

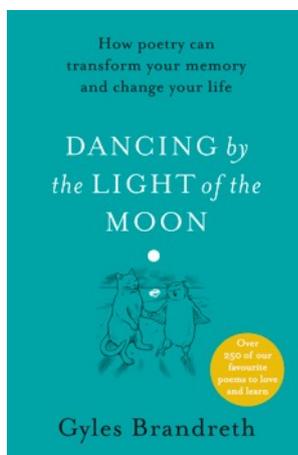


How to run a Poetry Karaoke session in your bookshop or library?

Created by **National Poetry Day** and **Gyles Brandreth**
with **Forward Arts Foundation** and the **Scottish Poetry Library**

National Poetry Day 2019 is on 3rd October and the theme is **Truth**. With events, celebrations and special activities taking place the length and breadth of the UK, it's a chance for all to read, share and enjoy poetry.

There are good reasons for including poetry in your bookshop events offer every week: poetry promotes empathy and understanding, strengthens communities – and makes for a great night out.



This toolkit includes suggestions on how to hold an informal poetry event at any time of year, so that all who participate feel relaxed, happy and engaged. This is **Poetry Karaoke**: not an event with poets reading, but a chance for customers and friends to get together, read and discuss their favourite poems, and discover some new ones.

This year we are working with **Gyles Brandreth**, editor of *Dancing By the Light of Moon* (Michael Joseph), a new anthology encouraging the memorisation of poems. Why not urge participants in your Poetry karaoke to learn a poem by heart? You'll find tips to help at the end of this toolkit. Share pictures and memories of your events online using **#DancingPoetry** **#NationalPoetryDay** for a chance to win an event with the man himself.

POETRY KARAOKE: POEMS ALOUD

Think of poems as the prompt for all sorts of memories and conversations

QUESTIONS & STORIES: Setting up poetry reading & discussion groups

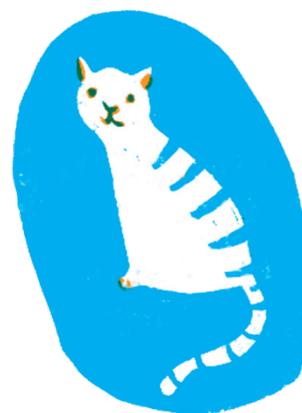
Conversations about poems are all about stories, whether a reader tells how a particular poem has been part of their life for years, or a group shares the adventure of reading a new poem.

In sharing a well-loved poem, readers share something of themselves. Asking people to bring favourite poems is a great way to create a friendly atmosphere. Responses can range from 'I like that' or 'It reminds me of...', to laughter and murmurs. Reciting from memory is good for the mind on so many levels: the rhythm of a poem's carefully chosen words strengthens the power of recall and restores feelings and sensations.

POETRY KARAOKE: Tips for the organiser

Session purpose and process

- To enjoy reading and discussing poems
- To learn a poem by heart, and gain a new skill – and party trick
- To share ideas with other readers
- To take time to explore different ways of thinking about poems
- To feel comfortable talking about poems, whatever you know – or fear you don't



Preparation

Prepare just enough to be comfortable

- Keep a selection of poems up your sleeve, in case not many readers come forward at first
- Prepare a poem to start and a poem to finish. We've listed good online sources below
- Encourage everyone - staff and customers alike - to join in and get involved
- 4 poems should be long enough for a 1 hour session, but don't be surprised if you only discuss 2 or 3. You could also run this event as more of a performance and less of a discussion

Spreading the word

- Prepare publicity notices – posters in the shop, flyers tucked into books, online, social media, word of mouth, via existing groups/organisations/venues
- Print off Gyles Brandreth's notes on learning poems and share ahead of the event
- Offer a broad theme – seasons/weather, local area, occupations, food, holidays
- In the publicity, invite people to bring a favourite poem but make it clear they can simply enjoy the poems: they don't have to bring a poem
- Make it clear that it is a chance to share poems chosen by readers, not a group for writers' feedback

Environment

- Set up a comfortable area with refreshments
- Display poetry books nearby so attendees can browse or find a poem they are trying to remember during the session. This could tempt purchases on the night

Running order

Depending on audience size and level of formality, decide how you will invite contributions. You could talk to everybody beforehand and make a list of who wants to read, or, with a small group, you could simply set the ball rolling with a welcome and opening poems, then invite contributions.

