

Poetry Curriculum Toolkit

Prepared By:

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She/hers & they/them/theirs



Welcome to the Poetry Curriculum Toolkit!

This document was created as part of the Arts Administrators Pipeline Fellowship with support from CCAE Theatricals, the Association of Arts Administration Educators, and the California Arts Council.



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Author's Note

Christina Charlene Quintana Olague is an artist organizer born and raised in the Central Valley. They've published a chapbook of poetry and competed in local, regional, and international poetry slams over the last 10 years. They hold a Bachelor's degree in Evolutionary Biology from UC Santa Cruz and continue exploring what it means to be human in ongoing global crisis through writing. They were a finalist in the 18th Street Arts Creative Corps in 2023 and were awarded the Arts Administrator's Pipeline Fellowship grant in 2024. They're personal mission is to empower people in advocating for themselves, their communities, and their non-human relatives. They enjoy crafting and taking walks with their elderly rescue dog, Viejito Brownie.

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Vision

The purpose of this document is to inspire educators and leaders to activate youth storytelling through creative writing and expression.

As leaders in our respective community ecosystems, we can feel an incredible amount of responsibility to those around us. What I envision for all of us, as leaders, is to model collective healing and justice through creative writing and expression.

We can find examples of the power of storytelling all throughout our lineages. Luis Valdez founded Teatro Campesino to uplift the California farmworkers rights' movement with storytelling (El Teatro Campesino). Connected to this movement were songs, stories, and joy amidst oppressive injustice. This shows how networks of community care can coalesce into a collective voice.

This document is a seed planted in a blooming garden of intergenerational poetry mentorship, afterschool programs, clubs, performances and so much more. Together we can challenge systems by seeing ourselves and our community stories “center stage.”

The Project Mission:

To educate the public about the power of spoken word poetry, support educators in activating youth voices for social change, and connect CA communities through performance arts.

Table Of Contents

What is Poetry Slam?	06
Original Slam Recipe	08
Journaling	10
Writing Prompts	12
Figurative and Concrete Language	13
Workshop Venn-Diagram Exercise	16
Warm Up Questions	18
CA Regional Poetry Resources	22
Poetry Resources	23
Works Cited	25

What is Poetry?

There are many ways to define what makes poetry “good.” Poetry is often introduced to us in the form of “classics” defining Edgar Allen Poe, Allen Ginsburg, and Charles Bukowski. It is also often found in music, on street corners, coffee shops, restaurants, art demonstrations, and the like.

Right now, living poets are inhabiting the world as they attempt to reach the hearts and minds of others. Everyday teachers, organizers, administrators, and care workers use poetry to process and relate to those around them.

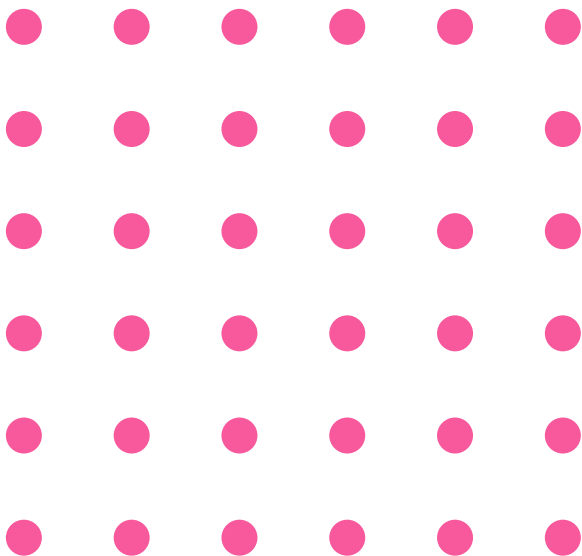
- Creative storytelling
- Playing with the rhythmic sounds and interpreted meanings of language.
- Describing images and eliciting emotion among listeners in real-time.

I find that this way of defining poetry opens up the possibilities of what we can consider “poetic.” The sooner we stray away from our previous conceptions of what we think poetry “should sound like”, the sooner we can express ourselves most authentically through poetry.



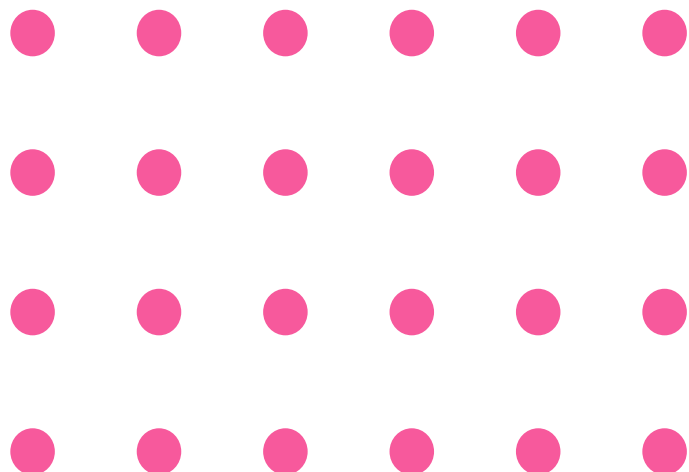
What is Poetry Slam?

