teacher resource guide

schooltime performance series

the mayhem poets

arts education

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The Mayhem Poets

Scott Raven
Raven is a poet, writer, performer, teacher and co-founder of Mayhem Poets. He has a dual degree in acting and journalism from Rutgers University and is a member of the Screen Actors Guild. He has acted in commercials, plays and films, and performed for Fox, Punia, CNN and "The Today Show." He has been published in "The New York Times" and "New York Post," and is the author of "Sonnorites, Beyond Sonnetta, The Polygons, and Sports Stories." As a teacher, Raven has taught English and led workshops on various subjects.

Kyle Rapps
Rapps is a poetry slam artist, rapper, producer and co-founder of Mayhem Poets. He was awarded poetry slam performer of the year, his stage work has propelled him all the way to the Grand Slam finals at the legendary Nuyorican Poets Cafe in New York City. As a rapper, he has recorded with Action Bronson, Talib Kweli, KRS-One and Joel Ortiz. After touring for more than 10 years with Mayhem Poets, Rapps moved to Mexico City to spread the troupe's message across the border.

Mason Granger
Granger is a poet, host, producer and teaching artist who joined Mayhem Poets in 2005. He created SlamFind, the world's first mobile app dedicated to performance poetry, which allows poetry fans to discover and connect with poetry venues and poets throughout North America. SlamFind poetry videos were featured in Huffington Post, Upworthy, Buzzfeed, Cosmopolitan and many more. As a spokesperson for New Era Caps, Mason was featured in magazines such as Vibe, Complex, Fader and Rolling Stone. He is currently the Outreach Coordinator for Get Lit, an organization dedicated to fostering poetry and literacy in schools. He has previously served as executive director of Bowery Poetry and host for PoetNY Open Mic.

Mikumari Caiyhe
Caiyhe is an actor, emcee, spoken word poet, arts educator and advocate. A native of Washington, D.C., Caiyhe graduated from the Duke Ellington School for the Arts with a focus in theater and then completed his acting education at Rutgers University's Mason Gross School of the Arts. He was then cast as the lead actor in the musical Revelations while in London in the role of God/MC. He was one of the first emcees/rappers to perform a hip hop concert at Shakespeare's Globe and was a member of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe 2013 Competitive poetry team. Caiyhe has worked with New Jersey Performing Arts Center, the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and the YMCA to facilitate residencies and workshops teaching literary arts, acting and ballroom dance.

How does your professional training and experience inform your performances?
Experience has definitely been our most valuable training. Having toured and performed as The Mayhem Poets since 2004, we've probably seen it all at this point. Just as with anything, with experience and success comes confidence, and with confidence comes comfort and the ability to be completely in the moment throughout your performance. You can feel it during the show, the moment when the kids realize we're speaking to them instead of at them... That's when they really open up.

Tell us a little more about the “gut-wrenching truths that leave audiences forever changed.”
Every single person's life on Earth has moments that are funny and serious, beautiful and ugly, easy and hard, etc. For many reasons, the average school setting simply isn't the place where the full range of these things can be addressed and confronted or spoken about fully. The beauty of theater in general, but especially in our show that's geared towards speaking to young people, is that we know how to go there, take you with us, and bring you back. Without fail, it's those moments in the show that both kids and adults remember most.

How would you like young audiences to approach poetry in the 21st Century?
We hope that young people come away from a Mayhem Poets show knowing that poetry is alive; not only in the sense of growing in popularity, but the art form itself is constantly growing, evolving and morphing just like everything else. If you ask a young person to name a TV show, they'll probably name 10 shows that are currently airing. Ask that same young person to name a poet, chances are they'll name someone between 80-800 years old. We want to show young people that poetry is not some archaic art form that 'used to happen,' but that it is happening today, and continuously growing, evolving and morphing just like everything else. What do you think about when you write them down on an advertisement, it piques their interest, but what makes it truly successful on stage is that it's not a marketing gimmick or three cogs slapped together to make a show. We love hip hop, so when we make art, hip hop will find its way in. Same with theater and same with improv. So really the success of the approach lies in the fact that it's a genuine reflection of who we are. The end result isn't a show that's one third this, one third that, and one third the other, but more of a whole show that's a seamless fusion of all three.

