

Introducing Performance Poetry

What is performance poetry?

Performance poetry is poetry that is meant to be performed in front of an audience. It's about having fun with words and telling your story. It's about listening to others too. Performance poetry can be exciting, funny, sad, fast or furious. But most of all, it's about you.

Creating your own performance poetry

This is a guide to writing and performing your own performance poems. We've included poems by performance poets Charlie Dark and Dzifa Benson, as well as some of their hints and tips on how to write and perform your own poems.

So what
are you
waiting
for?

The poems

Here are the text versions of three performance poems. Look out for how they use interesting imagery (painting a picture in your mind), repeat lines to make them sound important, use unusual language, rhyme or focus on specific detail.

'My Pen'

by Charlie Dark

My pen is my weapon I said

It's the microphone that allows my tongue to say things I'm too afraid to whisper

It's a sub machine gun of truth

A bullet shell of ink that spills blue blood on paper

It's a speaker

The megaphone of thought

An analogue tape recorder

A life support machine

It's a tool for catching dreams

It's the memory of what my teachers said

The indelible cousin of pencil lead

A silent movie on a snow white paper screen

An instrument of opportunity a chance to dream

A life, a future, an exit, a way out

A way to be heard without having to shout

My Pen

'Self Portrait as a Creature of Numbers'

by Dzifa Benson

I shifted into
this human life
from the spirit world
the fusion of 1 egg
and 1 sperm at 8.42 pm
where Latitude $51^{\circ} 31' 0''$ N
straddles Longitude $0^{\circ} -6' 0''$ E
London, N19 to be exact.

At 8 days my mother
outdoored me,
crossed the threshold
back and forth 7 times
whispered a prayer
over 3 glasses, dabbed
my tongue, 1 drop from each -
water, honey, salt.
She showed my face
to the 4 elements
each in turn
punched 2 holes
in my earlobes.
To bind mind, body
and spirit to destiny
life path 1
she took 3
new laid eggs
cracked them open
over my head.

1st daughter
of a 4th son of Ghana
my soul surges $8^{\circ} 00'$ north
of the equator, $2^{\circ} 00'$ west
of the prime meridian.
I march to a 4 beat
over 50,000,000 knots
on this ocean
called forever
knowing that bigger
better numbers
can be reached
by always adding
just 1 more.

Sketched from 300
moons minus 3
plus 25 valentine cards
I never received.
I am ruled by lustre
bouncing off the Evening Star,
2nd planet in
108,000,000 kilometres
from the sun.

If you encounter me
in the underground
standing 1.66 metres
tall on the escalator
going up or going down
know that I own 1001 options
raised to the power
of infinity plus 1 -
philosopher, seeker teacher
when I am willing.
Always climbing
1 more number.
At the very least 1.

'Airborne'

by Charlie Dark

Whatever happened to Airborne?
He was the baddest Breakdancer ever born
He could stand on his head and spin round and round
It was like he was a builder drilling a hole into the ground.
His footwork was dope and he always looked fresh
in tracksuits, trainers and Adidas vests
He had thousands of moves
That he liked to flex
He'd crush you with a power move...
and then he'd shout NEXT!

But one day he did a back flip
And never came down.
And that was the last time we ever saw Airborne around.

Perhaps he's dancing in outer space.
or moonwalking on the moon.
I wonder if everyone goes silent,
shhhhh! When he walks into the room
Did the DJ have the breakbeats
to challenge his feet?
Is he still challenging B-Boys on the
corner of the street?

Zigga Zigga Zung
Zigga Zigga Zung

He was a friend, a mentor and an
original superstar.
And this goes out to Airborne
Wherever you are...

Writing and performing poetry

What makes a good performance poem?

It has to communicate an idea to the audience clearly. It might also:

Use **assonance** (a 'half rhyme', like the way that 'face' half rhymes with 'fade')

Use **alliteration** ('Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers' – words that start with a repeating sound)

Use **rhyme** ('face', 'place', 'chase' and 'race' all rhyme)

Use **onomatopoeia** (where a word makes the sound it represents)

What should I write about?

Write about something you feel is important. It could be something you love; something that happened that changed your life; something or someone that inspires you. It can be funny or serious; quiet or loud – whatever you like.

When you've written something but it isn't quite right yet

Don't expect the first thing you write to be perfect. First, get all your thoughts onto the page. Think of that writing as a piece of clay. How can you shape it and make it better?

