

“SLAMMASTER”
MARC KELLY SMITH
WILL TURN YOU INTO A
SLAM POET!

MARC KELLY SMITH

WITH
JOE KRAYNAK



TAKE

THE

MIC

THE
ART OF

PERFORMANCE
POETRY,

SLAM,

AND
THE

SPOKEN
WORD





TAKE

THE

MIC



MARC KELLY SMITH

WITH JOE KRAYNAK



TAKE THE MIC

THE
ART OF
PERFORMANCE
POETRY,
SLAM,
AND
THE SPOKEN
WORD



sourcebooks
mediaFusion



An imprint of
Sourcebooks, Inc.®
Naperville, Illinois

Copyright © 2009 by Marc Kelly Smith and Joe Kraynak
Cover and internal design © 2009 by Sourcebooks, Inc.
Internal photos © Steven E. Gross, Tim Stafford, and Dan Sullivan

Sourcebooks and the colophon are registered trademarks of Sourcebooks, Inc.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems—except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews—without permission in writing from its publisher, Sourcebooks, Inc.

The authors have made all efforts to contact the copyright holders for material used in this book, if appropriate. If any omissions have occurred, we will happily correct such errors in future printings or editions of this book.

Published by Sourcebooks MediaFusion, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc.

P.O. Box 4410, Naperville, Illinois 60567-4410

(630) 961-3900

Fax: (630) 961-2168

www.sourcebooks.com

Cataloging-in-Publication data is on file with the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America.

VP 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

Introduction	xv
How to Use This Book.	xvii
Companion Book	xvii
A Note from the Publisher	xix
Acknowledgments.	xxi

Chapter 1: What You Think You Know May Not Be Slam. **3**

The Big Definition of Slam Poetry.	4
What Slam Is and Isn't.	5
Poetry and Performance	7
Where Art Thou, Slam?.	7
Finally...Attention and Respect.	8
Staged Bouts for Audience Appeal	8
Sowing the Seeds of Slam	9
"The Points Are Not the Point"	10
Who's the Best and Who Cares?.	11
Striving for the Best of Both Worlds	12
Performance Poet as Audience Servant	12
New Life for a Dying Art	13
<i>If you remember anything, remember.</i>	13

Chapter 2: Getting into the Spirit of Slam . . 17

Spoken Word's Long Tradition.	17
Battling Bards.	18
Oral Tradition's Dark Ages.	19
Spoken Word's Rebirth	20
Slam Takes Center Stage.	21

Who Inspired This Madness? and Why?	22
Slam Poetry Goes National.	23
Slam Poetry Goes Global	24
Slam Poetry Here and Now	24
The Spirit of Slam: Poetry for the People	25
Breaking Down the Color (and Collar) Barriers	25
The Culture of Democracy	26
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	26

Chapter 3: Slam Competition—Rules, Regulations, and Other Formalities 29

It's a Game, Stupid!	29
The First Slam Competition	30
Who Says Who Wins?	31
The Basic Rules of Slam Engagement	31
Perform Your Own Work	32
Three Minutes Is All We Can Stand.	33
No Props, Costumes, Trombones, or Other	
Carry-On Luggage	33
Scoring: 0 to 10 (or Down to Minus Infinity)	34
The Mean Chicago Rules	35
The Official Emcee Spiel Used at the	
National Poetry Slams.	36
Slams Are Open to All.	36
All Styles, Forms, and Subject Matter Are Welcome.	37
The Prize Is Not the Point	37
The All-Important Audience Is Always in Control	38
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	39

Chapter 4: Penning the Powerful Slam Poem 43

Once Upon a Slam—Storytelling	44
What's Your Point—Oratory, Poetics, or a	
Laundry List of Love?	47