An Interview with Mayhem Poets
Tell us more about your company's history.
What prompted you to bring Mayhem Poets to the stage? Mayhem Poets the touring group spun out of a poetry open mic at Rutgers University in the early-2000s called Verbal Mayhem, started by Scott Raven and Kyle Rapps. They teamed up with two other Verbal Mayhem regulars to form The Mayhem Poets and began performing in classrooms around New Jersey thru their own connections in the education realm. Those shows grew in popularity, enabling them to move up from classroom shows to full school assemblies. Along the way a new third member, Mason Granger, was added to the group, forming the core Mayhem Poets members who took the show even larger, performing not only in schools, but colleges and theaters nationally and internationally. The growth from campus open mic to international tour felt like a natural progression, like the real-life version of the saying, 'There's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come.'

How do you capture the attention of young audiences, especially those who groan at the “Poets” in your name? The word ‘poet’ is the perfect cover! You tell kids they're going to a poetry show, they're expecting to see old guys in black tights talking about the beauty of a flower (exactly what I thought when I went to my first poetry reading), then BAM – Mayhem Poets takes the stage and within the first five minutes of the show, everything they thought they knew about what poets are is tossed out the window and we get 'em.

Your performances are a fusion of hip hop, theater and improv comedy. Why do you think this is a successful approach?
The success of this approach has as much to do with the fact that those are things we enjoy ourselves as it does with those being popular art forms to put together. Sure, when you write them down on an advertisement, it piques their interest, but what makes it truly successful on stage is that it’s not a marketing gimmick or three cogs slapped together to make a show. We love hip hop, so when we make art, hip hop will find its way in. Same with theater and same with improv. So really the success of the approach lies in the fact that it’s a genuine reflection of who we are. The end result isn’t a show that’s one third this, one third that, and one third the other, but more of a whole show that’s a seamless fusion of all three.

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What advice would you give to aspiring poets and performers?
Big picture advice: do whatever you want and don’t think about whether you’re doing it right. Smaller, more tangible advice: instead of posting statuses on social media whenever they come to you, write those clever/interesting snippets down in your notebook and try to turn them into poems later. There’s obviously some sort of spark there that made you want to say it, so turn that spark into a full fire.
### Inspired Ideas in the Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher Focus</th>
<th>Student Activity</th>
<th>NJ Student Learning Standards</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P</strong> Prepare for the performance</td>
<td>If you have...</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL.1, NJSLSA.SL.2, Social studies 6.112.History.CC.8.c Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard #7-8</td>
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<tr>
<td>15 minutes: Introduce “snapping” and positive feedback. Play The Mayhem Poets Promos. See student section for discussion prompts. 25 minutes: (above and) Play A Short History of Spoken Word Poetry. See student section for discussion prompts. 45 minutes: (above and) Play “If We Must Die” by Claude McKay. See student section for discussion prompts.</td>
<td>If you have...</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> Experience the performance</td>
<td>Before the show: Engage students in a brief discussion on the different styles used by The Mayhem Poets. See student section for discussion prompts. After the show: Give students a few minutes of reflection to journal first impressions and ideas (see prompts) for a share out.</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL.1, NJSLSA.SL.2, NJSLSA.W.4 Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard #8-9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>R</strong> Reflect, respond and read</td>
<td>Reflect: Dedicate some wall space for brainstorm and post tools. Label a section as “Themes.” Create a list of themes from the show and add on new ideas. Respond: Discuss emotional responses to themes. Connect topics from the Themes list to curriculum, culture and personal experience. Read: Establish “Writing Toolbox” section and generate a list of literary devices. Read poems to identify literary tools. “truth” by Gwendolyn Brooks; “Spanglish” by Tato Laviera; “My Standard Response” by Karenne Wood. Discuss how the tools were used and what the context of the poems might be.</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLSA.R.7, NJSLSA.SL.2 Career Readiness, Life Literacies, and Key Skills 9.4.12.C2 Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard #7-8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>O</strong> Originate</td>
<td>Establish small writing groups. Remind the class of the feedback process (see “Prepare” section). Assign a writing warm up. Groups may devise crew names and announce to class (snap or applaud to practice supporting each other). Invite groups to choose a topic from “Themes” as a cooperative group. Next, brainstorm as a group using a visual organizer to jot down your words, rhymes and personal connections to create your poem. (Use TRG Worksheet “Asked and Answered” for prompts.) Option: Assign topics from curriculum to groups. After groups have a draft of their curriculum poem content, invite students to “Themes” to choose a topic for individual poems.</td>
<td>Take a few minutes to complete the warm up writing task, and then share your writings within your group. Remember to use positive feedback. Next, name your crew! Announce your crew name to the class and remember to give props (respect) to the other groups. Next, select a poem topic from the “Themes” list. Find something that speaks to all of you a message that everyone can stand behind. Use the worksheets to brainstorm. Include every idea! Even though all ideas won’t make it to the final poem, everything makes the final poem possible. Next, try creating a few lines or verses. Refer to the “Toolbox” lists for tools! Once the first draft is done, read it aloud. Edit and revise.</td>
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<td><strong>R</strong> Rehearse</td>
<td>Determine where the performance will be. Set a date and invite your audience. Before students practice in front of each other, review positive feedback and remind students to applaud or snap after every performance. Practice group poems using strategies from the Performance Toolbox. Determine the order of the poems (run of show) and let students practice performing from the first poem to the last. Time the length of the show.</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL.1, NJSLSA.SL.2 Career Readiness, Life Literacies, and Key Skills 9.4.12.C2 Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard #1, 2, 3, 5, 6</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong> Make magic</td>
<td>Determine staging area and prepare the performance space. If using mics (for sound or as props), allow poets to practice with them. Prep audience space. Do poets sit among the audience until they perform or separately? Introduce “snapping” and audience expectations with the incoming audience. Option: Conduct a talk-back session with the feedback process of “I like, I notice, I wonder.”</td>
<td>English Language Arts NJSLSA.SL.1, NJSLSA.SL.2 Visual and Performing Arts Anchor Standard #5-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>You wrote your poetry. You did an Amazing job! Relax and have fun. We enjoy watching and hearing poets perform because we connect to their words and feelings. Congratulations on giving a new audience an opportunity to connect with you and your message!</td>
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Poetry’s Roots to Now

