

# SLAMMED!

Poets of the spoken word share craft techniques that work for all genres.

By Hillary Casavant

**T**he energy is volatile. Tension pulses through the theater, sharp and electric. Head bent, breathing deeply, Las Vegas poet Vogue Robinson stands before the microphone. She glances once at her hand, where she has written the names of five women, one for each finger. She runs the poem through her mind a final time before, with a long inhale, she raises her head and speaks.

At a slam poetry event, writers such as Robinson have only minutes to pour out their souls onstage. They are the firsthand witnesses to their communities, exposing the raw, unspoken truths of culture and personal life. But they have to combine those insights with time limits and performance quality.

"The poem is me finding a place to contain my energy," Robinson says. "Wherever you're from, it's about learning how to channel whatever happens to you into something that's positive, that's beautiful."

Slam poetry includes a spectrum of genres, evoking elements of storytelling, personal memoir, journalism, performance and music. The poets infuse their work with wordplay, marrying syllables and sentences like the notes of an opera. The musicality echoes the precise movement and gestures that the poets incorporate into their performances.

The phenomenon has gained steady momentum since the 1980s, when Chicago poet Marc Kelly Smith founded the movement. He envisioned an art form that would unite writers of all races, backgrounds, cultures and ideas through the common love of spoken word. Almost 30 years later, slam is a global movement. From Cleveland, Ohio, to Heidelberg, Germany, slam poets are dismantling conventional approaches to how, where and why a poem should be heard. And they offer a model of both discipline and adaptability from which all writers can learn.

Photo of Tonya Ingram by Marshall Goff



## Applaud the poet

For the 70 teams of poets who competed in the National Poetry Slam last August in Boston, the thrill of performance is fundamental. Rudy “Rudacious” Cabrera of Lizard Lounge Poetry Jam in Boston says that the adrenaline helps fuel his work.

“When you’re up there and you start your first word, it’s like running as fast as you can, and you keep telling yourself, ‘Don’t fall,’” he says.

At the National Poetry Slam, poets memorize and perform several solo and group poems. Five audience members, randomly selected at the start of each

going to remember who won bouts,” he says. “You’re not going to remember who had the best scores. You’re going to remember the poems that got a hold of you, and you’re going to remember those things that changed your life.”

## From page to stage

Basilo, who is also executive director of Chicago Slam Works, believes that the most powerful poems are “personal and specific,” infusing elements of the macro world with micro experiences.

Competing with the Las Vegas Battle

Born Slam for the first time this year, Robinson applies this perspective in her own work. The poet finds inspiration from her experiences and conversations, then writes to discover solutions. After her friend became pregnant while pursuing a master’s degree, Robinson explored the definition of motherhood and the term “baby mama” through poetry. Robinson uses the poem to address the degradation of unwed mothers in her community.

A key component of Robinson’s writing process is observation, both physical and emotional.

“It’s telling the truth,” she says. “It’s making observations and getting to the details. It’s not ‘the table is round.’ It’s the little chips in the corners. Somebody decided to put brick right here. What is it made of? And how they laid each brick. How much of the mortar is in between? What’s in the in-between?”

Alexander Dang of Oregon’s Portland Poetry Slam also wrote a poem based on his personal observations. As the poem “What Kind of Asian Are You?” progresses, his humorous pop culture references give way to the dark origins of racial slurs.

“I wanted to demonstrate the frustration I felt growing up as an Asian American, only to realize what I am will ultimately always be *my story*,” he says. “That I’m the one to define my actions and my character.”

Dang’s writing process often begins with a lightning burst of inspiration.

“Once I have an idea, I’ll run with it in kind of a manic, one shot, go for it, see-how-far-it-will-go writing sprint,” Dang says.

That type of stream-of-consciousness is not unfamiliar to any kind of writer, and Basilo encourages both the “sprinting” and free writing in his workshops and classes.

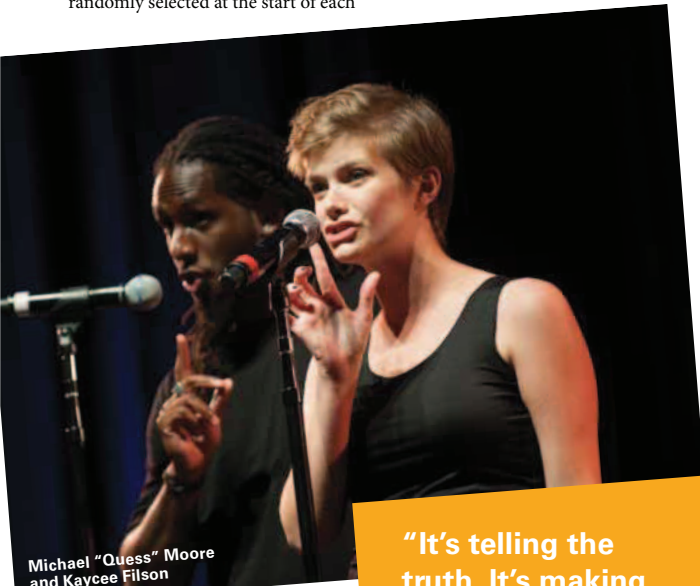
“Write for 20 minutes,” he suggests. “Write for the whole 20. Because at minute 12, you’re going to start the poem. Even though you’ve written a page already, the real poem doesn’t start until you catch the flow.”

**“It’s telling the truth. It’s making observations and getting to the details. It’s not ‘the table is round.’ It’s the little chips in the corners.”**

slam, determine scores, and the team with the most points moves on to the next round.

