

College Slam Survey Results 2009–10

A resource for slam teams new to the dance

During the fall semester of 2009 Jason Meier, 2008–10 ACUI Poetry Slam program team leader and assistant director at the University of Alabama–Birmingham, and ACUI college Poetry Slam founder Robb Thibault, union director at the State University of New York College–Oneonta, administered two surveys aimed at collecting information for first time college poetry slam team coaches and advisors.

Readers be warned: There are no guarantees to any “*slam strategy*.” While the results may show a great deal of inconsistency in the principles and strategies which may be employed, there are some common themes which a first- or second-year team might keep in mind in preparing a team for competition. In the end, as we say it’s just a mock competition; it’s just a slam!

We submit the findings and observations for your consideration and review. In many cases, they will raise more questions than provide answers.

Most crucial things learned from my first slam competition:

- Group pieces are more impressive than individual pieces
- Value of networking
- The range of opinions that can be represented in poetry
- Having a myriad of poems so that you are better prepared for the slam
- The "judging" is a sham
- Audience appeal
- Build relationships by staying up all night during the cipher
- Bad poetry usually wins
- Connect with the audience
- Don't be too competitive
- Value of strategy
- Don't expect the crowd to love your poetry as much as you do
- Know your audience
- Get a good night's sleep
- Organization is crucial to the success of a slam
- Anything can happen
- Organize sooner
- The various ways of writing
- What family is ...
- Knowing the location of the competition in advance is key
- Competition is not always about winning
- Taking the points seriously is an exercise in frustration
- To truly feel the poem you are doing
- Judges are biased and have favoritism

Coaches/Advisors:

Things I would do differently if I coached again ...

- Have more time together as a team, more group critique and weekly writing prompts, and more work toward group pieces.
- Start the practice season with a hard and fast rule about "leave your [crap] at the door." Give 15 minutes at the beginning of practice for people to be late. Don't practice in a space with ANYTHING distracting.
- I would spend more time teambuilding—have practices where all they did was get to know each other, to build team spirit.
- I would make an arbitrary deadline for the pieces to be finished (group pieces I mean; indies are their own problem) and another deadline for them to be memorized and performance ready (probably for the week before the competition, so they could do performance tweaks during the last week and get their repertoire down so that they can keep a poem going if one of them forgets their parts).
- I would limit 2–3 people to a critique of any given poet's poem; having the whole team and coaches critique a poem's writing is both a waste of the team's time and is counterproductive to the poem itself, not to mention unnecessarily stressful and confusing for the poet. Art is fundamentally interpretive, and coaches and teammates should help the poet's writing reflect the poet's message. The aesthetic differences between people tend to take the forefront and the helping of a poet find and hone their own voice tends to be forgotten in large group critique.
- Find ways to make the nonteam members of my performance crew feel more included in the process.
- Make it more competitive as close as possible to the event. Thus, pick six people and take four for the team. Make practices compulsory. Students don't know how competitive it is till they've gone once. Have a least one fun activity planned, required at event.
- Get a little stricter about itineraries, encourage more group work, and bake cookies for them.
- I would try to encourage them from getting intimate with each other. That can be an issue.

How likely would you ... (very unlikely, unlikely, likely, very likely)

Encourage poets must commit all poetry to memory.

80 percent — Very likely

Place the emphasis on solo work rather than group pieces — plan for maybe one group piece per bout.

80 percent — Likely to very likely

Place the emphasis on group pieces rather than solo work — plan for more than two group pieces per bout.

60 percent — Likely

Focus on the content of the poetry and the importance of each word.

80 percent — Likely

Start the bout with the best material you got—open strong!

80 percent — Likely to very likely

Emphasize creating a sense of togetherness- and start by building community, friendship and love.

100 percent — Very likely

Have your team participate in as many opportunities as possible before the tournaments (i.e. slams, readings, open mics, etc).

100 percent — Likely to very likely

When selecting poems to present during a tourney, lean on what the audience wants to hear.

60 percent — Likely to very likely

Focus on the delivery and performance of the poetry. Employ gimmicks and other word play as needed.

80 percent — Unlikely

If you know the "card" of an opposing team is likely to play and you also have that "card," be the first to play

it!

60 percent — Likely

Assess your poets: What do they want to do? What do they feel comfortable performing?

100 percent — Very likely

Use personal and intimate poems during preliminary bouts (lower attendance) and use your "crowd pleasers" to capitalize on the energy of the audience at semis and beyond.

80 percent — Unlikely to very unlikely

Keep all poets involved—including the fifth poet!

80 percent — Likely to very likely

Assess the room size, acoustics, sound equipment, and audience level.

