Performance poetry learning activities

Discovering and writing spoken word in school

Age 12-18
CFE Levels Third, Fourth and Senior Phase
Resource created by Scottish Book Trust

scottishbooktrust.com

Contents

About this resource

This resource will help you introduce and explore spoken word artists with your pupils. The resource has several aims:

- To introduce pupils the work of spoken word and give pupils a chance to respond to work by spoken word poets

- To use spoken word texts as a means to enthuse pupils about poetry

- To give pupils an opportunity to compose their own spoken word texts

This resource involves watching spoken word poems online some of which touch on topics such as grief, loss and forms of intolerance such as racism. We highly encourage that, for any activities where you have to watch any videos, you **watch them before you use them with your class and use your discretion about whether they are appropriate for the children you work with**.

Spoken word is also a very personal form of writing, often drawing on the writer's experiences. As such, some pupils may be facing circumstances that mean the reflection involved in personal writing can put them in the difficult position of confronting traumatic experiences. If you're worried about a pupil in your class, Mind's website has a [list of resources and organisations that can help support young people with their mental health](#). **We advise you use your discretion about**

delivering personal writing, and adapt activities in this resource with the children you work with in mind.

Authors Live

Authors Live is our series of broadcasts with writers and illustrators delivered in partnership with the BBC. You can watch broadcasts online, for free, at any time via our Authors Live on Demand library.

To support delivery of this resource, you can use some of our poetry broadcasts on Authors Live on Demand. For more information, see our resource on Making the most of Authors Live.

Introducing spoken word

Activity 1: Reading aloud

LIT 3-02a, LIT 3-03a, LIT 3-05a, ENG 3-19a

To get pupils thinking about reading aloud and tone and intonation, ask them to complete this quick activity. Write, "I didn't say it was her money" on the board.

Ask them to work in pairs and place emphasis on different words as they say them aloud. For example:

1. **I** didn't say she stole my money
2. I **didn't** say she stole my money
3. I didn't **say** she stole my money
4. I didn't say **she** stole my money
5. I didn't say she **stole** my money
6. I didn't say she stole **my** money
7. I didn't say she stole my **money**

Allow pupils to practice for a few minutes. Then, ask pupils to discuss how putting the emphasis on different words changes the meaning.

Next, read aloud the poem "Refugees" by Brian Bilston. Choose one person to read it normally, then another to read it backwards. Discuss how the exact same words can have the opposite meaning.

Activity 2: Watching poems

LIT 3-01a, LIT 3-07a, LIT 3-08a, ENG 3-03a

Now choose and watch three of the following spoken word poems as a class. These poems are referenced in other activities in the resource, so if you're not sure which ones to watch, you can base this on which activity you'd like to do.

- "Passing" by Ellen Renton (2 minutes, 6 seconds)

- "The Carpenter" by Doug Wilson Garry (3 minutes, 27 seconds)

- "Bumblebee" by Harry Baker (4 minutes, 24 minutes – skip to 2 minutes in)

- "Being British" by Deanna Rodger (3 minutes, 8 seconds)

- "Another Day" by Anis Mojgani (2 minutes, 13 seconds)

- "Point B" by Sarah Kay (3 minutes, 25 seconds)

- "Queen Boo" by Mark Grist (3 minutes, 20 seconds)

- "Conversation with a 10-year-old girl on the London Eye" by Maria Ferguson (1 minute, 55 seconds)

- "Strawberry Yoghurt" by Hollie McNish (2 minutes, 25 seconds)

- "Hope" by Jenny Foulds (2 minutes, 37 seconds)

Discuss:

- How are the poems the same? Do they have anything in common?

- Which poem did you like the most? Why?

- Which performance did you like the most? Why?

- What did you notice about how poets read the poems? How were they similar? How were they different?

- What did you notice about their pacing? When did poets read really quickly versus more slowly?

- What did you notice about their body language and gestures? What about eye contact with the camera?

Exploring spoken word

Activity 1: Write a prose version

ENG 3-19a, ENG 3-31a, EXA 3-03a

Ask pupils to write a short story, storyboard, or comic strip, based on one of the poems you've watched. Ask them to think about how any speakers, or subjects, in the poem might feel – what might their lives be like outside the poem? "Conversation with a 10-year-old girl on the London Eye" and "Another Day" are especially good poems for this.

Activity 2: Adapt a poem

ENG 3-19a, TCH 3-14a

Put the pupils into groups, and give them each a poem. Ask them to create a digital version of the poem. This could include:

- Using film or images to make a short film or slideshow
- Creating a soundscape or musical soundtrack to accompany the film
- Creating an animation of a poem

Throughout, ask them to justify their choices of style or music. Why does this fit the poem?

