

# HOW TO WIN A POETRY SLAM



THE UGLY TRUTH ABOUT  
COMPETITIVE POETRY  
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# For Taylor Mali

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Printed by GAD Publishing Co., Chicago USA.

*Electronic Printing: November 2002*

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# INTRODUCTION

The poetry slam is a new and exciting form of artistic expression still in its infancy. Originally invented in the mid-1980s by Chicago's Marc Smith as a bar gimmick, a way to make his audience feel more a part of the poetry show going on around them, in the ensuing two decades it has been transformed into a legitimate national competition, with real stakes and real prizes. For better or for worse, poetry slams are part of the nation's culture, and they're here to stay.

The slam at its essence is a fairly simple process. Two or more poets are placed head-to-head in front of a crowd, with three random audience members chosen to judge them. The poets each perform their pieces, being penalized if going over three minutes in length but otherwise left alone. The judges each assign a score from one to ten and the highest-scoring poet wins that round and/or the slam itself. While the format changes slightly from venue to venue, the basic structure is pretty straightforward.

For the national tournament the rules are beefed up somewhat but remain essentially the same. Five judges are chosen instead of three, with the high and low scores dropped before tabulation. Poets are not allowed to use props, costumes, or any other item that any other random poet could not themselves use at a moment's notice (such as a chair from the audience).

Many feel that the concept of poems being judged against one another is ridiculous and can't be done. These people will say that there is no strategy inherent to a poetry slam, and that there's no way to guess in advance what a random group of strangers will or will not like. This book begs to differ. While there is no way of truly defining the artistic worth of any individual project - that's what's so wonderful about creativity in the first place - there are, however, real and quantifiable ways to adjust a performance poem so that it gets a higher score within the realm of a slam. The ability to predict these things derives from what is both the greatest strength and weakest liability of the slam format -- the picking of random audience members as judges.

The point of the poetry slam has always been and will always be to get regular, non-poetry audiences to attend. By placing the power of judgment directly in their hands, audience members feel that the show is somehow under their control, that they too have a voice in how the evening proceeds. Audience members at slams are constantly reminded by the

emcee that that the evening is supposed to be entertaining as well as informative and thought-provoking, and that they have the right through their scores and verbal reactions to let the poets know when they are failing to hold the audience's attention.

With this atmosphere established, the average audience member at a slam attempts to judge a poem's "artistic worth" not on literary or grammatical qualities, but rather in comparison to the general popular culture around them. Armed only with the experience of what they as individual people are entertained by in other parts of their lives, they apply the same standards to judging performance poetry. The slam poet is rated not only on the literary quality of their work but also by its length, the performer's theatrical talents, whether or not the subject matter is deemed appropriate or "important," the poet's sense of validity as an expert in the subject in which they speak, the audience's reaction to the poet, as well as such seemingly random qualities as the performer's dress and level of physical attraction.

Some say that this is how it should be, that slams de-mystify the artistic process and return poetry to the populist roots from which it began. Others say that slams are a bastardization of the artistic process, and turn poetry into yet another easily-digestible form of trash culture. This book aims at endorsing neither opinion but merely pointing out that, as the situation currently stands, audience expectations can be easily exploited and manipulated by a performer to the desired effect.

This book is neither an indictment of poetry slams nor a crafty parody of the form. It is exactly what the title suggests, a practical guide to what audiences expect from slam poets and how to deliver the exact things that will get higher scores from them. *If you follow all the advice in this book, you will dramatically increase your chances of winning slams, on both the local and national level.* The lessons here can be equally applied to all manner of situations, whether the poet in question is a black lesbian in San Francisco or a white nerd in Iowa. The author of this book has not only taken second in the nation in a past competition, but is one of the only people in the country to write critical analyses of slam issues for literary journals, zines and the like. The advice within is culled from years of experience and hundreds of events attended.

The contents of "How To Win a Poetry Slam" have been divided into ten easily understandable lessons, things that can be applied on a superficial basis for the casual performer or a complex way for the professional. Ready to start? Turn the page to begin Lesson One.

