

Spoken Word

Many people think of Spoken Word as poetry that is written and then said out loud. It is more than that. Spoken Word combines creative writing with the skill of oration and the subtle nuance of theatre and improvisation. It is an exercise in affirmation and self-determination. It is a way to have necessary conversations with those who may not want to, may not be prepared to, or didn't know they needed to have them.

Spoken Word is the intersection of two art forms. It is the intersection of a literary art form and a performance art form. The choices made are relative to both. The first choice is what to write. The second choice is how you want to bring that to life.

You can write about anything. These are your words. It is your voice. It is your opportunity to share your thoughts and ideas on your terms. What message do you want to deliver? What do you want to share? What should people know, consider, or think deeply about? What have you tried to say but haven't felt you could? What does joy mean to you? What are your dreams? What challenges have you faced? What things are you still trying to figure out? These are the kinds of questions that lead us to write. That is where the poem is.

After you have put your thoughts down on paper, the next thing is to edit and revise what you wrote. You want to ensure you structure it how you want it to be. You want to ensure it reads the way you want it to. When you wrote it, you were writing for you. When you edit and revise it, you are preparing for it to engage with the world.

Then, it is time to share it. For this contest, you will be recording the poem. Below are some tips for making sure you give the best performance of the poem that you can provide. These tips are not only helpful in recording your contest submission. They are useful for performing in any environment and any situation.

The 6 P's of Performance

Preparation – Start by making sure that the poem is the way that you want it and you feel good about what you have. Ask for feedback. Don't be afraid of editing. You won't lose anything from the poem when you edit. You will only enhance what the poem is trying to do. Read it over, set it aside, read it over again. Get familiar with it before memorizing. Use a phone to make a voice note to help you. Listening to it helps you to build familiarity. Give yourself grace. It may take a few tries to get through it. That is normal.

Posture – Start with a comfortable stance that is generally shoulder length apart. Do not lock your knees. Keep the stance open. Keep your chest open, eyes up. If you start closed off or off center, make sure you have a reason. Make the posture match the intent of the poem. If it doesn't match, then it becomes a disruption and takes the audience's attention away from the words.

Presence – Use controlled movements. Reduce (or eliminate) nervous tics. You don't have to stand completely still. You do have to make sure any movement is purposeful. You can use arm movements, but make sure they fit the poem. Your face is part of the performance. Think about your facial expressions and what they also say. Your presence should enhance the way the words are received. It should not take away from what you are saying.

Projection – Use your voice as a tool. Intensity is not volume. Remember tone. Vary the delivery (enunciation, demeanor). Place pauses carefully. Shortened attention spans mean you can't say something the same way for too long. Your voice is an instrument. Decide what notes you want to play with it and when.

Pace – Think about how you want to pace your delivery. A slow and deliberate delivery conveys heaviness and importance. A quickened pace conveys a sense of urgency or playfulness. Use it to enhance the words written. Don't exaggerate just for dramatic effect. It may distract from what you are trying to get across.

Punctuation – Stick the landing (ending). Don't drop the poem (stop talking abruptly) unless intentional. Don't trail off (your voice) unless it adds to the impact of the poem. Clearly end the piece. That means knowing when in the performance you should start building to the end, so you are conscious of how you are guiding the audience there.