Try it out loud

Read your poem out loud when you're writing too – it might look good, but it might not sound right when you say it.

Expand the detail

For example, if you've written about a chair, what colour is it? What material is it made of? Where is it? How does it feel when you sit in it?

Rehearse your poem

You could use a **mirror** to rehearse. Go close up to it and read your poem in front of it. Are you standing up straight, making eye contact, being clear?

Think about what **actions** you need to put into the performance of the poems.

Imagining the person, place or thing it's about while you're saying it will help you to get your meaning across to the audience.

What's the most important thing to remember when you're performing a poem?

Pronounce your words clearly and make eye contact with the audience.

Try and get the right **expression** into the poem. If it's exciting, sound excited! If it's a quiet poem, don't do lots of loud noises and wave your arms around.

It's okay to be nervous...

All poets get nervous before they perform. You could do some warm up activities to make yourself feel more ready:

Tongue twisters: *Rubber baby buggy bumpers; Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers; Sally sells sea shells by the sea shore.*

Head rolls – roll your head slowly in a circle a few times.

Yawn and do some big smiles, stretching your lips and face.

Take some deep breaths. Enjoy!

Getting started

Free writing

Everyone is scared of the blank page – even writers. Here’s a way to get started – it’s called free writing, and writers like Charlie and Dzifa use it all the time.

- ☀ Choose one of the ‘free writing starters’ below and write it at the top of your page.
- ☀ Now, continue on from that starter in any way you like until your teacher says ‘Stop!’ Five minutes is good at first. When you get used to free writing, you might do it for longer.
- ☀ The only rule is that you have to keep writing. Don’t stop. Don’t read back over what you’ve written. Don’t cross things out. Just keep going.
- ☀ If you get stuck you can just repeat what you started with – ‘I remember’ or ‘I can tell you’. You can change the subject if you like. You really can write about anything. It doesn’t have to make sense.
- ☀ Afterwards, look through your writing and underline the bits you like.
- ☀ Use them to start writing your poem.

Free writing starters

I remember...

I don't remember...

I can tell you...

I feel...

I think...

I don't think...

Putting your poem together

- When you've done your free writing, look at the bits that you like and write them onto a new page. This will probably give you an idea of what your poem is going to be about.
- Choose a few key details to describe the topic or person.
- Write about how it made you feel. Use similes in these lines. What do these things remind you of? A simile is when you say something is **like** something else.
- At the end, write about something that you have realised about the topic or person - this is the 'epiphany' of your poem.

Other things you can try

Lists

When you know what you want to write about, make a list of everything you know about it, such as:

- How it looks
- How it smells
- How it tastes
- How it sounds
- How it feels
- Location – where it is
- Colours
- Small details
- What people say about it
- What's happening around it
- How you feel about it
- What you think about it

Now you'll have a whole page of thoughts and details to use in your poem.

Messy maps

Make a colourful, messy diagram including drawings (or pictures cut out from magazines) as well as your writing, describing your topic or the person you want to write about. Think about the same types of details as those in Lists, above – colours, small details, the senses etc.

What now?

If you've enjoyed learning about performance poetry, you could:

Try free writing at home

Take half a line of text from a book or a magazine at home and use it as your starter, then write for five minutes without stopping. You could do it every day for a week with a different starter (or longer!). Or, you could use the same starter every day – 'I feel...' or 'I think...' are good ones. We feel and think different things every day.

Keep a writing journal

Find a special book you like writing in and keep it just for your writing. Write anything you like in it – lists, free writing, ideas for poems and stories, funny things people say, things that make you happy, things that make you sad. You could also stick pictures you like in it, photos, draw in it, doodle in it, whatever you like. It's your creative book.

Plan a poetry reading

Ask your teacher to help you organise a performance poetry event after school – you could invite parents and friends. As well as performing poems you've written, you and your friends could also perform poems by other people. Your teacher can suggest poems that would work well.

Use the library

Look in your school or local library for poetry books – discover poets you haven't heard of before. See which ones you like and which ones you don't. Read them out loud to your family or ask them to read them to you. See if you can learn one together.

Other performance poets

Ask your teacher if they can help you find videos of other performance poets online – watch them as a class or after school. There are a huge variety of performance poets to be found, performing funny, angry, sad or exciting poems.