New Mexico
Poetry Out Loud

Performance Workbook
For Participants

Prepared by Theaterwork
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Introduction

Welcome to the New Mexico Poetry Out Loud Performance Workbook for Participants.

For the past six years Theaterwork artistic director David Olson has traveled the state imparting to students and teachers the techniques he has learned over decades in the theater. He may have already visited your classroom.

Now, you can have his expertise with you anytime through this performance workbook.

Discover how to choose a poem that resonates with you.

Learn how to create a performance script.

Find out what you should do on the day of your performance.

We hope this performance workbook will help make your Poetry Out Loud journey enjoyable and your performance the best it can be.

As David Olson says, dive in!

Jenice Gharib
Poetry Out Loud Program Manager
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Poem Selection: *Picked Out of A Lineup!*

Selecting the poems you want to work with is one of the most important things you will be doing. Take your time. Read them both silently and aloud. Look for something that really “grabs” you, something you understand but that stretches your imagination. If you find yourself saying, “I wish I had said that!” that’s a good sign because you *will* be saying it, bringing it into your mind and heart, giving it a little piece of yourself.

Look for diversity in your selection – style, period, and voice. There is a rich variety available to you through the Poetry Out Loud program. Have a dictionary somewhere in the room just to make sure of the meaning (often a rich array of meanings) of words you don’t commonly use in everyday conversation. Look up the poet whose work you are interested in right away. You will want to start understanding the life and times out of which a poem has come. Look a bit further. Consider the historical and artistic moment and other writers around the poet.

Select a group of poems out of which you will make a further selection for performance as time goes on. Familiarize yourself with this wider group. Read them all out loud. Work on all of them. They will all come in handy at some point.
Poem Analysis:  From Deep Within!

Pick a poem you want to start working on - the one that seems to have “your name on it.” Then you will begin an interesting process of understanding the poem, its central theme, its imagery, the world it comes out of and leads the reader into. Dive in!

First: Read it over several times. Get used to it. Let it start to resonate with you.

Then: Grab your pencil and a piece of paper and write down anything that hits you after 3 or 4 readings – images, special words, a setting, a character, a question it appears to ask, anything that hits you. What has jumped up? What mood or atmosphere do they create?

What does the poet seem to be either wrestling with or discovering?

Is there one sentence that might express what the poem says?

Without looking back at the poem, try to repeat as much of it as you can. Take a chance.

Where does the poem seem to come from in the body? The head? The heart? The gut? The blood? The nervous system?

Can you identify with the speaker? Can you stand in that person’s shoes?

Who do you want to share this poem with as soon as possible? A friend? A parent? A neighbor? A teacher? Do it. Don’t put it off! See what that person thinks, what the reaction is. That will also give you insight into what you’re working with.

Start to trust yourself with the poem. Believe in your sense of it.
Creating a Working Script:  *With Both Hands!*

When you are ready to start preparing a poem for performance, here’s a way to approach the task:

Get away from the format in which the poem is presented on the page of a book or on the online anthology. Get it out onto your own paper. Make some copies you are going to attack with a pencil and colored markers.

If, in putting together your own working version of the poem – turning it into a script for performance- you want to make it very immediate and useful, try some of the following suggestions:

Place WHOLE IDEAS on the same line, using punctuation as your guide.

Capitalize or highlight words that are keys for you and the audience.

Mark with a slash (maybe a red one) where you can and should grab a good deep breath. Give yourself enough air, breathing when you need to do so, but also where pulling in air will give you a “forward energy” moment. Always breathe - not to stop - but to push forward. Rehearse breathing. Believe me: Mark those breaths in your working script!

Make an enlarged copy of the poem you’re working on so you can see it easily away from your face. Don’t lean over it. Prop it up on something. In order to be able to do that, tape it to a backing of some sort. Put it at eye level. If you have a music stand, great. If not, make something up that serves a similar purpose.

If you find that your working script is not quite right or getting a bit messy, throw it out and make a new one!

P.S. Be sure to avoid emphasizing rhyme in your work on the poem. It is almost always best to let the rhyme just happen, be internal, come as a surprise.
Physical Preparations: *Here I Am!*

Performance of a poem – whether a reading or a recitation – requires plenty of physical preparedness. You can’t simply rise from your chair and do the job. A performer is a sort of athlete. The best ones have stamina, flexibility, muscle control, fluidity, full breath control. Couch potatoes need not apply!