Scholars have surmised that the earliest poems were delivered orally in order for people to remember stories and lessons and pass them on to the next generation. Oral poems have been found in every culture on the planet, from the Ancient Greeks to Africa. One of the earliest, historians note, is Homer’s The Iliad, an epic Greek poem that depicts the Trojan War.

From an oral art form, poetry evolved rapidly in many civilizations over the centuries. As literacy grew, human ingenuity made it possible to record poems in written form. An example of this is the ancient clay tablets that contain the Epic of Gilgamesh. (The tablets themselves date back to 18th century B.C.E. Mesopotamia.) This poem is about a ruler named Gilgamesh who lived in Ancient Sumer and figures prominently in Mesopotamian mythology and legends.

From clay tablets of Mesopotamia to poems handwritten on parchment (untanned animal skins) and then to paper, people recorded and preserved poetry in various ways, reflecting advances in technology. With the advent of the printing press in 1440 in Germany, poems could be printed multiple times and bound in books, making it a more popular and accessible art form than ever before. From aristocrats to common folks, poetry belonged to everybody.

In the mid-20th century, popular poetry returned to its oral roots with the rise of The Last Poets, a group of poets and musicians who drew inspiration from the civil rights movement and the push for black pride. The group is associated with the Black Arts Movement, a cultural phenomenon that centered on uplifting African Americans in the arts in the 1960s and 1970s. Gil Scott-Heron, the noted spoken word poet, was inspired to start his career when he heard The Last Poets’ performance. Heron’s best-known work is the seminal poem, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.”

Spoken word, in turn, influenced hip hop and vice versa. Hip Hop was born in the 1970s when DJ Kool Herc’s founding father, would play records and prolong the breaks on two turntables while an emcee would sing and chant rhymes over the music. This art form has since taken over popular culture and remains the top music genre today.

Poetry continues to find massive audiences through spoken word open mic events, poetry slam competitions and, of course, on social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter and TikTok. The best-selling poet Rupi Kaur has become an internet sensation by sharing her evocative and emotionally-touching poems on Instagram.
Amiri Baraka, Newark’s Voice

When it comes to literature, poetry, activism, and Newark, Amiri Baraka has an outsized presence. Learning about Baraka’s work and his life is essential to understanding important artistic trends that have left fingerprints on contemporary culture.

Amiri Baraka was born in Newark on October 7, 1934 as Everett Leroy Jones. His mother was a social worker and his father worked for the United States Postal Service. He studied at Rutgers University and then Howard University. It was during this time at Howard that he changed the spelling of his name to LeRoi, a sort of remembrance of Vincent Lushington “Roi” O’rrley, a notable African American journalist and writer. He then signed up to join the Air Force, a move he said not only galvanized him into changing many parts of life, including leaving his then wife Hettie Jones, moving to Harlem, and starting a theater troupe and school. After a time, Jones also converted to Islam, made Newark, NJ his permanent home base, and changed his name to Amiri Baraka. He held radical views, pushed for big progressive changes in policy and arts, and advocated for disenfranchised groups.