100 percent — Very likely to likely

Organize your game plan and stick to the plan to the end.

60 percent — Unlikely to very unlikely

Be flexible and willing to adjust your game plan at any time.

100 percent — Likely to very likely

Prior to the start of the tourney, make charts for each bout for both a hot room and a cold room.

60 percent — Very unlikely to unlikely

Build trust with your team so that a coach can focus on the competition, bout order, and selection of poems to be delivered and the poets can just focus on performing.

100 percent — Very likely to likely

Help poets "tell their story."

100 percent — Likely to very likely

Explore and emphasize what is our most unique work—what will be remembered?

80 percent — Likely to very likely

At tournament time, poets should never exceed the 3.09 time limit. Editing poems to stay within time is a priority.

100 percent — Very likely to likely

How are poems selected to be performed during bouts? What is your preferred game plan? How effective are these strategies? (very ineffective, ineffective, unsure effective, very effective)

Each poet has an arsenal of perfected poems. We go in with poems from all over the spectrum. We push our artists to try all different subject matters, tone, genres. We make our poets write together. Once we go over who we are competing against, we assess the audience and the judges, we can begin to construct our game plan. We also assess the poets ie. who can handle a death card, who can be the anchor, which team piece showcases what voices, who has the stronger poem for this slot. People don't realize how much goes into a slam but you really need to be focused, organized and aware

100 percent effective to very effective

Start strong but accessible, put another strong but perhaps more challenging or darker poem in the 2 slot, 3 is the change-up (funny, strange, otherwise different), and slot 4 is for kicking the audience's ass in a way that it has not been kicked hard enough yet

80 percent effective

Make a general plan with different contingencies.

60 percent effective to very effective

Generally, try to contrast as strongly with the poem before you, while playing to the audiences and judges bias. If the piece before is politics, do romance. If the piece before is romance, do comedy. If the piece before is comedy, do tragedy. If the piece before you is quiet, be loud. If the poem before you is epic big, do a story-telling poem; family and friends work well. Anything to make it apples and oranges, to keep it fresh and stand out from what came before.

40 percent effective

We usually have a good idea of what we're going to do before we walk in the room. Sometimes we won't have a concrete order at first; this is determined by our draw and what we think the room is like. On rarer occasions, like if we can tell we need to pull a high score to advance, we'll ask a poet to "burn" a stronger piece earlier than planned.

100 percent effective to very effective

The ones that are practiced the most and memorized are the ones performed during bouts.

100 percent effective to very effective

Write out many different set lists based on the poems you have so you are familiar with all the contingencies. Then, when you need to make a snap-decision during the poetry slam, you will be more prepared to do so, and have already pre-conceived what a good move will be..

60 percent effective to very effective

Before the bout, decide what poem each person is most interested in doing, and what their plan b is. Flow charts for each possible draw are useful.

60 percent effective to very effective

Typical outline: Ace (something high energy with neutral content) Solid (something a little more politically charged) Creeper (the weakest poem...put here because of score creep) Anchor (your strongest poem)

60 percent Unsure; 20 percent Effective; 20 percent Very ineffective

I like to come out funny if I've got a truly gifted 'funny' poem on my bench. I tend to use my best, most powerful piece in the 2 slot. I don't like to wait for score-creep, I like to create it. Let my #1 gun kill it in the two slot and begin the score jump. I leave highly poetic stuff for later slots to allow an audience to acclimate itself to more dense material. My anchor is almost always the same person, it's always the person who I have never seen make a mistake. The person who is the memorization savant. The last thing you want is to put a jittery freshman in the last slot and have them blow a slam because of memorization. The anchor must be steady and gifted.

60 percent Ineffective; 40 percent Effective

All Participants were asked "What are 3 qualities of a successful multi-voice or team piece?"

- Having the right mix. Not all poets should be on stage together. Styles and voices sometimes do not blend right.
- The piece is reflective of a family dynamic, not just performers spitting together.
- Purpose. Why are you writing this piece? Because the idea is fly. Or because you have a story to tell? If it's not the latter, you have a problem.
- It needs to be done as a group piece and not a solo piece-can't be done in one voice!
- Interaction on stage (blocking patterns, parts said in unison, etc)
- It can't be corny/Not too gimmicky.
- The poem should necessitate multiple voices (multiple characters, multiple viewpoints, etc.)
- Different voices/parts must fit them/ precision.
- Being fresh. This applies to any poem but more so in team joints. Be sure that you're not just relying on the 'gimmick' of dual voices to beat a dead horse. Try new things, be innovative.
- It should not sacrifice depth for multiple voices.
- A distinct reason why this is being done with more than one person.
- Gimmicks– The judges are stupid, and they will never pay as much attention to writing as to back flips, funny voices, or other theatrics.
- Practice, practice, practice./Hand motions should be perfect. Make sure every movement is planned and purposeful.
- The poets onstage should sound different from each other in an interesting and complementary way.
- Synchronicity. The pieces must be practice three times more than indie pieces. Small missteps in timing can make a team piece feel disjointed and unprofessional.
- The piece NEEDS the multi-voice dynamic, not just a body present.
- Narrative Arc– it gives unity to the piece, and highlights the *epic-ness* you're already putting on stage by having more than one poet there.