# RULE 1:

## Make your poem two minutes and fifty-nine seconds in length.

If there is one rule about the poetry slam that can almost be called a universal truth, it is that short poems don't win. There are logical reasons for this, and you may or may not agree with their validity. The fact remains, however, that the closer you can get to ending your poem exactly at the three-minute legal limit, the better your chances of getting a high score from your judges.

Why is the slam time limit at three minutes in the first place? No big mystery -- it's simply the number arbitrarily chosen by Marc Smith when he invented the poetry slam in Chicago a decade and a half ago. As slams have progressed and grown in popularity, though, the three minute rule has lasted. Many people find it a good length for performance poetry -- long enough to get one's point across, but short enough that bad poets will be forced to finish quickly. Besides, a three-minute limit works out well mathematically; 20 poems neatly comprise an hour, or 15 if you allow a minute between each piece for applause and score tabulation.

Audience members wouldn't care so much about the three-minute time limit if the poets themselves didn't care so much about it. Go to any heat of the national poetry slam and you will see scores of poets with stopwatches perpetually hung around their necks, crouching in front of stages and giving frantic hand signals to the performer currently in the spotlight. It is a cyclical reaction -- the more that poets believe that the audience cares about the time limit, the more they get uptight about it; the more the poets are uptight, the more the audience feels they must care about it.

But no matter what the reason, it's important to remember while reading this book that we are not talking about what is morally or ethically *right* or *wrong* about the poetry slam, only what actually *exists*. And what exists at a slam is an environment that rewards poets who can perform their pieces in as close to a three-minute limit without actually going over three minutes. Do the same yourself and you will be the one holding the competitive edge over your opponent.

# **RULE 2:** **Be oppressed.**

We as a culture have had a popular image of "The Poet" for nearly as long as poetry has been around -- that of a tortured, misunderstood genius, toiling in obscurity within a medium that many understand but few can master. Conventional wisdom says that great art cannot be made without great pain and suffering; whether or not this statement is true is irrelevant to how the typical audience member of a poetry slam scores you.

Judges love giving high scores to oppressed and fiery poets. After all, many of these audience members are the same ones actually inflicting the oppression in other parts of their lives. Giving a ten to an angry poet in a bar on a Thursday night is an easy out, a way for the judges to feel that they have actually contributed to the overall sensitivity and tolerance of our nation without having to tackle anything thorny or difficult. The phenomenon is somewhat inappropriately referred to as "white guilt," but in fact this powerful and intense emotion can be applicable to all judges, no matter what the race or class. Remember, we are not talking about what is right or wrong about such behavior, only that it actually does exist and that you can take advantage of it.

The secret is in finding a source of frustration in your life that is appropriate to your own particular gender, race and upbringing. Some choices are obvious -- black poets speaking about racism, female poets talking about sexism, gay poets talking about homophobia. But there are others that work equally as well. People who grew up in the country can talk about the unfair portrayal of white trash in our society. Anyone with a bloodline primarily tied to one culture can very effectively talk about the injustices occurring in the homeland from which their ancestors came. The opportunity to find subjects in which to become angry is a wide open one if you choose to explore it in depth.

If you are a straight, white male poet you will find, probably for the first time in your life, some complications. This does not mean, however, that you are without problems. If you have chosen to spend your spare time writing and performing poetry, you are most likely nerdy and sensitive. The inner pain of this upbringing can be an effective weapon in your battle for first place. Or you may take the opposite route, displaying your anger at all the other white, straight males who inflict this oppression on your poetic brothers and sisters in the first place, effectively using their indignation as your own. No matter what the subject, though, or how you choose to express it, if you want to start winning poetry slams you better find your cause, and fast.

# RULE 3: Take acting lessons.

No matter how much others deny it, the fact is that we humans react more strongly to visual and aural information than we do to cognitive. There is something very powerful that we can neither describe nor explain when actually watching creative work with our eyes and ears, instead of reading it from a page and interpreting it with our brain. Maybe it's the immediacy of the moment; perhaps our proclivity as a species to communicate with gestures and nuances. Whatever the reason, it is there, and we react intensely to it.