When working on your poem be on your feet as much as possible. Move away from table work the moment you feel you want to try to “get the poem on its feet.” As you are about to work, stretch out, shake your limbs, lift and lower your shoulders, twist at the waist, raise and lower your legs, gently rotate your head. Just take a minute to do all this. Then, let the poem start coming out of that body. Blood is flowing, you’re awake, your nervous system is on high alert like a runner, a skater, a dancer. Ready to go! You can’t do too much in this regard. Try it sometime after a run, a bike ride, or a swim. You’ll see what I mean.

The reason for this is that you are going to want to be able to pull the poem and its energies from different places in the body. In a Poetry Out Loud competition you are not allowed - or encouraged - to use large gestures. But that doesn’t prevent your building the performance of the poem on sensation – shifting ones - in the body.

We have all sorts of expressions for that in everyday life:

“I felt like I was going to explode!”

“Something grabbed my stomach!”

“I wanted to reach out and pull him toward me!”

“I thought I was going to faint!”

“I felt a cold wind pass over me!”

And so, go on. Go ahead. Try two of them .... *See?*
All of those sensations can be awakened in the body and should be when required for conveying the experience of a poem to an audience. But they need to be identified and rehearsed as you work on a poem. Write those internal sensations on your working script.

One way to prepare for an in-depth work session is to follow this routine:

- Enter the place where you are going to work. Wear loose clothing and no shoes.
- Stand still, feet somewhat apart (for balance).
- Be sure your posture is good. Head up, shoulders back, yet at ease. Lift rib cage slightly.
- Breathe easily and deeply.
- Begin a series of WALKS. Move around the space at different rhythms.
- Use different parts of the body as LEAD POINTS (little finger of one hand, forehead, pelvis, left knee, and so on).
- Stop. Breathe deeply and easily. Now walk more rapidly/then in slow motion.
- Try walking up on tiptoes, knees apart, pelvis lowered, backwards, and so on.

ALL THE TIME—ONCE YOU START MOVING—BE MAKING SOUNDS.

Make the sound of the movement. Using different vowels, sometimes drawn out, sometime explosive. You can’t be wrong. Just go into it and see where it takes you.

THEN: Stop, stand straight, feet somewhat apart, rib cage lifted, head up, and recite some lines of poetry. See what happens. Enjoy it!
NOTE:

It is very important to realize that when you perform you need to be on a solid base. All expressiveness comes from this.

If the base is your feet make sure you have good supportive shoes on. Stand always with your feet somewhat apart. Be ready to lift from the feet or push down on them.

You are not encouraged to use big gestures with your hands and arms, but it is important that you are building energy and the release of emotional qualities from the base up.

If you are not standing for some reason, you still can identify your physical base and work from there.
Vocal Preparations: *Let it Sing!*

Preparation of the voice for the work of reading or reciting poetry is very important. You are working with words. The words need to reach the audience carrying all the force and shadings that the poem requires. The recitation of poetry is one of the oldest human activities extending back tens of thousands of years. You can be sure that all that time the poets, bards, storytellers, shamans all took care to both be able to grip an audience and to be able to sustain their voices over a long time.

How do we work on that?

If you are in a choir or music group of some sort you know that you warm up before a rehearsal or performance. You develop a way to warm up and always use it whether you are about to rehearse or perform.

This can be very simple: a low hum using random sounds or your favorite song. Always start with the low hum. You can do this in the car, on the bus, in the hallway, just off stage, wherever you are. Raise the hum up into the head and let it drop down as far into the chest as you can easily manage with no forcing.

Then, move on to something more related to speech. Use the vowel sounds - A E I O U. Place those sounds in the mouth and go through them. As you do this, exaggerate the position of the lips and tongue for maximum effect. Go ahead, try it. See?

AAAAAA  EEEEEEE IIIIIIII OOOOOOO UUUUUUUUUU!

Simple and very effective.