All Coaches/Advisors were asked “What recommendations do you have on how to keep a poetry slam team focused?”

- Good leadership! If you’ve got a young adult like myself leading the program they’ll look up to you and they’ll listen to you. They’ll jump when you say jump, cus they respect your abilities and your know-how.
- THEY HAVE ONE JOB TO DO! if they are not personally focused you cant bring them together.
- Take a team retreat the week before. Students tend to be stressed with classes and work so they need a specific amount of time where they breathe, eat and drink poetry. Also, this helps build a team culture (which is one of the most crucial components of a successful slam team).
- Focus exercises with warm ups. games like zip-zap-zop, trying to hold an arm out completely still, etc.
- Keep it fun and focused on the goal of telling stories effectively and passionately.
- It's all about team unity. You have to rehearse together and try to minimize infighting. If all your team can do is argue and get into power struggles, you're getting nowhere. If you're in a group of people who are or become friends, you'll avoid confrontation and have a stronger focus.
- Rituals, before and after every bout, every practice. Get their heads in the game before the work starts, and they'll hit the ground running.
- Have a set practice schedule.
- We had a problem with that on our team, and I'd have to say that I needed to have more competitions to get on the team. This can only learn that in hindsight.
- Listen to them. Take interest in their poems. If they don't already believe in their poems and want to perform them to their fullest in front of people, they probably aren't ready.
- By being there for your team but still authoritative. Show them respect and they will show you respect. Help them with whatever they need. Be more than just a coach; be a friend.

All Coaches/Advisors were asked “Please describe how practices or rehearsals operate. How often and how long...?”

- During the fall its twice a week for 2-3 hours. During the spring 3-4 times a week for the same. We also schedule and prospective team pieces into separate rehearsals for only those poets, with one of my two assistants.
- Two to three times a week, about 2 hours.
- It depends. if everyone’s head is there then as long as we have to go. Usually 3-5 hour sessions. 15 minute breaks every 1.5 hours. You gotta live and breathe the same air.
- Regularly, we meet 1-2 times a week. In these meetings, we engage in writing activities, share new poetry, and work on collaborations. A month before the competition, we start Hell Month. We double up on practice. We practice everyday the week before and the week of the competition. Three weeks before
- the competition, every poet needs at least 4 solos. And all groups pieces must be finished (at least 4 as a team). When poems are complete, we work strictly on performance. We do crazy activities: performing poems without speaking, with accents, in slow motion, upside down, with taunting from mock audience, etc. We also increase our number of open mics so that we can gauge how audience respond to certain poems.
- We practice for two hours at least three times a week. start with warm ups and focus exercises, then run poems into the ground. The whole team does both performance and writing work-shopping.

- Two hours every Saturday. We also do a writing workshop/open mic that is open to the community every Monday for two hours.
- Practice was pretty flexible. Due to travel, we couldn't always get everyone together, but people who could meet would get together probably three times a week. As we got closer to CUPSI we had some crash practices that lasted hours, because they were our only chances to work on some pieces.
- Depends on time and team. Hopefully, once to twice a week until the week before competition and then every night. Each rehearsal until the week before should have time to write together, time for group critique and update, and time to practice performing together. Tried to do this once every two weeks, but didn't work out well.
- We have about two hour meetings on campus where business is handled first, then workshops and critiques of poems and performance. Since the two alumni coaches live over an hour away, if there is a chance both of us can't make it to the meeting we find time to come up when we can and handle what we missed. We also work one on one with the poets discussing each of their strengths and weaknesses. Those can last however long we need it to. All angles must be approached. When it comes closer to competition, we have two formal meetings a week and then informal practices as well.

All Coaches/Advisors were asked "How do you assess the audience and judges?"