In a perfect world the typical slam poem would be a blessed union of the theatrical and literary, a finished piece of creativity that works as well on a static page as it does when coming out of a performer's mouth. Unfortunately we do not live in a perfect world, and we as imperfect humans place much more emphasis on how a slam poem is *read* and not *constructed*.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, although it's certainly not good either. You as a slam poet, however, have already made a conscious decision that performance is indeed an important part of your artistic output. Now embrace that decision and learn to become the best performer you can actually be. There are certain cues about dramatic delivery that almost all basic actors learn at the beginning of their studies -- proper diction, the use of a pregnant pause, how to hold yourself in front of an audience. These people are doing it, and so can you. You don't have to be an award-winning actor in order to perform a slam poem well; after all, if acting was your forte you'd be an actor, not a spoken-word performer. There are, however, certain basic techniques that can go a long way towards delivering a consistent, entertaining piece to an audience.

There are no guarantees in slam poetry, of course, but keep this adage in mind while writing your pieces: *A badly-written poem performed well still has a random chance of scoring high, but a well-written poem performed badly does not.* Do you find this statement a bit harsh? Then you're reading the wrong book. Your performance qualities can and do make or break you within the realm of slam poetry. Acknowledge this, and vow to get even better at it than you are now.

# **RULE 4:** **Make a lot of friends.**

Slam poems are in theory supposed to be judged as their own self-sustaining creatures, independent pieces that are scored simply by how good or bad they themselves are. But as anyone who's actually been to a slam knows, this is not how it actually works. Well-known and well-liked poets have an automatic advantage going into a round, and will receive a higher score for no other reason than that everyone believes they should get a higher score. If you want this advantage yourself, you too must learn not to be an island when it comes to slams.

The tendency for popular poets to get higher scores should come as a surprise to no one. After all, sports teams almost always do better at home games than at away ones. There's something about a warm, supportive crowd that makes us better at whatever it is that we're doing in front of an audience. It takes the edge off, helps calm our nerves, creates an atmosphere where we as the performer feel confident and assured. Packing the audience at a slam with your friends can literally make you a better performer on the stage.

But there is another factor equally important within the realm of slams, which is that judges for the most part turn to the audience to learn how to score. Let's face it - we humans love ongoing stories. We enjoy going into a competition knowing who the favorite is, or the plucky underdog, the hot up-and-comer, the washed-out has-been. For concrete proof of this, simply notice the "storytelling" coverage that television networks use when presenting us with such sporting events as the Olympics.

The problem within the slam is that judges are chosen specifically because they know nothing about the poets or the competition going on around them, and there is no Bob Costas to explain the dynamics in the pre-show beforehand. These judges, however, still have that natural desire to know the "story behind the story" of that night's competition, and they will listen to people at the tables around them to get it. It's important to establish, before the bout even begins, that you are the favorite going into the competition. The more you can make your judges believe this, the larger score you will receive based on their own biases.

And there is a third factor when discussing a friendly audience, which is that their verbal reactions to your piece can and do influence the judges' scores, in a profound way. Nobody likes to get booed! And that is exactly what will happen after a low score if you have packed the audience with your friends and supporters beforehand. The act of judgment is a harsh, cruel one, and is mostly thrust upon poor slam judges at a moment's notice. After all, most of them were merely expecting to show up at a bar, get drunk, watch some people making asses of themselves on a stage, and go home. These judges want to have as good a time at the slam as you do. And if they can give scores that won't get them heckles and wadded-up napkins thrown in their direction, they will give those scores, for peace of mind if nothing else. Are you going to let your opponent have that advantage? Of course not. Be friendly, make allies, and promise each and every one of your buddies a free drink if they will show up to your slam next week.

# **RULE 5:** **Write serious poetry.**

Why is it that comedies almost never win the Academy Award for Best Picture? Because we as a society labor under the false belief that drama is somehow more taxing, more important, and harder to accomplish than comedy. It is simply not the case, as anyone who has ever tried to write a funny poem can tell you, but it is how our culture looks at the validity of creative work. And you can use this misconception to your advantage within the world of slam poetry.