Pop Ideas and Newspaper Politics	48
Write from Experience	48
Seeing Is Believing—Concrete vs. Abstract Language	49
Slam Examples of Concrete Language.	50
Abstract Language	51
<i>Exercises.</i>	52
Flaccid Phrasing	52
<i>Exercises.</i>	53
Too Smart for Your Performance	53
It's Gotta Sound Good, Too	54
Rock to the Rhythm.	55
<i>Exercises.</i>	56
Old Testament Stanzas	57
<i>Exercise</i>	59
If You Must Rhyme...	59
The Hip-Hop Line & Rhyme.	61
Caution on the Motion—Too Much Rhyming Commotion	62
No Sermons, But If You Must Preach....	62
All Forms Can Slam	65
<i>If you remember anything, remember....</i>	66
Chapter 5: Confronting Stage Fright—	
Overcoming the Fear	69
What Is Happening to Me?!?	70
Slay the Confidence Busters	71
It's Not Natural...It's an Art	72
Is That Text Well-Prepared?	73
Visualize Success.	73
Practice, Practice, Practice	73
Shift Your Focus	74
Breathe Already!	75
Please Release Me	75
Tricks (or No-Brainers) of the Trade	76
Not Recommended	77

Celebrating Your Slam Virginity, and Then Losing It.	78
Confessions of a Virgin Virgin—Joel Chmara	78
Confessions of a Virgin Virgin—Mary Fons.	79
Accumulate Stage Time	80
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	82
Chapter 6: Slammin' Fundamentals	85
Engage.	85
Entertain.	87
Affect	87
The Entertaining Fundamentals.	88
Vary the Volume	88
<i>Exercises.</i>	89
<i>Classroom Activities</i>	90
Tweak the Tempo	91
<i>Exercises.</i>	92
<i>Classroom Activity.</i>	92
Articulation	93
<i>Exercise</i>	94
<i>Classroom Activity.</i>	95
Breathe Deep and Pause.	95
<i>Exercise</i>	96
<i>Classroom Activity.</i>	97
Look 'Em in the Eye	97
<i>Exercises.</i>	100
Memorization	100
How We Make Memory Deposits	102
Total Recall	103
The Memorization Curve	104
<i>Exercises in Flexing the Memory Muscle</i>	105
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	105

Chapter 7: Body Talk—Shake, Gesture, and Move	109
Warming Up	110
<i>Exercise: Shake Out.</i>	<i>110</i>
<i>Exercise: Breathe</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Exercise: Vocal Warm-Ups.</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Classroom Activity: Warm-Ups.</i>	<i>112</i>
Elements of Movement	113
<i>Exercise: In the Bubble</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>Exercise: Catching Butterflies.</i>	<i>114</i>
<i>Exercise: Imagine the Stone</i>	<i>115</i>
<i>Exercise: Paint the Reading Room Red.</i>	<i>117</i>
Laban’s Eight Efforts	117
<i>Exercise: Applying Effort to Your Words.</i>	<i>118</i>
<i>Classroom Activity.</i>	<i>119</i>
Down to Specific Body Parts.	120
Working Out the Kinks.	121
Posture and Stance	123
Crossing the Boards	124
Dos & Don’ts of Movement	124
<i>If you remember anything, remember.</i>	<i>126</i>

Chapter 8: Rehearse, Rehearse, Rehearse	129
Establish a Rehearsal Regimen	130
Set a Rehearsal Schedule	131
Rehearse in Layers	131
Spice It Up with Some Variation	132
Finding Voice, Tone, and Mood through Rehearsal.	132
Discovering a Poem’s Voice (Character).	133
<i>Exercise: Exploring a Poem’s Voice</i>	<i>133</i>
Discovering a Poem’s Tone (Attitude) & Mood (Emotion).	134
<i>Exercise: Exploring a Poem’s Tone and Mood</i>	<i>135</i>

