

Slam Poetry Lesson #1 - Sticks & Stones & The Power of Words

Intro – Slam poetry is the combination of creative writing and creative performance. It is an opportunity to approach words in a new and unexpected way and to remove as many of the obstacles, hidden fears and insecurities so we can have fun being creative writing and performing words.

Step One – I start by creating Word Banks on the whiteboard that students can draw from when they start writing. I begin with metaphors and similes, though I often just call them expressions. I like to offer some lead lines and ask them to fill in the end by calling out the answers. The collective creative energy and raised voices immediately establishes that slam poetry is fun, interactive and a bit loud. You can make your words banks as large as you'd like. I try to have at least five metaphors and five similes.

Metaphors

It's raining... 'cats and dogs'
There is a carpet of... 'leaves'
Life is a... 'rollercoaster'
She is a shining... 'star'
The world is a... 'stage'
His cotton candy words didn't appeal to her taste
Her eyes were on fire
She cut him down with her words

Similes

Life is like a box of... 'chocolates'
Cute as a... 'button/kitten'
Snug as a bug in a... 'rug'
It's like a blanket of... 'snow'
Your room looks like a... 'disaster area/tornado'
He was as brave as a... 'lion'
Her joke went over like a... 'lead balloon'
Stood out like a... 'sore thumb'

After we establish some Word Banks on the board I ask them to write two lines.

First line starts with, "Your words hurt like..."

Second line starts with, "Your words are beautiful like..."

Have students use a metaphor or a simile to finish each line, and to be as creative as they want. Our best writing usually comes from our experience. Encourage them to think about a time someone said something that hurt, and then write about how those feelings and memories. Then think about a time someone said something helpful, healing or encouraging, and channel that memory and those positive feelings into the second line.

I give them about 5-7 minutes to write, and as soon as they're done I ask them to come to the front hand their papers in. Their writing is anonymous, so no one knows whose line is whose. I find this is an important step in creating a safe place for some students.

Even before they are all handed in, you can start to create one group slam poem out of all their lines. Lines don't have to rhyme or be the same length. It looks and feels more like statements made in point form. But the common theme and lead lines and use of metaphors and similes provides enough structure that their writing will fit together.

This requires the instructor to take a creative risk as well. There is no right way, or perfect way to create a slam poem. You have to be willing to have fun and maybe make a mistake or two. But even a 'bad' group slam can be a good thing, because it creates a safe place to try something new without the expectation that we need to be perfect.

This first lesson does a couple things. It lets students into the creative process. I might read one of their lines out loud and either write it on the board, or change it slightly to fit. I tell them I'm not using every single line, and not every line exactly the way it was written, because we're creating a group slam.

This lets students see their ideas, their lines and imagery up front with everyone else's. This always has the effect of encouraging and empowering them to realize that they are just as good and creative as anyone else in the class.

Once I have finished writing out the group slam, I perform it for them. Feel free to remain very flexible with length. I will try for 8-10 lines. Or I will fill a section of the whiteboard. But I don't over think this step.

Without me being involved, you will perform it as the teacher. You can also invite a student in the class to perform it. Remember, this is about the process not the finished product. I like to praise and show excitement about anything in their writing I can, whether I use their line on the board or not.

There is no 'Right' way to do slam. There is 'Your' way. Some people talk really fast. Others talk really slow. It's about how you choose to perform the words.

Conclusion – We want to get the class calling out similes and metaphors. Slam poetry is oral, its performance based, which means it's loud and fun. And we also want to get the students writing as quickly as we can. This first lesson is about the process. Connecting our ideas with emotions and feelings, and then expressing them through our performance. We can edit and perfect our craft later, but we have to start somewhere. So try to get students writing as soon as you can.

Some Additional Thoughts

Risks & Laughter - I take lots of risks and laugh at myself as I teach so they know they can laugh at themselves and have fun trying it out.

Praise - I praise them for anything and everything I can. Every clever metaphor, use of alliteration every inflection, every risk they take, I remark and comment, because I know lots of writers who get shut down by the voices in their head that tell them they're no good or people will laugh at them.

This is always the first lesson I use to introduce slam poetry. You can explain slam poetry and create some word banks and show the class my Power of Words sample slam video before they start writing if you'd like.

Sample Slam for Power of Words

Your words?

Some days your words feel like winter winds

That scrape like pins, pierce my skin

Cut like a jagged blade rusted with age

Leave me reeling feeling as if there is nothing left worth believing

Your words! Are like wild animals

That tear me and everyone else apart when they're left to run free

All claws and teeth

Tearing me down until the hurt is all that's left to be found

But then some days your words are so beautiful

It's like they heal me...set my heart free from the rib cage that confines and conceals me

Your words are rain to my dry and dusty heart

They make flowers bloom in the graveyard of broken dreams

Stitch me back together when I'm falling apart

Your words are a lifeline when I'm lost and alone in the dark night of the soul

When I'm in that place...your words are the most precious thing I own