



## The benefits of writing and performing in the spoken word poetry community<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Compared to other writers, such as novelists, poets have higher rates of mood disorders and suicide. Recently a new form of poetry has taken rise – spoken word poetry, in which performing and competing is incorporated in the medium. This study qualitatively explores how this new form of poetry affects poets' mood and overall well-being. Ten poets were interviewed, and transcripts of these interviews were analyzed using grounded theory. Findings suggest that connecting with a community, having a forum of communication, emotional development, and having an internal drive to write and perform help the poets to feel balanced in everyday life. The performance aspect of spoken word poetry seems to confer several benefits that would not be found in writing alone, such as social support through connecting with others.

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Previous research has shown that creative writers have higher rates of pathology than the general population (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). Further, in comparison with other creative writers (e.g., novelists) poets have higher rates of pathology – such as mood disorders (Ludwig, 1994) – and a higher incidence of suicide (Jamison, 1993). Andreasen (1987) conducted structured interviews with 30 creative writers, 30 of their first degree relatives, and 30 matched controls – the classic model upon which most research on creative writers has been based. Andreasen found that, compared to the matched controls, creative writers reported higher rates of mental illness, including bipolar disorder and other affective disorders.

A new type of poet has emerged in recent decades. Spoken word poets perform their work for an audience at venues like poetry lounges and coffee shops. They participate in competitions, such as poetry slams. A poetry slam, the art of competitive “performance poetry” (also referred to as “spoken word”), is the focus of more than 100 venues in the United States (Maddalena, 2009). Poetry slams are judged by five randomly selected audience members (Aptowicz, 2009). The element of being judged by audience members encourages poets to create work that the general public will relate to, catalyzing a forum for shared experience. Not all poets who

perform at spoken word venues compete in poetry slams; however, people who regularly present their work on stage share similar styles, content, and delivery techniques (Maddalena, 2009).

Despite the fact that this new medium has emerged, the majority of research on writers has used post hoc historical analysis. For example, Ludwig (1995) investigated over 1000 eminent individuals' biographies and found a higher incidence of mental illness among those in artistic professions (writing, art, and theater) than those in non-artistic professions (business, politics, and science). However, posthumous diagnosis of a mental disorder can be unreliable for several reasons, including the difficulty of specifying the severity of a disorder and distinguishing between co-morbid disorders (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). Studying biographies of well-known creators may also lead to an overestimation of mental illness, because more eccentric stories may be more often documented.

Current research focuses on therapeutic writing within a clinical setting. Poetry as a therapeutic device has been seen throughout history through the use of storytelling and prose to examine and understand human struggle (Furman, 2003). This practice has evolved to being used for personal use and within a therapeutic setting. Mazza (1999) describes the therapeutic components of poetry therapy in practice in the following way:

1. The receptive/prescriptive component, involving the introduction of literature into therapy.
2. The expressive/creative component involving the use of client writing in therapy.

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### 3. The symbolic/ceremonial component involving the use of metaphors, rituals, and storytelling.

These components introduce the various ways that a clinician can include poetry in therapy. The practice of using this medium in therapy historically has most easily been translated into psychodynamic modalities; however, more recently it is seen to be more congruent with theories of practice as well (Mazza, 1999). Poetry can be useful in helping people create meaning and value in their lives.

Therapeutic writing usually employs the Pennebaker (2004) paradigm, which instructs a person to write for a minimum of 15 min a day for at least three or four consecutive days. The writing is meant to be continuous after one begins, without worrying about spelling or grammar. There is no specification of how one must write: one can write longhand, type on a computer, or speak into a tape recorder. Likewise, there is no direction for what one must write: it can either be the same thing on a daily basis or something different every day. Typically the method suggests that students write about things that are worrisome, dreams, aspects of life that are unhealthy, or things that are avoided on a regular basis. The Pennebaker method is very similar to free-writing techniques that poets use to overcome writer's block (Taylor, 2009). However, poets do not repeat this exercise on a daily basis as the paradigm requires. Once there is a direction for poets to focus their work on, the exercise stops.

