

PART ONE

LESSON 3: AN INTRODUCTION TO SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Joe Davis writes and performs Spoken Word Poetry (SWP). Most students already know about and listen to SWP. In this introduction they will discuss prior knowledge, view performances, and identify and summarize elements of SWP.

YOUR WILL NEED:

- Smart Board or large chart paper and markers
- At least two spoken word videos. Choose from the list below or your own favorites. Be sure to include one by WITNESS Guest Artist, Joe Davis.
- Copies of the student worksheet **Definitions of Spoken Word Poetry** (can be printed and cut into half-sheets), included with this lesson
- For Optional Activity: Copies of the student article **A Brief History of Spoken Word Poetry** included with this lesson

THE ELEMENTS OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

STEP 1: Write **Spoken Word Poetry** on the board. Ask students what they know about SWP. Write their responses on the board and **save them for later additions**. Who are some of the SWP performers they listen to?

STEP 2: Select two SWP videos from the list below. Choose one by WITNESS guest artist Joe Davis. As a second video to watch, consider “Unforgettable.” It features both gender and cultural diversity and is energizing to watch.

Watch the videos one at a time and use the process below to respond.

- Before viewing, write this question on the board or chart.

What did you notice, see, and hear in this performance?

- Students will think about this question and **pay attention to details** as they watch and listen. They can jot down responses to remember them for later discussion.

STEP 3: Take student responses and comments, and summarize on the board/chart. When they run out of responses, add a second question. This guides students to interpret or speculate about the intentions of the artist(s).

What do you think the poet/performer(s) want you to know, feel, understand? What’s the message?

- Watch the video again, then take responses for this question and summarize comments in writing.
- Repeat **STEPS 2 & 3** for the second selected performance.

STEP 4: Review student responses to both questions. Ask for any additions to the collective list.

STEP 5: Provide students copies of the blank **Definitions of Spoken Word Poetry** worksheet (can be printed and cut into half-sheets) included with this lesson. Students can work with partners or in small groups to pool their thoughts ideas and thoughts, then write a definition of Spoken Word Poetry in their own words.



Amanda Gorman, American Poet Laureate
<https://www.iteach.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/amanda-gorman.jpg>

MINNESOTA STANDARDS CONNECTIONS...

Music: Artistic Processes
(Respond or Critique)

Standard 1: Respond to or critique a variety of creations and performances using artistic foundations.

English Language Arts:
READING:

Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and make logical inferences from it.

WRITING:

Standard 8: Gather relevant information from multiple...sources and integrate the information...

STEP 6: Reconvene as a large group. Ask volunteers to read their definitions **out loud**. Post their responses in a visible place. Compare their definitions with the **ELEMENTS OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY** listed below.

OPTIONAL ACTIVITY FOR CLASS OR HOMEWORK:

Read and discuss the additional information in the student article **A Brief History of Spoken Word Poetry**, included in this lesson plan.

SUGGESTED VIDEOS PERFORMANCES OF SPOKEN WORD

Poetry for Viewing/Listening:

Listen to as many as you have time for, but please select one by Joe Davis. All videos are located via the links below, as well as in the online WITNESS Classroom Resource Hub.

JOE DAVIS:

- “The King Lives” at <https://youtu.be/En0179L9QOU>
- “Love Always” at <https://youtu.be/6VILzN6nYFQ>
- “Beautiful Lie Ugly Truth” at: <https://youtu.be/wDFseDzd63s> is a video against the sale of Menthol cigarettes. There are many teenage speakers along with Joe in the video.

