

# Perform a Poem

## Performance tips



### Francesca Beard's performance tips

Hi, my name is Francesca Beard, I'm a performance poet and I'm hoping that some of these tips on performing poetry will be helpful to you and your class.

#### WARM UP: GAMES

Call-and-response games and others that focus on teamwork and speaking and listening are a great way to warm up, as they help the class to be a supportive audience when it comes to the performances.

These games play with rhythm, one of the most important ingredients in a poem. I ask pupils to stand or sit in a circle to do them.

##### Game 1

The group creates a simple four bar beat (eg clap clap stamp stamp.) Going round the group, each person inserts their name into the beat.

##### Game 2

Clap, click or stamp out a simple rhythm – the group repeats it back. Move around the circle, each person choosing their own rhythm which is then repeated back to them by the whole class.

##### Game 3

Everyone in the group memorises a simple line from the poem they want to perform. They call it out to the group and the group 'sings' it back, paying particular attention to the rhythm, mood and musicality of the line.

#### D.I.Y: MODELLING

Choose or write a poem yourself and perform it to camera so that the children can see your choices and how you do it. Maybe you get to do stuff like this with them all the time, but if not, they'll relish the chance to see this side of you and it might inspire some unlikely candidates to take part.

Talk them through your process, acknowledging that everyone does it differently. If you find it a little bit scary or need several 'takes' to get the performance right, all the better!

#### ONCE MORE WITH FEELING: REHEARSAL

Once you've established a positive atmosphere of trust, ask for a volunteer or three to begin the rehearsal process. As you're helping them rehearse, the trick is to find a way of being genuinely honest and constructive whilst also being 100% supportive and encouraging.

#### My Most Valuable Tip!

I find that it's not possible to be too positive – performing is a scary thing, even for seasoned professionals. In general, the more confident performers are, the better they will perform, so I try to treat all young poets like potential stars and am generous to a fault.

# Perform a Poem

## Performance tips

With your director's hat on, ask your volunteer(s) to run through certain parts of the poem a couple more times, encouraging them to pay attention to:

*voice projection*: speaking at a good volume so everyone can hear

*articulation*: speaking clearly so all words can be understood

*timing and rhythm*: emphasising the rhythm of the lines, respecting punctuation, not reading too quickly

*mood*: varying tone of voice, volume etc to suit happy / sad bits of a poem

*facial expression*: using expressions to suit different parts of the poem

*gesture*: emphasising or echoing the meaning of the poem with hand gestures

Ask the group to think about what the sound and the sense of the poem are doing in certain lines and talk together about how best to get that across with the performance.

### **Trouble-shooting in rehearsal**

Common issues to work on are inaudibility, fidgeting, holding the paper in front of the face, looking downwards and giggling. Classmates are likely to point out these problems so be ready to come up with solutions.

### **To encourage children to speak louder**

As a group, ask them to feel the difference between speaking from their throat (squeaky and constricted) and speaking from their

chest/stomach (deeper and more powerful). To practise speaking from the stomach, I ask children to come up with their favourite martial arts move and accompany it with an explosive HUH! (It's best if this is done in a circle, ie no one facing anyone else!)

In performance, remind them to focus on a spot on a wall opposite and 'throw' their voice to that point. This also helps with eye-line, so choose a spot that helps them to look through the camera rather than at it.

### **To encourage children not to fidget**

Fidgeting usually goes away fast if you film some practise runs of the performance. This is a good idea anyway as it lets the performers get accustomed to the camera.

Or you could harness that nervous energy by developing the unconscious movement into a simple choreographed gesture that they can repeat. This does not have to be related to the action but can be a way of marking the rhythm. This is a trick that many professional performers use!

### **To encourage children not to hold the paper in front of the face**

If pupils can memorise their poems, their performances will be more effective – partly because they can look straight at the camera (and therefore the viewer) and partly because their hands will be free for any gestures they might like to make.

Memorising simple poems will also be easier for younger pupils or those who are not yet fluent readers.

If pupils find it difficult to memorise their poems, especially if they are longer or more

# Perform a Poem

## Performance tips

complex, some of them will be confident to read from a sheet of paper held below the level of the camera, glancing at it from time to time to remind them of the words.

For other pupils, write the poem in large writing on a big sheet of paper and ask a classmate to hold it up next to the camera, like a homemade autocue.

### To encourage children not to giggle

Get pupils to practise in front of the camera so that the equipment does not make them nervous. Move any classmates who might be the cause of embarrassment or infectious giggles out of eye-line.

Once you have modelled the rigorous nature of the rehearsal process, split pupils up into groups or pairs so that they can help each other practise.

## AND FINALLY... POETRY IN MOTION

Finding entertaining and thought-provoking ways to perform your poem is a vital part of the performance process. Encourage your young poets to play and experiment with the use of movement, gesture and teamwork. Ask them to draw on their knowledge of drama and music – they can also borrow from sport and dance in order to bring their poems to life.

Some of your class might naturally gravitate into pairs or groups, which will provide a dynamic contrast to individual performances.

### RAP stands for Rhythm and Poetry

If there is a strong rhythm and rhyme scheme to the poem, one or more classmates can say certain key words together in the way that rap artists do – this gives a punchy energy to the piece.

Rap artists often collaborate in pairs or a crew. You could ask if any of your pupils are familiar with rapping techniques. Perhaps discuss these techniques in class and encourage rap fans to analyse why they work and where they might be appropriate in this context.

### A few suggestions for team poems

Divide lines or stanzas between two or more performers and have them 'throw' the poem back and forth to each other, like a game of catch.

If the poem has a repeated chorus, pupils could ask another classmate to do it for them or with them. Choreograph actions to suit the sound and sense of the piece.

Get friends to create a cool acapella or body rhythm to accompany the poem – for example, clapping different parts of the body to create interesting tonal rhythms like street musicians do in South America, or cupping the mouth to beat-box.