Funny poems are not automatically disqualified from being winners; many writers have gone on to great fame and fortune through pieces that make their audience laugh out loud. But these people have an advantage that you may not – namely, they are very, very good at it. It is an incredibly difficult thing to write a comedic poem that nonetheless receives high scores. When confronted with a poem about the lynching death of a black man in the deep south, most judges will not ignore it in order to make your "ode to 1970's sitcoms" the winner instead. Regardless of how good your poem is and how bad your opponent's, the judges would look like unfeeling jerks by declaring you the winner. It is a fight you cannot win, no matter how unjust, and if you are serious about wanting to win poetry slams you should get used to the idea now that you will have to write very serious, very "important" poetry.

This is not to say, however, that your poem should be a completely dry, humorless document of doom and gloom. Small amounts of humor can go a long way when discussing something of great importance or seriousness. The audience appreciates the break in the tension and the chance to dispel some of the angst they have been building, listening to you. In addition, when you sock them in the gut right after the laugh they will feel shocked, and reward you for it with higher scores.

Should you avoid funny, irreverent poems at all cost? If all you're interested in is entertaining your audience and having fun, then no. But if your goal is to win poetry slams, the answer is unfortunately yes. Comedic poems are too big a risk in the slam world. You may very well score high and score big with a funny piece, but the chances of bombing out of the tournament altogether are just as great. And if you want to win on a consistent basis, removing as many unknown factors as possible will do nothing but help your chances. Save the jokes for your friends after the show, where they rightly belong.

# **RULE 6:** **Get some rhythm.**

We've already established in Lesson 3 that the performance of a slam poem is of greater importance to the average audience member than the construction of the poem. Now let's take that idea one step further, and declare that poems performed with a sense of tempo and rhythm are automatically the most favored type of slam poem of all.

Performance poetry has been correctly and incorrectly compared to music many times over the years. Both pop songs and slam poems hover right around the three-minute range; both musicians and performance poets go on the road on a regular basis, touring at an endless series of dark bars and offering their goods for sale after the show. In addition, musicians and poets share a common personality, that of the crazy, misunderstood genius, living their life slightly (if not completely) on the fringe of society.

Slam judges have very likely never been to a poetry slam before the night they are called into duty, and so don't know what to expect. How they judge the poetry before them, then, is to compare it to other events they have experienced in their lives. For better or for worse, because of the similarities described above, many judges do end up comparing the artistic worth of a poem to the artistic worth of a song. And if a poem can make them start tapping their toes, snapping their fingers, and humming the piece under their breath, then this is the piece that they will naturally reward the most.

As before, this is neither a particularly bad nor particularly good thing, just simply how the world exists at this day and age. Many argue, for example, that the line between rap and performance poetry is almost non-existent, and they would be right. It's no coincidence that many of slam's brightest stars double as hip-hop artists. The overall goal, as with all ten of these lessons, is to immediately and profoundly get your piece stuck in the mind of that judge, sitting there in the audience with a blank sheet of paper and a magic marker, a mere three minutes away from passing judgment on you. You have exactly 180 seconds to convince that judge why they should give you a higher score than they gave your opponent, and one of the best ways to do that is to make your poem the more viscerally exciting one. Having a piece that resonates with the audience for weeks and months afterward is a great thing, but it doesn't necessarily win slams. The piece that makes the audience sing along with you in the immediacy of the moment, however, usually does.

There is a side benefit to incorporating rhythm, beat and rhyme into your poem, which is that you can effectively fool an audience into thinking that you are saying something complex and profound, when in actuality all you are really doing is repeating the same three phrases over and over. It is a sort of shortcut, if you will, to creating new pieces which can effectively garner you high scores. Keep it in mind the next time you are on your way to the local slam and you have yet to finish a new piece for that night.

# RULE 7: Perform last.

Back in Lesson One I mentioned that, if there's one thing about the poetry slam that could be considered a universal truth, it would be that short poems don't win. Well, I was wrong. An even more universal truth about the poetry slam, one that has no exceptions in the history of time, is that if you perform first you will lose. You will. Lose. No exceptions, no two ways about it.