Discovering the Situation and	
Identifying the Unseen Audience	135
<i>Exercise: Exploring Situation and Audience</i>	136
<i>Classroom Activity</i>	137
Practicing Your Approach: Stepping Up to the Mic	138
Make the Right Approach	139
Use Your Nervous Condition to Your Advantage.	140
Hitting Your Mark.	140
<i>Exercise: Practicing Your Approach and Stage Movements</i>	141
From Closet to Mirror to Tape Recorder to	
Friendly Ears	142
Through the Looking Glass	142
Audio Replay	143
Video Replay	143
Recruiting a Critique	144
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	144
Chapter 9: Shaping a Performance and a Few	
More Skills	149
Mastering the Art of Seductive Revelation	149
Enter and Open with a Flair	150
<i>Exercise</i>	152
Hold 'Em	153
Mixing It Up	155
Something Up Your Sleeve	155
From Knee-Slappers to Sidesplitters.	156
Spectacle and Visual Accessories	157
Musical Accompaniment and Sound Effects	157
The Edge	158
Closers	159
Underpinning It All: Style and the Subject Matters	160
All Forms Can Slam—Take Two	161
Avoiding Common Performance Clichés	161

Performing in the Zone 162

If you remember anything, remember..... 163

**Chapter 10: Where and How
to Gig Around 167**

All the Gigs You Can Do. 168

Open Mic Search 168

Bookstore Readings 170

Don't Forget the Slams 171

Performance Venues of Every Variety. 172

Nightclubs, Saloons, and Other Informal Venues 172

Late-Night Theater 173

Slammin' in the Schools (Educational Outreach) 173

Do-It-Yourself Venues (Create Your Own Show) 174

Performance Poetry Etiquette 101 174

Look & Listen & Get to Know 175

Behave Yourself, Be Courteous, & Do Your Job 175

Audience Etiquette 178

If you remember anything, remember..... 179

Chapter 11: Book Me! Please! 183

Thinking Like a Marketing Mogul 184

Hitting the Campaign Trail. 185

Press Pack. 186

Page One and Only One! 187

In-Depth Résumé 187

Look at Me! 188

In the News! 188

Finally My Poems! 190

Audio Component 190

The Do-It-Yourself Audio Method. 190

Getting a Little Sound Advice 191

Studio Time 192

The Clock's Ticking	192
Aftersounds—Editing and Production	193
Roll 'Em: Filming Your Act	194
Built-In Opportunities	194
Call the Pros	195
Establishing a Web Presence	195
Blog	197
Launch a Website	198
Populate Your Website or Blog with Content.	199
Promote Your Website or Blog	200
Explore Social Networks.	200
Share Podcasts of Your Performances	201
Post Video Clips on YouTube	202
Low Budget or All-Out Glitz?	202
Putting the Tools to Work	203
<i>If you remember anything, remember</i>	<i>204</i>

Chapter 12: Getting the Word Out: Publicizing Your Performance 207

Know What You're Promoting	208
Marketing Materials: Forms That Fit	209
Making a Name (and Logo) for Yourself	210
Cheap, but Effective: Flyers and Postcards	212
Not as Cheap, but Very Effective: Posters	213
Garnering Some Free Press, Radio Time, and Exposure	214
Generating Feature Stories, Interviews, and Media Attention	214
Step 1: Write a Press Release	215
Step 2: Send the Press Release.	216
Step 3: Call 'Em.	216
Work Your Angle	217
Press the Airwaves	218
More Methods for Getting the Word Out.	219
Managing Mailing (and Emailing) Lists	219

Press the Flesh	221
Paid Ads	221
Cool Calls	222
Website Appeal	223
Never Underestimate Word of Mouth	223
<i>If you remember anything, remember.</i>	<i>224</i>

Chapter 13: Taking Your Show

on the Road 227

Tour Planning 101 227

Step 1: East Coast? West Coast? No Coast?	228
Step 2: Book a Big Gig	228
Step 3: Find More Dots (Gigs) and Connect Them	229
Step 4: Route Your Tour	230
Step 5: Filling in the Gaps	230
Step 6: Get a Ride	231
Step 7: Find a Place to Sleep and Shower	231
Step 8: Promoting Your Tour	232
Step 9: Before You Start the Engine	234