You are after expanding and protecting your voice, certainly, but even more important you are preparing to allow the poem to be heard - fully and beautifully. In presenting a poem you are right in the middle of the beautiful. If you were a musician you would want to be sure your instrument was fully tuned and that you were playing it with all the right fingering, breath control, and the like. It’s the same here!
Be sure you are pronouncing every word of the poem with clarity and fullness.

You will not be *singing* the poem, but *ALMOST!* You are lifting your voice, the words, the meaning of the poem, the spirit and mood of it. That’s a lot like singing it.

(Don’t tell.)
Performance: *Make A Gift of It!*

At the time of a performance allow yourself to realize that you are making a gift of beauty to the people present. You are handing something over to them no strings attached. That awareness gives you a sort of freedom that others will see and appreciate. You are doing something they are not doing. They look to you for your being an artist. They want this from you. They wish you well in doing it.

Making a gift of your work doesn’t just happen. You have to rehearse it. Improve on your capacity to become more and more generous, more alive, more open to your audience.

**On the day of a performance:**

Be rested.

Eat well the day before. Eat something the day of, but nothing heavy.

Drink plenty of water.

Be careful with caffeine and sugar.

Do whatever you usually do to make you feel your best.

Wear comfortable clothes and shoes. No busy patterns up around your upper body and face. Keep your hair simple. We need the face and eyes.

Take on nothing new that day: don’t get a new pet, fall in love, buy a pickup truck.

That morning get some exercise. Take a walk, a swim, whatever gets the systems going.

Warm up vocally, as often as you can.

Just before splash some water on your face, brush your teeth and tongue,
rinse the mouth with a good mouthwash (Cepacol is excellent). If your lips are dry use Chapstick. (Looks like you might want to make a little carry-case part of your performance gear).

Before you go on shake your hands out and stretch a bit.

Go to your place confidently. Don’t re-arrange or touch anything.

Find your audience with your eyes. Look at them.

Remember: Feet apart, head up, breath with the diaphragm.

As you begin, look out just above your audience to the very back row and MAKE A GIFT OF THE POETRY to a stranger whose face you like back there!

When you are finished:

Allow the last word of the poem to hold in the air for a count of 5.

Step back one small step.

Look at the entire audience once more.

Be grateful and happy – it shows.

Walk off confidently (know your way off).

REWARD YOURSELF IN SOME WAY!

Be sure to thank the organizers or anyone who has assisted you in any way.
**Reviewing Your Performance: *Every Hair Standing On End!***

You should always build in a little time before the sun sets on a performance, or your head hits the pillow, to go over how you feel you did.

Make this a formal “sit-down.” Give yourself fifteen minutes.

Go over things concretely: Preparation/ Performance/ Audience response/ Things to strengthen for next time.

Make a few notes.

Did you discover anything new?

If you have an advisor, find a moment to go over this with your advisor at some point.
Working with others:  *One for all! All for one!*

You don’t have to work in isolation. Learn (it takes practice and generosity) to work with others. Learn how to let them help you. Learn how to help them.

You can at least have a partner who helps you with memorization so that you can lift off the paper as soon as possible. Do the same for that person.

Sit in the back of the room (have someone do that for you, too). Can you hear? Is the ENERGY, the intention of the poem, reaching you there? Are all of the words clear, well emphasized.


Be a colleague, in other words.
Performing in the Community: *Spreading the Riches!*

Poetry is a wonderful gift into the life of a community. Sharing your work as often as you can in community settings strengthens both the community and your work as a performer.

Where can this happen?

- Other classes in your school whose teachers would welcome a visit.
- The local Library – they will help set something up.
- Rest homes and retirement villages.
- Local churches, as part of a service or special event.
- A coffee shop.
- A special family event.
- Surprise a friend!

You see what I mean. Give it a try.
Keeping A Diary: Where to? What Next?

It becomes very helpful as you work on this to keep a diary, journal, or notebook.

Just get one of those little ones so that you don’t have empty pages. You can always buy another one when the first one fills up.

Write down the date and time you work as a heading.

Describe what you did.

What did you discover this time?

What do you need to do some research on?

You can also keep some pages for your creative work as someone who both studies and performs poems (maybe even writes some poetry at some point).

Those are pages just for words, images, overheard ideas, poems you love, quotes, clippings, audience comments. All this is your own way of building up your work as a student (and lover) of poetry.

Don’t let one more day go by without your little spiral notebook!