As an extension, you could watch the film poem "When I Think of my Mother" (1 minute, 38 seconds) by Jinling Wu, which is a poem created entirely of film and images and no words. Ask them to create their own film poem that shows a day in their life through their eyes. Watch their film poems together, and ask each pupil to

explain a bit about their film poem and their choices.

Creative writing

Activity 1: What's the poem about?

LIT 3-07a, LIT 3-08a, LIT 3-16a, LIT 3-17a

Spoken word can be used to address politics or injustice from a personal point of view. Watch either "Passing", "Strawberry Yoghurt" or "Being British" and ask:

- What is the poem about?

- What metaphors does the poet use to talk about the topic?

- How do they show their personal experience of the topic? (e.g. Do they share an anecdote or story? Or talk about elements of their life?)

Ask the pupils to think about something that they care about (no matter how big or small), and then think of an example from their life that illustrates this cause. For example:

- Climate change – they remember watching the school strikes on the news

- Intolerance or prejudice – they've experienced a form of injustice in their lives

Activity 2: Saying what matters

LIT 3-02a, SOC 3-15a, ENG 3-31a

This activity involves writing about current politics, human rights or other democratic issues. You may have some pupils who would like to write something more light-hearted (like "Queen Boo", "Bumblebee" or "Hope") or more personal (like "Another Day", "Point B" or "Conversation with a 10-year-old girl on the London Eye"). If so, see our resource on personal writing. The activities on making metaphors and using memories as a stimulus can be used as a prompt for creating a spoken word poem.

Discuss human rights with your pupils. What do they think a human right means? After this, hand each pupil five post-it notes. Ask them to write their top five human rights, one on each post-it, and stick them all on a wall for everyone to see. Discuss

the wall with your pupils: which rights have come up more than others, which ones are similar to each other, and which ones seem unique?

Next, ask each pupil to pick three that they think are most important. Ask them to free write about these – why they chose them, and where they have seen them in or out of action.

Pupils then come back to the wall, and out of their three, ask them to stick just one back up on the wall, so each pupil has effectively nominated their 'top' human right. As a whole class, whittle this down through discussion and debate and finally select just one. During this process, you might find that the class naturally separates into groups advocating different rights. These groups can be given time to form arguments for their human right, and feedback.

Once just one human right has been chosen by the class to focus on, ask each pupil to free write about the selection. Are they happy with this selection, what implications does the human right have for them, their community, the world?

Ask pupils to compare each other's free writing, making additional notes and underlining any favourite parts on their notes. They should now use these as the starting point for a poem, where pupils explore the reasons why the selected human right is important, where they have seen it in and out of action, and why and how things need to change to help more people enjoy this human right.

Performance

Activity 1: Getting the gestures

ENG 3-03a, LIT 3-04a

Watch "The Carpenter" by Doug Wilson Garry and ask the pupils to make notes of all of the poet's gestures and body language. Ask them to discuss in groups:

- What kinds of gestures does he use? (e.g. acting out some of the lines of the poem, waving, pointing etc.)

- When does he use them?

Now, put pupils into pairs and ask them to talk to one another (about anything!) but standing and with their hands behind their backs. Do they notice if they still gesture even though it's not visible? Does it feel weird or alien?

Activity 2: Practice makes perfect

ENG 3-03a, LIT 3-04a

The best way to hone a performance is practice. As a take home task, ask pupils to practice a poem – either one they have written, or choose one they like – in front of a mirror. At first, just read it aloud as if it's a conversation with a friend, don't think too much about "poet voice". Occasionally looking up from the page will help them see how much they gesture.

They can also try filming themselves – if they feel comfortable – and watching back what they look like.

Activity 3: Poetry slam

LIT 3-20a, LIT 3-23a, LIT 3-24a, EXA 3-01a/3-01b

A poetry slam is a competition where each poet is given a time limit to perform a poem in front of an audience. They are usually judged on three things: performance, poem content and audience reaction. Depending on where you run your poetry slam you can alter this.

As not all pupils may want to perform, split the class into small groups. Every pupil must perform their poem to their group. The groups can then decide which one or two poems they would like to nominate to be entered into the poetry slam.

Now the class has been whittled down to a smaller number of entries, you can now hold your poetry slam. Pupils can perform to the class and non-performers can vote for their favourite. To make the event a bit more special, you could hold it in your hall or library space, and you could invite other classes to attend.

You could also run a poetry slam digitally, by filming each pupil's poems and

allowing them to watch one another. This could really help children who are not confident in public speaking, but still want to participate. It also gives children who don't want to read a role in either filming, editing or circulating the videos.

Further resources

- The Young Writers section of the Scottish Book Trust contains resources, tips and articles and opportunities for young writers

- Our Live Literature programme funds author visits across Scotland, find out more through our website and look into the spoken word poets you could bring to your school or community

- For reluctant readers, our article on Five poets to read if you hate poetry is a great place to get started!

- Find out more about the Scottish Youth Poetry Slam from Confab