Schmoozing the Bookers, the Waiters,

the Ticket Takers 234

Slams and Their Masters	235
Nightclub Owners and Their Managers	236
Buttering Up the Booking Agents	237
Concert Halls—Performing in the Big House	238

Don't Get Set Up to Fail 240

Getting Paid 242

<i>If you remember anything, remember.</i>	<i>244</i>
--	------------

Chapter 14: Old-School Advice:

Act Professional 249

Oh, Behave! 250

Keep It Down During a Performance	251
Don't Pull Focus While Others Are Performing	251

Don't Glower	252
No Hoot-and-Holler Cheerleading	252
Keep Conspicuous Negative Opinions to Yourself.	253
It's Not Your House.	254
Would You Talk That Way to Grandma?	255
Be Courteous: Nobody Likes a Jerk	256
Final Reminders—Last Bits of Advice	256
Be Prompt: Early Never Hurts.	256
Offstage Preparation: Recap Getting the Nerves Out.	257
Priming for the Stage	258
Hawking Your Wares.	259
Respect Your Audience and Your Fellow Performers.	260
<i>If you remember anything, remember.</i>	<i>261</i>

Appendix A: Slammers:

Performance Poetry	263
Poetry Collections.	263
Audio Recordings	264
Anthologies	264
Publishers of Slam Poetry	265
Agents	266

Appendix B: Books on

Poetics & Performing	269
---	------------

Appendix C: Slammin' Websites	271
--	------------

Appendix D: PSI-Certified Slams	281
--	------------

About the Authors	297
------------------------------------	------------



INTRODUCTION

Most of us have suffered through poetry readings during which the poets were about as animated as roadkill. No facial expression. No gesture. No intonation. No sign of life whatsoever. Even the poet's skin seemed ashy, as if he had just stepped off the set of *Night of the Living Dead*. A zombie who threatened to kill us all—not by eating our flesh but by droning on and on in a deadening monotone until he had sucked bone dry all our will to listen and to experience the poetry he was lowering into a premature grave.

Please don't be one of these soul-sucking zombie poets. Reach deep inside, pull out your pulsing heart, and fling it on the stage. *Make* the audience listen. Grab it by the throat...figuratively speaking, of course. Use your voice, your eyes, your body, your heart, your soul, and your mind to fire to life the passion, sense, and subtleties of the poetic words you toiled over past midnight, affixing them to the page. Make faces, stomp, gesture, whisper, yell! Be the fool, the prophet, the lover, the king, or the kangaroo your poems demand you to be. Do whatever it takes to capture the crowd's attention, keep it entertained, and communicate your poetry through professional, impeccable performance.

That's what this book hopes to inspire you to do. In it I ask you to:

-
- Learn the fundamentals of communicating poetry onstage in a public forum.
 - Acquire tools for overcoming stage fright and eliminating bad performance habits.
 - Develop regimes of rehearsal and memorization.
 - Attune your psyche and motivation toward the goal of connecting authentically with an audience's heart and mind.
 - Grasp the ability to assess any performance situation and retool it into an environment that provides the best opportunity for success.
 - Apply principles of good writing to understanding what makes an effective performance text and how to interpret it onstage.
 - Transform your body, mind, voice, and spirit into a finely tuned instrument of communication.

As a reward for all the hard work it'll take to accomplish these feats, I've included in Chapters 11 to 14 most of what I know about the practical aspects of earning a modest living as a professional performance poet—something I've been able to do for more than two decades. (No small order for a poet.) So, when you get your “chops” tuned up (that's jazz lingo for a musician's readiness to play) come visit me at the Green Mill in Chicago and I'll boost you up onto the stage for your debut as a “virgin virgin” at the Uptown Poetry Slam.