But scores aren’t everything. Many poets honor the old slam adage, “The points aren’t the point; the point is the poetry.” J.W. Basilo, a Chicago-based finalist in both the National Poetry Slam and the Individual World Poetry Slam, has been through enough competitions to recognize the truth behind this mantra.

“At the end of the week, you’re not



Michael “Quess” Moore and Kaycee Filson

Marshall Goff



Salt City Slam

Vasant Marur





Brenna Twohy and Alexander Dang (above), Rudy "Rudacious" Cabrera (inset)

After the initial first draft, Basilo puts his poems through a grueling editing process. Revising and reading his work aloud helps him memorize and pinpoint the rhythm of the words.

"I like to know how it's going to feel in my mouth," says Basilo. "A lot of times I write things that are really good looking on the page, but there's no music to what I'm saying."

Basilo may go through five or six drafts before the words are rhythmically ready to perform. But the process doesn't stop there. Performance has taught him to economize, a skill he applies across all genres to condense his phrasing and "focus on the depth of each word."

## The character veil

Other writers create poems from the perspective of a character or object. Jesse Parent, who has competed with Utah's Salt City Slam since 2007, is frequently inspired by Biblical stories and fairytales.

One poem examines why Rumpelstiltskin would want to steal a child. In another, Parent speaks from the perspective of the Biblical character Lazarus. The poem explores Judaic beliefs of the afterlife and Lazarus's possible resentment after coming back from the grave. Parent's unique perspectives earned him a second-place finish at the Individual World Poetry Slam in both 2010 and 2011.

Parent began his career as an improvisational comedian before taking the leap to slam poetry. His narrative style still implements the "patterned structures and theatricality of improv," he says, allowing him to "wear a character for a little while" like a mask or a costume. Parent often begins the writing process with a one-dimensional character from history or folklore and then uses improvisational techniques to tease out a more complex narrative. He asks of his characters, "If this is true, what else is true? And what would I do? And what do I think is true about this?"

This process inspired a poem from the perspective of Judas, the betrayer of Jesus in Biblical tradition. The poem begins with the line, "It is a different type of martyrdom to sacrifice your name," speculating that Judas was a "scapegoat" for humanity.

Although rooted in his personal faith, Parent questions the complex dynamics of religion "to tell an uncomfortable truth" through poetry.

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## Healing with words

For some writers, the fear of personal exposure restricts their ability to write with full honesty. Yet slam poets thrive on audience response and use the presence of strangers to bolster their work. Basilo's one-man show helped him to process his past, and he says exposure to the audience was key to personal development.

"It's part of owning it," he says. "Owning ourselves is the most important thing we can do as human beings. And telling our truths and telling our stories onstage are the best ways to do that."

The intensity of these stories can unleash unexpected emotions. Basilo experienced this the first time he performed his Pushcart Prize-nominated poem "Anointing the Hand" after his friend's death. The poem's boxing imagery contrasts the loss of control he felt during that time.

"When you're writing, there is a cer-

tain level of divorce from [the emotions] because you're controlling the memory, you're controlling the action," he says. "But once you're performing it, you hear those words coming out of your mouth, and your energy's already up, and your adrenaline's already up, sometimes you can just get ambushed."

Jasmine "Jaz" Sufi, who competed with Pierced Ear Poetry Slam from Stockton, Calif., recognizes the fine line poets walk between healing and "re-traumatizing" through the spoken word. "Poetry can put you in the mind frame to change your own life," she says, but the poet must "do the work" to implement those changes.

Her poem exploring her history of self-harm has also opened the doors of conversation with the audience. Following one slam, a woman who had attended the week before with her stepdaughter approached Sufi. The woman said that after hearing Sufi's poem, her stepdaughter opened up about her own problem with cutting.

"That is when I realized this isn't just writing," Sufi says. "This actually can help people."

The power of spoken word moves beyond the audience, too. Jessica Helen Lopez, a poet for ABQ Slams in Albuquerque, N.M., first discovered slam as a single mother and waitress. Performing slam poetry empowered her to become an activist and teacher, and allowed her to address the domestic violence of her childhood.

"It's there where I can find my voice, when I didn't have a voice as a child," she says. "I was silenced and victimized at the time. Here is where I can survive."

Lopez says slam poetry has become a "grass roots movement" for writers, a genre that invites all genders, all races and all identities to open their mouths and speak. The results are soul shaking, a transformation that happens "when poetry finds you and you find poetry." **W**

Hillary Casavant is an editorial assistant at *The Writer* in Boston.

# From the mouths of poets

The elements of slam poetry apply across all genres. Use these ideas from seven poets in your own writing.

- **"Write something genuine."**  
— Alexander Dang, Portland Poetry Slam, Portland, Ore.
- **Craft stories that are "personal and specific."**  
— J.W. Basilo, Chicago Slam Works, Chicago
- **Share what "makes you the most uncomfortable."**  
— Vogue Robinson, Battle Born Slam, Las Vegas
- **Use poetry for "the process of growth," to discover different parts of yourself.**  
— Rudy "Rudacious" Cabrera, Lizard Lounge Poetry Jam, Boston
- **Explore a different persona. Ask, "If this is true, what else is true?"**  
— Jesse Parent, Salt City Slam, Salt Lake City
- **Create a poem that works "on page and onstage."**  
— Jasmine "Jaz" Sufi, Pierced Ear Poetry Slam, Stockton, Calif.
- **Write your story and "claim it. Because it's yours and it belongs to you."**  
— Jessica Helen Lopez, ABQ Slams, Albuquerque, N.M.