- Slam is a psychological game. We see an example of their (judges and audience) tastes with the sacrifice and a bit more in the first rotation. I try to use the energy to our advantage by putting the right pieces in the right moments.
- Based off of experience and intuition. I change a lot of strategic calls on the fly.
- It's ludicrous to even ask.
- The audiences level of emotion or the death in the silence. How loud their claps are...
- I try and figure out early on how they are judging other poets. Some judges are really easy to label. For example, you have the judges who do not appreciate imagery. For them, you need to throw out more straight-forward poems. Then you have the emotional judges. They are the ones who like to see tears, stories of rape, yelling, etc
- I usually don't. If funny poems are consistently scoring higher, we'll throw up something funny, but the points are not the point.
- Audience--I listen and watch their reactions to the poems performed. Judges--I pay attention to the scores and try to figure out about what range they're hovering around, what types of poems are scoring well, etc, etc.
- Usually in terms of "temperature"-- if it's a "cold room," you can either try to make it a "hot room" by focusing on performance, or play a piece that is strongly written and appeals well to people who are quieter and paying more attention. If you can tell a judge is only giving scores based on some ideology or racial/political belief, well, ignore that judge because you'd be dishonest to yourself if you pandered to him or her.
- Follow the scoring patterns and the audience reaction to poems. Granted, a lot of the crowds will be with a specific slam team, and thus rough on everybody else, but usually if you can grab their attention they'll give you some props out of respect. Judge stereotyping (sorry, but this is true) also works fairly well if you're too early to watch scoring bias towards poem types.
- Observe how they react to other poems. Just pay attention to what gets a reaction from them. Don't just give them what you think they want; get to know them, have a conversation with

them. Understand their comfort zone, but don't underestimate them. Poetry is about challenging the audience.

All Coaches/Advisors were asked, "What are your recommendations on how to keep your team relaxed?"

- Keeping in mind that these are college students, and they like to do what college students do. Being flexible with their 'party-side' is a good bet. Keeping an eye on them always, but let them act like fools and stay up late and have a good time. If you make it more serious than it is, they won't enjoy it.
- Remind them it's a game and a learning experience. However, don't keep them too relaxed. We have silly rituals that we do before bouts (tongue twisters, sharing a personal story, stretches, etc.) during the actual competition; we set a schedule for practice time. And any other time is for R&R.
- Have fun! Constructive criticism and also reminding folks what they're doing well. Remembering that the points are not the point..
- Make sure they have fun, and try to allow as few people as possible to handle all of the executive, political, logistic stuff. Those tedious tasks can really make a lot of people frustrated. Don't put too much pressure on the team or the competition aspect of slam. Do it for the poetry!
- Little rituals or group get-togethers can help immensely. Last year, we each had individual warm-up rituals, and a little team meeting before each bout. We also went out for food or tea as a group a few times. This kept everyone off the edge and willing to work it out.
- Do non-slam things together as a family.
- Joke around, remind them that they've "got this," otherwise be supportive in a way determined by the situation.
- Once again, communication, positive reinforcement, set time for relaxation. It is important to know what works for each poet, so keep that in mind as well.

All Coaches/Advisors were asked, "Please describe the types of exercises do you use to build writing and performance skills."

- There's way too much to describe. But we begin the year with more team-building, get-to-know each other type exercises about our pasts and selves and faiths and feelings. The way we inspire poems themselves in a highly secret operation 😊.
- Connecting to the poem is the big one - there are exercises, but the point is to clue in to the emotional landscape of the poem so you can take the audience there with you. That also means un-memorizing cadence and flow, so you are being very conscious of where you're putting emphasis, how your cadence changes meaning, etc. usually our goal is to find a balance between conversational and "poemy".
- Writing-- we give prompts based on professional writers' poems and we give feedback to each other by talking about what is memorable and what is working and what isn't.
- Performing-- Various theatre games and acting exercises. I constantly remind my fellow poets to just "Tell the story."
- We work-shopped extensively in small groups until rehearsals started; at that point, we pretty much decided we had what we had and should go with it. As for performance, the most

important thing we did was to ask questions about every line: Why was it being said? Why was it essential? How does it further the piece? From that starting point, we tried to deliver each line with a distinct purpose.

- I try to write every week, but when I was coaching the youth team it was summer, they weren't really up to it. Performing in front of each other, in front of mirrors, and in front of family works well. Especially having other teammates read your piece, so you can see alternative interpretations.
- Writing workshops. Prompt writing. Group editing and critique. one-on-one editing and critique.
- Use Slam Poetry for Idiots book exercises..
- Watch the movie SlamNation as a group and discuss..
- Having the poet repeat a single line back in different ways; having the poet "talk through" the poem, just telling the story; having the rest of the team hold up fists one at a time at various points during the poem, which tells the poet where to direct the poem. As for writing, there are always workshops.
- We have fold-over poems, team piece building, black box poetry, reciting each others pieces, improv workshops. We really do it all.