- A competition format for sharing, practicing, and improving spoken word poetry
- Invented in the 1980s by construction worker Marc Kelley Smith and popularized by notable figures such as Saul Williams and more ([Banales](#)).
- Styles can vary with region and often reference topical issues and personal experience
- **Spoken Word Poetry:** a genre of poetry that emphasizes the oral recitation or performance of poetry
- An **Open Mic** is a format for sharing poetry, without any scoring system, in which each poet has an allotted time to share
- In the right environment, this can be a comfortable space to practice sharing creative works and build confidence



So What?

- Poetry Slam is an accessible way for people to gather and share their creative works in a fun and lively environment
- Slam has been a vehicle for storytelling, connecting, and activating movements for social change across diverse communities
- Organizing Slams and open mics is typically a community effort and volunteer-based
- During the Pandemic, some slam spaces and open mics went virtual and were able to continue operating, while others took a hiatus or disbanded
- Hosting a Poetry Slam on a recurring monthly basis requires commitment, diligence, and passion for the artform
- Many “Slam Poets” go on to publish poetry collections, work for literary organizations, or simply gain confidence in their respective fields.



Original Poetry Slam Recipe

- Gather a group of poets and spectators
- Randomly select about 5 judges from the crowd
- Poets share within a timed period
- Judges give a score from 1-10
- The highest and lowest score are usually dropped
- Poet with the highest score at the end wins a prize
- Competitions can last for one round or more

There are all kinds of variations that don't follow this precise format. Some poetry slams have different themes or time limit rules. Some will start with an open mic portion for practicing poets to have space to work on performance without numeric scoring. Oftentimes, a non-competing poet will perform before the competition, which acts as a chance for the judges to calibrate their scoring. A Poetry Slam is where the writing connects the writer to real-time writing community.



FAQs: Why judge poetry with scores?

When discussing Poetry Slam, we are often asked, “Why would anyone subject themselves to numeric scoring?” As a young poet of seventeen, I was enthralled with the poets that would get onstage and share their works for scores. That level of courage inspired me to improve and share my own poetry.

One mantra I’ve found helpful in my 10 years in the slam community is...

The points are not the point, the point is the poetry!

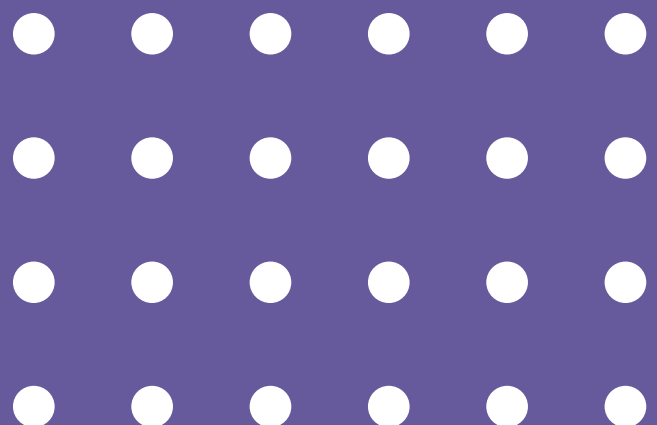
Why Poetry?

When people gather to share poetry, the collective feeling of catharsis can lead to collective healing. In the book *Your Brain on Art*, Magsamen & Ross discuss the biological and physiological effects of art & poetry on the brain. They reference one particular study by the Max Planck Institute, in which brain scans showed that the areas of the brain activated when listening to poetry were the areas associated with meaning-making and interpretation of reality (Magsamen & Ross). Additionally, the National Literacy Trust found that kids who read and write poetry show higher engagement and see themselves as “good readers” (Cole et al.). So if we open up our contemporary understanding of poetry to include spoken word, a highly accessible form of poetry, then we can open doors for many young students who would have otherwise never considered their creative writing and expressions as “poetic.” The highly accessible and collaborative healing nature of spoken word and slam poetry keeps students and writers engaged and empowered in the world around them!