This obviously begs a little more explanation. I don't mean that if you perform first out of two you'll lose, but rather if there's a group of you, like how the national competition works. In fact, this behavior is evident in all types of sports that are judged subjectively by individuals, from gymnastics to skating to diving. Why? Because of the phenomenon I like to call "the Creep." The Creep, in simple terms, is the tendency of judges to score too high too fast, forcing them to inflate their scores by the end of the match to reflect anyone they might like better. And if you perform first in a situation like this, you are simply and undeniably screwed.

An example. You perform first in a round of eight poets, the top four scorers of which will advance. The judges really like you and they give you a score of 25 out of 30. Not bad. But then the next poet they like just a little bit more. They give that poet a 26. Oops, you're now in second. A couple of poets perform who aren't very good, and they get scores lower than you. Fine. But then the poet who is known for getting everyone whipped up performs. The judges, overwhelmed, give the performer a 29. You're now in third place. Then the next performer gets up, the person who is the favorite to win the entire thing. They blow everyone out of the water, producing spontaneous sobbing from random members of the audience. 30. You're in fourth place.

Now, the important part. A person gets up next and performs a piece of the exact same quality as yours. Same subject, same level of complexity, same performance style. The performer is, in fact, your twin sibling, and the two of you have performed in a way so exactly alike that no one can tell the difference. Yet your twin gets a 28.5 and you received a 25. Why? Because the judges can't give out another 25 now that they've handed out a 29 and a 30. They would get lynched by the audience. There would be no excuse in committing such a heinous act. So the result is that your twin is now in the finals and you're not, for no other reason than the order in which you performed.

We can all agree that this is simply wrong, and that it's clearly the fault of the judges for allowing a situation like this to happen. But recognizing that a situation is unfair and denying that it exists are two entirely different things. The situation *does* exist, and if you want the edge over your opponents you will use it to your advantage. Do you want your competitors to advance just because they performed later in the match than you? No. You're there to win poetry slams, remember?

But isn't it illegal to choose the time you will perform in a slam? Yes and no. At the national level, for example, where poets compete against each other as part of a four-member team, it is perfectly legal for the teams themselves to choose the order their four members will take the stage -- only the order of the actual team rotations are chosen randomly. *Do everything within your human powers to convince your teammates that you should perform last.* Explain how you are the anchor of the team, the one with the mythical perfect piece that will pull them ahead in the tournament. Tell them that your piece will be appreciated more the drunker the audience is. Tell them that you've never performed last and, damnit, it's about time that you did. It often will not work -- the other three members are also looking to perform last, remember -- but you'll never get a chance to even find out if you don't try in the first place.

In a local slam, where the stakes are low but order is supposed to be randomly chosen, use a little creativity. Tell the host whatever you need to in order to perform last, even if it involves bending the rules. Remember: *If caught, you will not get in trouble for bending the rules; the host will for allowing you to do so.* Tell the emcee that you're very nervous about your upcoming performance and that you would rather get a couple of drinks inside you first if they don't mind. Tell them that you are going out for a pack of cigarettes, and then don't show up again until they're forced to put you on last. Bitch and moan about how you are always chosen first for the slam and can't they ever make an exception for once. Is this a sneaky thing to do? Not at all. It's called competition, not insider trading. Your opponent has the same opportunity to adjust their position within the roster as you do. The difference between first and last place may very well depend on who has the courage, though, to do something about it.

# RULE 8:

## Act the way your audience expects you to.

I cannot put enough emphasis on audiences' pre-conceived notions of what a "poet" is, in relation to how well you perform in the slam. All of us as humans seek out *validity* in every part of our lives. Our stockbroker needs to not only be knowledgeable but *to look like a stockbroker* before we will take them completely seriously. Psychiatrists are hired as material witnesses in court trials not only for their schooling and experience, but also whether they bear a resemblance to Sigmund Freud. We as a species communicate with each other not only through language but with such subtleties as gesture, mannerism, personality and dress. And part of what makes us decide on the validity of the person we're talking to is not just *what* they say but *how* they say it and what they look like *when* they say it.