Amiri Baraka died in 2014 at the age of 79. His critics called him polarizing and controversial figure, alluding to his past black nationalistic views and some writings that have been described to be anti-semitic or misogynistic. He helped push the 1960s/1970s Black Arts Movement, which attempted to translate black power politics into the arts. Baraka toured all over the world reciting his poetry to a musical accompaniment, reminiscent of beatnik past. He also loved jazz and some of his earlier writings, especially the work Blues People, helped establish jazz studies as a serious discipline.

The New York Times wrote in his 2014 obituary: “But [Baraka’s] champions and detractors agreed that at his finest he was a powerful voice on the printed page, a riveting orator in person and an enduring presence on the international literary scene whom — whether one loved or hated him — it was seldom possible to ignore.”

—The New York Times

cultural connections

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Poetry

A piece of writing or literary work that attempts to distill in an imaginative way experiences, thoughts and emotions. Poets – or the practitioners of the art of poetry – compose choice words into specific, artfully put together arrangements, which often have rhythm and rhyme. At times, poems don’t have rhyming words in them. This type of poem is called blank verse, but it has a certain rhythm in how the words are composed. Poems are often created to evoke emotional responses or reveal profound, hidden truths on a variety of subjects.

Rhyme

In the context of poems, rhyme is when two or more words have corresponding similar sounds, such as hat and cat, mouse and house, pink and link, etc. Basic poems have ending rhymes where the last words or syllables in two or more lines of poetry rhyme with each other. An example would be Robert Frost’s poem, “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”: “Whose woods these are I think I know / His house is in the village, though / He will not see me stopping here / To watch his woods fill up with snow.”

Rhythm

In the context of poetry, rhythm is the beat, pattern or cadence in a poem. It can be heard or read as a type of movement or repetition in the way the words and syllables are put together. In music, rhythm basically has the same definition but with musical notes as the ingredients of any piece.

Hip Hop

Hip hop is both a musical genre and artistic, cultural movement that traces its roots to big block parties in the Bronx, New York in the 1970s. As a cultural phenomenon, it is made up of rapping, deejaying, beatboxing, breakdancing and graffiti. In music, the hip hop genre features stylized rhythmic music with rapping, a rhythmic and rhyming speech that is chanted by an emcee/MC.

Spoken Word

Poetry intended for onstage performance, rather than exclusively designed for the page. While often associated with hip hop, it also has strong ties to storytelling, modern poetry, postmodern performance, and monologue theatre.

Poetry Slam

A competition where spoken word poets recite poems in front of judges and a lively audience.
**Acronyms**
are letter abbreviations for proper names and common phrases. (Text messaging has made acronyms a big part of our language.) Spoken-word poets sometimes create their own versions of existing acronyms. For example: Laugh Out Loud (lol).

**Alliteration**
uses words that are next to or near each other that begin with the same letter or sound. For example: Curiosity killed the cat.

**Antithesis**
(ant-TITH-uh-siss)
contrasts opposite ideas in similar words. For example: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

**Chiclets**
An expression, idea, or element of an artistic work that has become overused. For example: For example: The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

**Hyperbole**
(ni-PER-bo-lee)
is a greatly exaggerated statement that is not meant to be taken literally. For example: I have a ton of homework!

**Onomatopoeia**
(on-a-mott-a-PEE-a)
is using a word that sounds like the thing it describes. For example: buzzing bee, ding-dong bell.

**Oxymoron**
puts together two ideas that seem to contradict each other. For example: you have to be cruel to be kind.

**Personification**
gives a thing or idea human qualities or abilities. For example: lightning danced across the sky.

**Pop-Culture References**
Take several well-known names, characters, titles, etc. and put them together by free association.

**Puns**
are another technique for playing with words that have multiple meanings. For example: Lord of the Ringmaster

**Similes and Metaphors**
are figures of speech that directly compares two things. Similes differ from metaphors by highlighting the similarities between two things using words such as “like”, “as”, or “than”, while metaphors create an implicit comparison. For example: Brave as a lion (simile) or he is a shining star (metaphor).

**Rhyming and rhythm**
- Used rhyme where appropriate.
- Varied rhyme scheme and used slant rhymes.
- Used internal rhyme.
- Used alliteration.

**Alternate ways of putting words together**
- Used inventive acronyms.
- Took clichés and changed them around.
- Incorporated pop-culture references.
- Used puns, wordplay, etc.

**Personal connection to poems**
- Created personal connections.
- Combined personal connection with imaginative/creative concepts/ideas.

**Enunciation**
Poets pronounce their words clearly and distinctly. They often use tongue twisters as a warm-up to loosen their lips and mouth.