Start

- Welcome and introduce yourself
- Outline what will happen at the session
- Assure readers of the value of different opinions, and reassure them that knowledge of poetry is not essential
- Prepare photocopies of poems from books or websites to help aid memory
- Acknowledge the source - book title, poet, publisher and date on photocopies. Collect the photocopies at the end for recycling and encourage users to consider buying the book(s) after the session

First impressions

- Ask if someone would like to recite a poem
- Thank them, and ask your opening question (see next sections)
- Ask if they (or someone else) could recite/read the poem again, so everyone can listen with your question in mind



Midpoint

- Speak less and less during the session, except to keep discussion moving with new questions
- If anyone asks you a question directly, bounce it gently back to the group – ‘that’s a great question, why do you ask it?’, ‘what does everyone else think?’. You are there to enable discussion, although it is very tempting for people to appeal to you as an authority on the poem
- Be a referee – keep discussion focused on the poem, make sure everyone gets a chance to speak if they wish (they may not at first, but keep checking for signs somebody wants to talk later)
- Treat all comments as interesting and offer everyone a chance to weigh them up, however tentatively they are offered
- When a comment is offered tentatively as a question, and addressed to you, try to avoid the temptation of answering it yourself. When you can, begin to repeat these as questions open to the whole group. Gradually, readers will feel comfortable addressing these questions directly to the whole group
- If a questioner asks directly for your personal opinion or validation of a particular view – ‘Do you think the poet means x?’ – try to resist giving your own opinion immediately, so that you can keep encouraging people to trust their own and other ideas in the group. If you can honestly say ‘I haven’t made up my mind, what do you think?’, ‘That’s a crucial question, what do you / what does everybody think?’, you can move the discussion back to the other readers
- If two valid but opposing views are offered by readers, and if they don’t seem comfortable with debating it (or they are extremely comfortable debating, and you need to move discussion along), then recap the main points of each to acknowledge both as equally interesting, use it as an opportunity to emphasise that there can be more than one valid interpretation, and ask if the other readers have further views
- To feel confident about shaping the discussion, you only need to offer questions to keep the discussion going – the group will supply their own answers, and eventually their own questions

Endgame

- Move discussion of each poem to a close by changing the kind of questions you ask, or ideally by asking what questions the readers themselves now want to ask of the poem
- Try to recap some of the discussion; you can mention interesting points that were made, but in that case try to note at least one observation by everybody
- Plan a formal finish time, but add extra time for people to browse
- Repeat any key messages – future events, feedback, next steps, mailing list to stay in touch

Aftercare

- Plan any follow-up mail, information on next sessions, feedback requests
- Write to thank any colleagues, organisation partners or others who worked on the event with you
- Make a note for yourself of how it went, including any ideas for next time
- Process any stats, feedback forms or comments and file somewhere you and colleagues will be able to find them



The **Scottish Poetry Library's** *'Nothing But The Poem'* reading group format was developed to help run rewarding, friendly poetry discussion sessions, where nobody needs previous experience or knowledge about poems, but where all experience and interest can be shared. Here are some of the questions they developed to shape the sessions. See below for more questions developed to shape friendly, inclusive conversations about poetry.

Questions to shape a story, developed for *'Nothing but the poem'*

Some helpful opening questions

Make these specific enough for everybody to be able to focus, but with plenty of possible answers.

'What sounds / words caught your attention?' All sorts of things will come out of this.

'What did that feel like to read/learn?' Strong rhythms, tongue-twisting phrases, emerging patterns?

'Who/what/where/when...?' Some poems may simply be confusing to start with – acknowledge that, and spend some time untangling the puzzle

Or make it more about the particular poem

'What kinds of journey are there in this poem?'

'What's your first reaction to this – do you feel it might be a poem about X, or more about Y?'

where the poem has more than one immediately obvious subject. Emphasise that this is just a first impression, and come back to this question towards the end to see who has changed their mind.

