

# POETRY

# SLAM

N a t i o n a l C h a m p i o n s h i p s

by Gene Hyde

The crowd is yelling maniacally. Out onto the stage, with its line of life-sized, three dimensional models of Edvard Munch's "The Scream," walks a smiling Marc Smith, who beams like a father watching his child succeed beyond all expectations. "What are you screaming about?" Smith mischievously asks, then ironically proclaims to over 500 fans awaiting the finals of the 1994 National Poetry Slam Festival: "Poetry is boring!"

Smith, the originator of poetry slams, is obviously enjoying himself. The crowd, in response to a poem they like, rambunctiously fills the theater with enough noise to drown out a political convention. But their response is not unusual. It's common for those in the audience to scream, yell, laugh, or express themselves in any fashion they choose - poetry slams encourage audience participation; in fact, they thrive on it. If, as Fred Chappell asserts, "The first function of poetry is to entertain," then slams must be working: this crowd is highly entertained.

For the poetry slam community, a group of people who like to mix fun and drama with their love of poetry, the 1994 National Poetry Slam Championships are the equivalent of the final game of the World Series. Slams occur on a regular basis, usually in coffeehouses and bars nationwide. But tonight's finals are being held in downtown Asheville's regal Diana Wortham Theatre, a much more sophisticated venue than those that typically host poetry slams. Allan Wolf, the co-emcee with Smith, captures the attitude of many in this tongue-in-cheek crowd when he walks out on stage, looks around, and remarks, "It almost makes poetry look respectable."

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## Allan Wolf's 15-Step Program for Starting a Poetry Slam in Your Community

compiled by Gene Hyde

1  
Get a real job.

2  
Attend another slam somewhere and see how it works.

3  
Do a little research: call around for advice, contact other slam communities, specifically the people who are running them. Ask questions, find answers.

4  
Subscribe to *SLAM, The International Performance Poetry Newsletter*, the official publication of the poetry slam network (send \$6 to 24 Arlington St., Medford, MA 02155.)

5  
Find a venue of friendly folks who don't mind poets hanging out. Ideally, this place will have good sight line. A stage is always good, as are good acoustics. Think about these things: does it need a PA? where do you get one? does the venue have one? It's nice to have a microphone. If you don't know how to use a mic, learn. Be clear about certain things with the host venue – do they want money for the use of the space? Or will they just sell concessions? Take admission. I ask five bucks per head, and three for the poets, so the poets are actually paying to be the performers.

6  
Get the word out. Cause a buzz. Create a whisper campaign. Alert the media. Advertising is fine, but free publicity is 100 times better. You'll get more mileage out of a story in the press than anything else. Connect it with the fact that your local poetry slam is part of a national movement – local people will be more likely to show up for local events if they're connected to something larger and nationwide.

7  
Have an inaugural slam and make it a big deal. Give it a big name – “the glammerslam,” or something. Make sure it's going to be a good one. You want an audience there, not just a bunch of poets. The poets will always come. If it's not a good show, the audience won't come back.

8  
Make sure you have a lineup of people who are ready to slam. Make sure for your inaugural slam that you have a bunch of poets. That's the big crash. In North Carolina, you shouldn't have a big problem because there's lots of poets. But make sure you personally invite some of them. Make it a community thing.

9  
Gather a posse, or a group of people who will help put the slam on. Find friends who will put up flyers, take the gate, be a scorekeeper or official timer, in exchange for free admission. Find a support group. Don't try to do it all alone.

10  
Bring in feature performers from out of town – that's important. You know that they'll put on a good show. The beauty of the slam is that sometimes you're going to get good poets, sometimes you're not; but if you get someone in who's from outside and known to be good, then you can see how good people *can* be. There's a network of good poets to choose from, and *SLAM*, the newsletter, will connect you with that network.

11  
Leave your audience wanting more. That's real important. Don't allow one person in an open mic portion to monopolize things. Keep it short – adhere to the three-minute rule. If it goes on too long, the audience will get bored. Don't let this happen!

12  
Be inclusive. If there is someone or some faction that is giving people or poets a hard time, invite them to come to the slam – invite their input. If everyone has input, then it works better. Give any and everyone the forum.

13  
Keep it fresh. Try out new things. Try a Christmas slam, a Halloween slam.

14  
Keep a mailing list of poets and participants. Keep it updated and use it.

15  
Then, quit your job. You won't make much money doing this, but you'll have a lot of fun.