



70 TIPS FOR PERFORMING YOUR POETRY

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PERFORMANCE POETRY TIPS

1. **Know your material but don't rely on your memory.** At a spoken word night or open mic night it is acceptable to have a copy of your work nearby to read from. This is not to say you should look only at the pages in front of you rather than at the audience, but having the work to hand means you can refer to it as needed. Although it may be tempting to memorize your work completely, under the pressure of performance you might struggle to remember the next line. With this in mind keep a printed copy of your poem with you on stage and ensure it is printed in large font as the lighting at such events is not always strong or well-positioned.
2. **Check in with the event host.** This will sound basic but it is something people can fail to do, and then they sit in the audience stressing over whether the host will remember to put them in the line-up. When you arrive at an event, check-in with the host – even if it's just to thank them for putting on the event or selecting you as a performer. Most event hosts will want to know when the speakers arrive and it will also give the host a chance to offer any logistical advice about the stage, mic levels or mic height.
3. **Turning points.** Poems often move us from one emotional space to another, and when you perform it's important to be aware of where the turning point sits in your poem or poems. You may want to perform a line slower so that the audience takes it in, or give the line more emphasis through intonation. This will make the turning point stand out more to an audience that are likely to be hearing your work for the first time.
4. **Get up close and personal with the microphone.** Make sure you're standing close enough to the microphone that your voice is amplified. This might seem obvious but you would be amazed by the number of people who get scared about standing too close to the mic as soon as they're called up to perform. The result is, the people at the back miss out on hearing the performance. Stand close to the microphone. Speak into it. Test the sound levels before you begin the performance with a sentence of introduction. But...
5. **Keep your introduction short and succinct.** If you offer the room a lengthy introduction before you begin your work then they may switch off when you

actually read the poems themselves. Although it's tempting to tell people the backstory in case they don't understand the work, it's better to let your work speak for itself and let the listener bring something to it for themselves.

6. **Warm-up your voice.** In episode two of the [Poetrygram podcast](#) which is themed around performance poetry, actress Alexis Strum suggested warming up your voice with the following tongue-twister before you go on stage: *She stood upon the balustraded balcony, inexplicably mimicking him hiccuping, whilst amicably welcoming him in.*
7. **Be conscious of rhythm and line breaks.** Sometimes at spoken word nights poets use a steady rhythm to remember their lines but if you're not careful, the listener might end up paying more attention to the rhythm than to your words. Be sure to disrupt the rhythm now and then, to surprise the listener and keep them engaged in your performance.
8. **Hold your space.** Some poets pace up and down the stage as they perform. This can prove quite distracting so, again to ensure the readers are focused on your work, choose a spot on the stage and plant yourself in that place to read your poem. This might not work for every poem but more often than not it makes for a more compelling and more confident performance.
9. **Breathe deeply and make eye contact.** Reading poetry can be an unnerving experience. The work is often personal and it's easy to feel exposed and vulnerable in the spotlight. When you are up there, take a deep breath and remember that you put words on the page because you had something you felt the urge to share. Make eye contact with the audience and trust them to recognise your vulnerability as strength.
10. **Signal the end of each poem.** In performance situations, the audience can get a little bit awkward about when they should applaud. You can avoid any uncomfortable silences or half-claps by saying a simple 'thank you' after each poem. This signals to those watching that it's time acknowledge your performance.

For more tips on performing your poetry, listen to episode two of [The Poetrygram](#) podcast.