Nowhere is this tendency more nakedly exposed than within a poetry slam. Audience members, many of whom have never been to a spoken-word event before, have in their heads an idea of what a "poet" is -- how they dress, what they look like, how they speak, their subject matter. Not to mention, we want our public performers to be attractive people. The performances themselves are more entertaining this way -- we not only enjoy the work on its literary terms, but also get to spend three minutes staring at a person we are attracted to, languishing over their words, constructing romantic fantasies in our heads. The more people you can convince of your validity, through your clothes and actions -- and the more people you can convince to be attracted to you because of it -- the better chances you have of winning the slam.

The secret, like Lesson Two, is to tailor your look to best complement your race, class, age and social standing. An eighteen-year-old riot grrrl would obviously look ridiculous in a tweed jacket and smoking a pipe; a 45-year-old college professor would look equally ridiculous in baggy jeans and carrying a Hello Kitty purse. Also keep in mind that it's not *your* opinion of what an artist looks like but rather your *audience's* that influences their scores. A crowd of yuppies will most likely want to see someone subversive-looking enough to be impressive, but not so edgy as to be threatening. The Gap clearance rack works well in a situation like this. On the other hand, at a dive bar in a major city in the middle of the night, Gap clothes are likely to get you booed off stage. Be sensitive to the type of audience that will be at your show -- academic, hip-hop, tourist -- and dress and act to meet their expectations. The goal, as discussed before, is to grab these people as quickly as possible, to convince them in the very small time of 180 seconds that you are the best poet who ever lived, certainly much better than any of these other losers you've been lumped in with at this slam. Any advantage you can exploit, no matter how small, can and should be utilized.

# RULE 9:

## Create a national reputation for yourself.

Of all the lessons in this book, this particular one might be the easiest to utilize, not to mention the most fun and productive. Creating a national literary reputation for yourself and your work not only gives you a greater chance of winning slams, but also helps sell books, gives you an excuse to visit other cities, and (what we slammers all love) to be the center of attention for small periods of time.

Your first visit to the national poetry slam can sometimes be an intimidating experience, what with all the good performers, the books, the CDs and NPR appearances and the like. But it's important to always keep this in mind: *The national poetry slam is the sexiest science-fiction convention in history.* For all the big talk at slams about how the form is single-handedly changing the face of American literature, the fact is that the vast majority of American citizens have never heard of the slam, don't realize that people are even performing work of this nature in public on a regular basis, and will scratch their heads in confusion when the national competition is brought up in their presence. The "slam community" in the United States comprises in actuality less than a thousand people, most of whom know each other and hang out with each other on a regular basis.

In this kind of environment, establishing a national reputation for yourself is a relatively easy process, much simpler than, say, breaking into the music industry. The reason is that there is little to no money involved in the process of performance poetry, and so people are more than willing to invite you along to performance and publishing opportunities. Getting your work published is usually just a simple matter of actually sticking the pieces in the mail and sending them to the underground, xeroxed lit zine in question. (Or, in our Information-Age times, sometimes the even easier process of emailing the work.) For all the hype about the perpetual winners of the national poetry slam, most of these people have no other books published than the same xeroxed, folded-in-half chapbooks that you yourself can make of your own work over the course of a typical weekend.

Look for opportunities and take advantage of them whenever humanly possible. If an out-of-town performer starts discussing the upcoming poetry festival in their city, ask them how you can get involved. Usually it's just a matter of you paying your own airfare and they signing you up for a showcase. Have plenty of chapbooks ready when you go to a festival of this sort, at least 100. Sell them, give them away, alert everyone to your cool website while you're at it. Do the best job you can at your performances, realizing beforehand that being a "touring out-of-state poet" brings its own false sense of validity that this time works to your advantage. Go to the national poetry slam, if not as a competitor than at least an enthusiastic audience member. Make contacts, buy drinks and exchange cards. After you've met enough emcees of other slams around the nation, consider jumping in a car for a couple of weeks and partaking in a national tour. With a few exceptions, getting booked at out-of-town shows usually involves nothing tougher than simply alerting people that you are touring. Combine the books, the festivals, the national competition and the tour together over the course of one year, and you will suddenly become one of the most well-known contemporary poets in America. It's just as simple as that.