PAGES MATAM, ELIZABETH ACEVEDO & G. YAMAZAWA:

- “Unforgettable” by a group of three poets. An immensely powerful group performance. <https://youtu.be/ivNWzr-Zue8>

AMANDA GORMAN:

- “Earthrise” performed at the Los Angeles Climate Reality Leadership Corps Training in August 2018 by 20-year-old Gorman: <https://youtu.be/xwOvBv8RLmo>
- “The Hill We Climb” performed at the January 2020 Inauguration of President Joe Biden: <https://youtu.be/LZ055illiN4>

FOR YOUNGER STUDENTS

- Watch excerpts from the videos and simplify the conversation about the elements of spoken word.
- Create a class definition of SWP.
- Locate a copy of the book with CD “Hip Hop Speaks” by Nikki Giovanni. It is available at both Minneapolis and St. Paul Public Libraries, but look in your school library too. The poems and **some** tracks on the CD provide useful information and the sound of Spoken Word.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS CONNECTIONS

If you are a Language Arts teacher, help students identify the literary devices used in SWP that are part of the Language Arts curriculum for their grade level. If you are not, connect with the Language Arts teachers in your school for possible Interdisciplinary curriculum activities and collaboration.

ELEMENTS OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

- Poetry performed for an audience.
- Spoken/recited out loud.
- Sometimes includes instruments with the voices.
- Focuses on the sound of the speaker’s voice; strong, with “attitude.”
- Emphasis on important words.
- The quality of the speaker’s voice is emphasized. Speakers interpret the text using vocal characteristics such as word play, rhythm, rhymes, tempo, repetition, dynamics, and **intonation** (the rise and fall of the speaker’s voice); All relate to the aesthetics of sound.
- Speakers also connect with the audience physically through movement, energetic voices, and eye contact. They visually aim their performance towards the audience.
- Topics are often connected (or refer) to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community.
- SWP can include the use of instruments and instrumental or vocal music that accompany and/or highlight the words.
- The speaker is usually the author (but there are exceptions).

TYPICAL LITERARY DEVICES USED BY SPOKEN WORD POETS:

- Repetition
- Rhyme
- Alliteration
- Metaphor
- Assonance
- Simile
- Metaphor
- Onomatopoeia
- Hyperbole
- Personification

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

Before human beings wrote stories, they spoke them out loud.

In the ancient world, every culture had people who were **word keepers**. They memorized and spoke aloud the stories, history, songs, and essential information about the people.

In the 8th century B.C.E. the Greek poet and bard, **Homer**, created two epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. **Bards** memorized the poems and spoke them aloud to entertain and inform the people.

Griots (gree-o) passed on the spoken word traditions in various African countries. Griots were historians, praise singers, and storytellers. Spoken word was, and still is, how a griot tells the news, advises people, relays essential information, and creates the new, and remembers the old stories and poems of a community.

In North America, Native American community **elders** (of all genders) were highly regarded leaders. Their role was to keep the traditions and origin stories of the people.

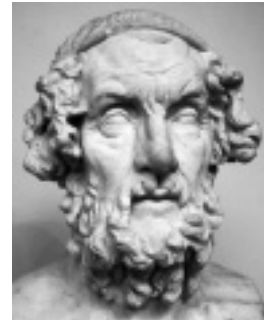
In Europe, **troubadours** wandered between the villages and the castles in the Middle Ages. They brought stories and songs to life for the people as they traveled.

Spoken word traditions changed when Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 15th Century. But they never disappeared.

Spoken word drew from the rich African American culture of words and music in the United States. Langston Hughes and other poets of the Harlem Renaissance (1920s & 30s) wove the sounds and feelings of spirituals, blues, and jazz throughout their works. Mid-century poets of the Beat Generation drew inspiration from Hughes and others when they recited their poems out loud.

African American preachers speak to their congregations using rich words with musical cadences. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a minister and leader of the 20th century Civil Rights Movement, delivered words that sounded like poetry. Two of his memorable speeches are “I Have a Dream” (Washington, D.C., 1963) and “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968. This was the day before his assassination). Both talks are rich with emotion and the resonance of spoken word.

Spoken Word Poetry flourished in the late 20th century. The Beat Poets, Black Arts Movements, Hip-Hop, and Rap made it more popular. Competitions called poetry slams brought even more attention to the art form. Now, in the 21st century, spoken word is an important art form with significant messages for society.



HOMER



GRIOTS AND GRIOTTES



TROUBADORS



DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

DEFINITIONS OF SPOKEN WORD POETRY

A Definition of Spoken Word Poetry in our own words.

Names _____

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