOKS

Double Snaps, by James Percalay. Harper Perennial, 1995. Clever put-downs; contains some explicit language.

Poetry Slam: The Competitive Art of Performance Poetry, edited by Gary Glazner. Manic D Press, 2000. An anthology of poems by slam champions, essays on how to run a slam, winning strategies, tips for memorizing poems, and more.

The Seventh Octave - The Early Writings of Saul Stacy Williams. Moore Black Press, 1998.

She, by Saul Williams. MTV Books, 1999. Poetry.

The Spoken Word Revolution, by Mark Eleveld. Sourcebooks MediaFusion, 2005.

What Learning Leaves, by Taylor Mali. Hanover Press, 2002. A collection of poems about teaching, love, and dogs.

Where the Sidewalk Ends: Poems and Drawings by Shel Silverstein. HarperCollins, 1974.

ON THE WEB

poetryslam.com - General info, history, etc.

brickcity.net - Submit/post your own poetry online.

Organize a Poetry Slam - A detailed, practical guide.

New Victory Theater's Mayhem Poets School Tool

Bowery Poetry Club

Saul Williams' website

Education World® Great Sites for Teaching About Poetry

Everypoet.com - "Every resource for every poet."

Poetry Portal - A bird's-eye view of Internet poetry.

VIDEO

Slam. Lions Gate, 1998. Rated R. A prison-and-poetry drama about a young poet's rise to self-awareness, featuring Saul Williams.

Slam Nation: The Sport of Spoken Word. New Video Group, 1998. Not rated. The film follows slam poets Saul Williams, Beau Sia, Mums the Schemer, and Jessica Care Moore as they journey to the National Poetry Slam.

AUDIO

A Light in the Attic, by Shel Silverstein. Sony Wonder, 1985.

Eat Your Words, by Mayhem Poets. 2005.

Episode I, by Thought Breakers. 2004. Hip-hop.