(Avoid big, broad questions like 'did you like this?', 'what's this about?' or 'how does this make you feel?' as early questions. At this stage, they are hard to answer effectively, and may bring conversation to a stop, or make people take up defensive positions which they cannot yet explain;

save them for the end, when people have had a chance to explore what they think and why).

Have some further questions up your sleeve...

'Where does this poem start, and where does it finish?' (Places, moods or concepts)

'Where – for you – does this poem change direction?' (readers can identify a particular image or even word, and it often varies from reader to reader)

Help people explore the sounds and shape/look of the poem. Easy to rush past these!

'Are there further important ideas in the poem – as you read it more, what else does it make you ask?'

Consider some final questions

Ask about final lines

Ask about the relevance of the poem's title

Consider repeating a question from early in the discussion: do people feel differently now?

'Is this a poem you would give to somebody, and why?'

'Which of these poems do you find yourself most drawn to / like least?'

'What – for you – is/are the most important question(s) to ask about this poem?'

Gyles Brandreth's top tips to help learn your poem



1. Repetition, repetition, repetition

Learn one line at a time and learn two lines in a day. Repeat tomorrow what you learnt today. Do as much of it as possible out loud

2. Analyse and understand each line as you learn it

Look up words and references you don't know. Check pronunciations if you are uncertain about them. The clearer you are about what you are learning the easier it will be to learn it

3. Find a friend

Your friend can either simply listen to you and prompt you, or you can both learn the same poem and test each other as you progress. Many famous actors, including Dame Judi Dench, use this technique

4. Write it down

Copying out your poem is a good idea. The act of putting the words on paper with pen or pencil helps embed them in the brain

5. Walk as you talk

Walk around your room – or anywhere where there is space to move and you won't feel self-conscious – and speak your lines out loud as you move, turning sharply in a different direction at the end of every line

6. Rhyme and reason

If there are rhymes in your poem, use them. Note how they work, as the first rhyme will help you to remember the second, and so forth

7. Enjoy the journey

Almost every poem takes you on a journey of sorts – some, obviously, rather shorter than others. As you travel through your poem, look at each line, phrase or thought as a stepping-stone. If you are conscious of the journey you are taking, wherever you are it will help you know where you are going next

8. Sleep on it

There is plenty of research to suggest that sleep helps boost learning – and not only a good night's sleep, but also a sixty to ninety-minute post-learning nap

Gyles Brandreth is an English theatre producer, actor, politician, journalist, author and TV presenter. *Dancing By The Light of The Moon* is a handpicked anthology of over 250 of the nation's best-loved poems to relish, read, and recite, and an ode to poetry's many joys and benefits.

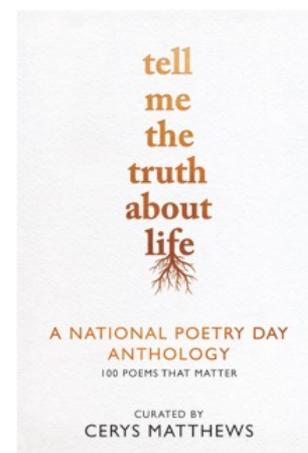
And remember to share pictures and memories of your events online using **#DancingPoetry** and **#NationalPoetryDay** for a chance to win an event with **Gyles**.

Finding poems to share

There are lots of poems on the theme of **Truth** on the **National Poetry Day** website, as well as recommendations of the best new poetry books. Other sites worth checking:

Forward Arts Foundation forwardartsfoundation.org
National Poetry Library nationalpoetrylibrary.org.uk
Scottish Poetry Library scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk
Poetry Book Society poetrybooks.co.uk
The Poetry Archive poetryarchive.org

Look out too for *Tell Me the Truth About Life*, National Poetry Day's 25th anniversary anthology that celebrates poetry's power to tap into the truths that matter. Curated and introduced by Cerys Matthews, this collection features poems nominated for their insight into truth by a range of ordinary (and extraordinary) people.
(Michael O'Mara, £12.99)



Any questions or comments? Email poetryday@forwardartsfoundation.org



www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk
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