How to Use This Book


Although I encourage you to read this book from cover to cover to tap its full potential, it's laid out to facilitate a "skip and dip" approach. Just about every chapter, section, and subsection can stand on its own, so you can pick up the book, flip to what you want, and instantly obtain a mini-lesson on a particular aspect of polishing your poetry-performance skills or transforming yourself into a poet-professional.

As a result, you may encounter a tiny bit of redundancy. However, I believe that the redundancy is worth the price of having a book that reads smoothly from cover to cover and provides you with a quick reference when you need a brief refresher course to sharpen your skills.

Companion Book

We invite you to check out our companion book on staging a slam—*Stage a Poetry Slam: How to Create, Run, and Attract Huge Audiences to Your Slams*.





A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

A few years ago, Sourcebooks MediaFusion was privileged to publish *The Spoken Word Revolution*, edited by Mark Eleveld and advised by Marc Kelly Smith (coauthor of the book you're holding). In the tradition of our book *Poetry Speaks*, which featured historic poets reading their own work, *Spoken Word* brought forth today's vibrant, living world of performed poetry.

While those works included audio CDs bound into the book, today we have the opportunity to bring the world to you online in all its kicking, evolving glory. So we invite you to join the revolution at PoetrySpeaks.com, an emerging home for this vital art form.

You'll find scores of samples, examples, and tracks you can use along with this book for inspiration. Some of the movement's best talent is represented there, plus you'll have the chance to join the community, post your own material, get feedback, maybe even inspire someone else. Come join the revolution and see for yourself at:

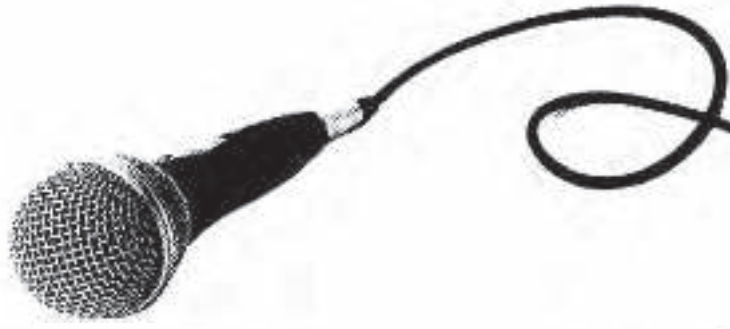
www.PoetrySpeaks.com





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the slammers around the world for their contributions to this book and to the slam community in general. Special thanks to Mark Eleveld, editor of the *Spoken Revolution* books, and to the folks at Sourcebooks who made this project possible.



NEXT UP!

The Big Definition of Slam Poetry

What Slam Is and Isn't

Poetry and Performance

Where Art Thou, Slam?

Finally...Attention and Respect

Staged Bouts for Audience Appeal

Sowing the Seeds of Slam

"The Points Are Not the Point"

Who's the Best and Who Cares?

Striving for the Best of Both Worlds

Performance Poet as Audience Servant

New Life for a Dying Art

If you remember anything, remember...

sample content of Take the Mic: The Art of Performance Poetry, Slam, and the Spoken Word (A Poetry Speaks Experience)

- [**download The Literary Conference book**](#)
- [click The Bishop's Man \(The Cape Breton Trilogy, Book 2\)](#)
- [download online Tea Basics: A Quick and Easy Guide](#)
- [download Maureen O'Hara: The Biography here](#)

- <http://dadhoc.com/lib/The-Literary-Conference.pdf>
- <http://nexson.arzamaszev.com/library/CR300--CRM-Sales--Version-95-.pdf>
- <http://rodrigocaporal.com/library/The-Marco-Effect--Department-Q--Book-5-.pdf>
- <http://monkeybubblemedia.com/lib/Neuro--The-New-Brain-Sciences-and-the-Management-of-the-Mind.pdf>