**Eye Contact and Focus**
Poets make eye contact with their audience or with other poets while performing to connect, interact, and feed off the energy in the space. It also helps the audience and the poet focus on the piece.

**Memorization**
Poets commit their piece to memory and learn their poem by heart. Some memorization tips are to rewrite your poem by hand several times, read your poem aloud before going to sleep at night, and repeat it when you wake up, and practice your poem in front of your family and friends.

**Physicalizing**
When a poet puts a movement or gesture to the words to help the audience better understand and relate to your story.

**Syllable/Word Stressing**
Practice your lines out loud, emphasizing different syllables and words, using different vocal inflections and stresses.

**Voice Projection**
Poets project their voice nice and loud when they practice and perform so that the audience can hear what they have to say.

**Warm-Up**
Poets warm-up their voices and bodies before a slam or performance so that they are mentally, physically, and emotionally ready to give it their best.

**Using voice to its full capacity**
- Enunciated clearly and sustained energy throughout.
- Stressed punchlines when appropriate.
- Projected so everyone could hear.
- Paid attention to timing, pacing, and rhythm.

**Using body to enhance performance**
- Incorporated gestures and movement.
- Had poem memorized so hands were free and the body open.

**Connecting with an audience**
- Looked at the audience while performing.
- Fed off the audience’s energy throughout.
- Stayed focused during disruptions and took in the unexpected.

**Overall performance of poem**
- Used several performance tactics throughout.
- Used own unique, distinctive voice.
- Took the audience on a journey from beginning to end.
The Mayhem Poets
mayhempoets.com
Scott Ott
scottottavenow.wordpress.com
Kyle Rapps
google.com/kylerappsmusic
Mason Granger
masongranger.com
Mikumari Caiyhe
instagram.com/mikumari_caiyhe/?fbclid=IwAR0FpxqwPubausp-1SyLC-3UDPWslu5355r-WvP-r0hbc-T3Qzbr35WjQvuk
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poetryfoundation.org/poems/58198/spanglish
Books
The Rap Year Book: The Most Important Rap Song From Every Year Since 1979, Discussed, Debated, and Deconstructed
By Shea Serrano, Arturo Torres, Ice-T Abrams Image (October 13, 2015)
Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation
By Jeff Chang
Picador (December 27, 2005)
When the Beat Was Born: DJ Kool Herc and the Creation of Hip Hop (Garetta Scott King - John Steptoe Award for New Talent)
By Laban Carrick Hill and Theodore Taylor III (Illustrator)
Roaring Brook Press (August 27, 2013)
Take the Mic (A Poetry Speaks Experience)
By Mark Elinevd
Sourcebooks MediaFusion (April 1, 2009)
The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation (A Poetry Speaks Experience)
By Mark Elinevd
Sourcebooks MediaFusion; Revised ed. edition (March 1, 2005)
Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution
By Alix Olson
Seal Press (October 5, 2007)
Slam Poem about Bullying
youtube.com/watch?v=AAa2wylIDoM&feature=youtu.be
“What Kind of Asian Are You? Alex Dang
youtube.com/watch?v=KAQFf9ICiL&feature=youtu.be
Brave New Voices (Finals) – “Emmett”
by Philadelphia Team
youtube.com/watch?v=RizMIB8BY&feature=youtu.be
In-School Residences: Residencies: NJPAC teaching artists come right to your school—online—to teach the performing arts to your students. Our super-flexible virtual residencies are designed to meet your needs, and you’ll have a dedicated program manager to help you every step of the way. It’s the perfect program to keep your students creating, connecting and expressing themselves through the magic of the arts.
Professional Development: Calling all educators! Expand your teaching skills, deepen your curriculum and give yourself a creative boost in NJPAC’s forward-thinking professional development workshops. Our virtual PD programs are for teachers all the way from pre-K to high school, and include hip hop, dance, storytelling, theater, music and more. Not only will you learn something... you’ll also have fun and be inspired.
Study the Arts at njpac
Saturday Programs: NJPAC’s Saturday programs are geared towards students at every level—from those who dream of starring on Broadway to those who are still learning their scales. Students work with professional artists to build technique and develop their own creative style in hip hop, jazz, devised theater and symphonic band.
Summer Programs: Want to begin to explore the arts? Or immerse yourself in the study of one genre? Then join us at NJPAC next summer in one of seven programs that spark the creativity in every child through the study of music, dance and theater.
For more information or to schedule an appointment, please email our education sales team at artseducation@njpac.org.
Visit njpac.org/education