Creating a national reputation for yourself not only helps you to win poetry slams in its own right, but is a big aid towards fulfilling the other lessons in this book: It will give you lots of practice on time limits (Lesson 1); expose you to the various injustices in this big world of ours (#2); give you real experience in how to interact with your audience (#3); certainly help you make friends and fans for your upcoming national competition (#4); give you a greater justification in your insistence on performing last (#7); not to mention, if you embark on a tour right before the national competition, you will end up arriving in the suitably haggard, hungover, strung-out condition that your audiences expect their poets to be (#8).

It is amazing how much your credibility rises at the national poetry slam simply by going on the road, publishing on a regular basis, and being friendly to others. When you find the movers and shakers of the slam talking about you in glowing terms, you are only a rock skip away from being a mover and shaker yourself. And this is the prime position you want to find yourself in if you wish to increase your chances of winning slams.

# RULE 10: Keep it real.

None of the other lessons in this book will amount to a hill of beans if you do not keep this last lesson in mind throughout, that you must always be sincere and heartfelt when writing and performing your slam poetry. This may sound like a contradiction to the rest of this book, but after examination you will see that this sincerity is actually a complement to the manipulations you will otherwise be enacting in your quest for first place.

There is a rule about slams that few people ever learn and even fewer heed, which is: *Your audience may act like idiots most of the time, but they are not stupid.* No matter how many times slams are accused of "dumbing down" the American arts and letters, the fact is that the average person who chooses to attend one generally has a higher intelligence and sense of culture than someone who, say, attends a sporting event or watches television with their spare time. No matter how easily an audience's expectations can be exploited and twisted to serve your own needs, they have come to that slam in the first place because they enjoy spending an evening listening to creative people write original literary works and perform them in an engaging, entertaining way. And these people can sniff out bullshit faster than a poet can blow a paycheck.

Remember, there is a subtle but unmistakable difference between *exploiting* an audience's preconceptions for your own advantage and merely *pandering* to what you believe an audience's expectations are. No matter how much a serious poem about rape will aide you in winning a slam, you must fundamentally have a desire, a compulsion, to write about rape in the first place. If not, you run the very real risk of completely alienating your audience, as they quickly discover that you have no interest in the subject of rape and are in fact presenting a flaccid, obvious attempt to twist their emotions. The same goes for the other lessons in this book, from too-obvious theatrical gestures to the making of friends only for the political gain it will give you.

There is something we can recognize but not put our finger on when hearing someone speak sincerely about a subject that interests them. It's a certain tone in the voice, a certain deliberateness to their actions. It's impossible to articulate what makes us recognize sincerity, but it's very easy to notice when it's not there. The point this book makes is that none of us have only one solitary idea for a poem in our head at any given point. We have many, based on our life experiences, the two-dozen things that make us mad about the world, the recent events in our lives just in the past week. When the time comes to sit down and choose the subjects in which to write about for the slam, this book suggests taking an overall look at everything that interests you and choosing the ones that most closely fulfill these ten rules. But you should certainly never just make up a subject out of thin air, for no other reason than that you believe it will win. It won't. And more importantly, your audience will see through your thinly-veiled attempts at exploiting their emotions and resent you for it.

You are at the slam to win, yes, there's no doubt. But you're there for something more -- to connect, to present your view of the world and the way you think it works, to convince others that your view of life is the correct one to have. You are there to be entertaining, and to be entertained. Mostly you are there to have fun. And just as performing a poem that lacks these other nine lessons will never win you a slam, performing a poem without this tenth rule will also make you perpetually lose. For a poem to truly do well in a slam environment, it must equally speak from the heart as well as twist around your audiences' emotions.

So, that's it. You're armed, you've been trained, and you're ready for battle. Now get out there and start winning some poetry slams.



JASON PETTUS is the author of three novels and, to date, over forty self-published books of short work. His performance credits include National Public Radio, the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, WGN-TV and the Albuquerque Poetry Festival, as well as placing second at the 1997 National Poetry Slam as part of the Chicago-Green Mill team. Mr. Pettus regularly writes on slam and performance issues for such publications as *e-poets* and About.com, and maintains a website that has attracted a cult following. Mr. Pettus lives in Chicago and is now retired from the slam community.

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**END**