Pennebaker (2004) suggests that writing is therapeutic because it allows an individual to work through confusing and upsetting feelings in a meaning-making process. Perspectives are shifted from a self-focus to a more socially integrated stance. Although traumatic events are often related to isolated accidents, they have an effect on an individual's social world. Emotional writing can gradually alter how individuals talk to others about their traumas (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). Additionally, one can become desensitized to distressing emotion through exposure as a result of sequenced writing sessions. It is also believed that forming a narrative allows one to disclose a traumatic event and recode it into language (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006). Doing so improves self-regulation, frees up working memory, and makes the trauma more manageable and easier to store in memory. It is thought that, by creating a narrative, a person is able to incorporate information about the trauma or stressful event into existing mental schemas, allowing a person to attain a coherent explanation of the event (Ulrich and Lutgendorf, 2002).

Smyth, True, & Souto (2001) assigned 117 undergraduate student volunteers either to write about traumatic events in a narrative (using the traditional Pennebaker paradigm) or fragmented fashion (listing thoughts and feelings), or to write about a mundane topic for 20 min. The only group to show health improvements, demonstrated by less restriction of activity due to illness, was the narrative group. This finding suggests that it is not just expressing emotion related to a traumatic event that is helpful; a narrative style also has a relationship to positive health benefits. But, what aspects of the narrative are associated with these benefits?

Ulrich and Lutgendorf (2002) conducted a study in which 122 undergraduate psychology students were assigned, for a month, to write at least twice a week for at least 10 min. They were assigned either to write about a trauma – either writing about emotions only or both cognitions and emotions – or about a mundane task (the control group). Writing about both emotions and cognitions associated with a trauma or stressor was associated with more personal growth than was writing about emotions alone or about the mundane task. The authors suggested that writing about both the cognitions and emotions through journaling can raise awareness of the possible benefits of the event, which is an important predictor of successful adjustment. Those in the cognitions and emotions group also showed a decrease in illness symptoms over time.

**Table 1**  
Descriptive data by participant.

Participant number	Gender	Age	Years writing	Years performing
761	Male	54	46	30
694	Male	35	17	17
613	Male	25	7	7
610	Male	30	15	10
886	Male	40	29	10
602	Female	27	19	8
466	Female	28	17	5
458	Female	21	4	2
295	Female	30	15	11
265	Female	25	12	2

The purpose of the current study was to identify aspects of writing and performing that poets consider to be driving forces behind their work. Additionally, the study investigated the qualities that led to the most psychological benefit from writing and performing poetry. Having the knowledge of how these practices influence the poets may help clinicians integrate spoken word poetry in individual and group therapy settings. For those who write to alleviate psychological stress, what aspect of writing confers the most salutary effects? Interviews were conducted with poets actively engaged in the spoken word community. These interviews were qualitatively analyzed using grounded theory to see whether recurrent themes would surface about the reasons poets chose to write and what benefits they received from expressing themselves in this medium and through performance.

## Method

### Participants

Ten poets from different poetry venues in a large U.S. urban area were recruited by word of mouth (5 women and 5 men). The mean age of the participants was 31.5 years ( $sd=9.6$ ). The mean number of years the participants reported performing poetry was 10.2 ( $sd=8.27$ ). The mean number of years the participants reported writing poetry was 18.1 ( $sd=11.92$ ). Please refer to Table 1 for descriptive data for each individual participant. There was no compensation for participation in the study. All participants signed informed consent forms. This study was approved by the authors' institutional review board.

### Materials and procedure

Participants were interviewed by the researcher using a semi-structured format at a location that was convenient for the participants. The semi-structured interview underwent a pilot test to assess the relevance of the questions and the amount of time needed to complete the interview. Questions included: What draws you to express yourself through poetry? What motivates you to write? What do you hope to get out of performing your work? Throughout the interviews, questions were asked to clarify the understanding of participants' answers. Leading questions and closed questions were avoided. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

## Results

Grounded theory is a qualitative research method that develops a theory, consisting of a set of plausible relationships proposed among concepts and sets of concepts discovered within the qualitative data (Barker, Jones, Britton, & Messer, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Thus, a grounded theory is inductively derived from the phenomenon it represents (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory provides a systematic method involving several stages that are used

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