Journaling

Different journals can have different intentions and can even elicit different kinds of writing. I'm often amazed by all the unique styles of journaling. These very customizable journals are more than just pages. They act as the container for the writer's deeply personal relationship to writing as a practice.

When I was in school I simply had one journal for all my thoughts, feelings, and poetry. Everything else was lecture notes and homework. It was simple and straightforward. Today however, I have a work journal, personal journals, E-Journals on devices, journals for special occasions, and believe it or not, this ever-revolving system works for me and all the kinds of writing I do. Personally, I believe a writer should have as many journals as they need, as long as they include the date written. I've even ripped out pages, taped and glued pieces into other journals to help me in my creative process when I felt stuck. Every journaling system is unique and should evolve with time, as the writer does.



Examples of Journal Types

Subject Notebooks

For a singular topic (such as: work, class, finance, therapy, etc.)

“Commonplace” Book

For any number of daily interests or topics

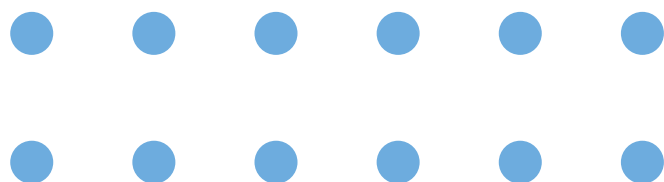
“Diary” Notebook

For emotional processing of our deepest internal feelings

“Observational” Journal

For noticing things, internally or externally, as they float by

Whatever the case may be, a key concept to keep in mind is mindfulness. Observe the tone of voice in the writing that comes out. Is it kind or cutting? What kinds of things do we notice in different states of being? A journal is a place to listen and sort through our thoughts and emotions, not to judge, criticize, or stifle just as we are trying to get the words on the page.





Writing Prompts:

Writing prompts is a creative process all on its own. A balance of both open-ended and specified questions can inspire curiosity and contemplation. It can be helpful to give brief examples to give students ideas based on framing and tone. Showing students how one might start writing according to a prompt can be vulnerable because we're starting to reveal our personal creative dreaming style. However, this invites students to also write with a level of vulnerability and inspiration to take it and make it their own.

- List formats are an easy way to generate more material to work with. Much like a sculptor, it is better to have more material to work with, rather than less.
- Letter Formats are another great way to generate freeflowing ideas. A letter can be written to anyone (A famous political figure, a past/present/future version of the self, internet trolls, a body, a geographical formation, etc.)



Figurative & Concrete Language

Once a regular practice of journaling is established, we can start to notice the way that we, as humans, naturally gravitate towards comparisons that connect us to the rest of the world around us.

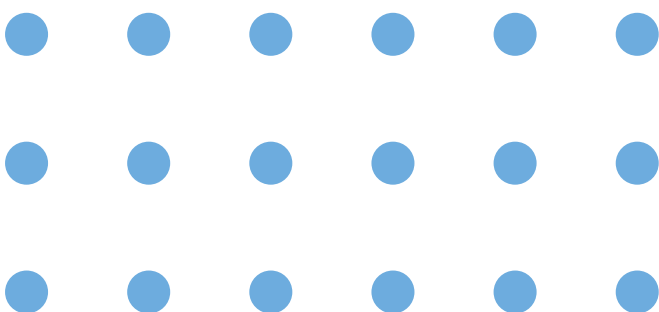
Concrete Descriptive language:

- Using as many of the senses (sight sound smell touch taste) as possible to describe an image in a way that paints a mental image in the readers mind.
- The goal is to describe an image so clearly that it appears in the reader's mind

Figurative Descriptive language:

- **Metaphors:** Comparing things to other things
- **Similes:** Comparing things while using the terms "like" or "as"

With the above two concepts in mind, we can find their uses everywhere.



Figurative & Concrete Language (Cont'd)

Examples:

“I am stressed, frazzled, and frustrated.”

Vs:

“I am torn between two tectonic plates, like the friction of the earth, waiting to erupt into an explosive force of molten magma.”

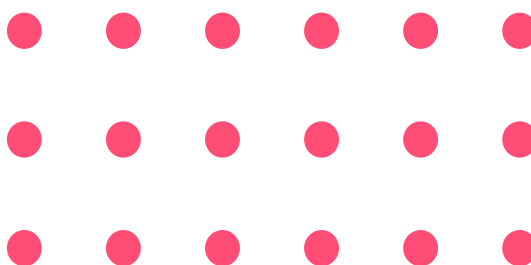
The first does work in terms of getting the writer’s point across, but the second uses metaphor and simile to play with the word’s meaning in a fun and rhythmic sounding way.

For another example, the following excerpt is a piece in which the assignment was to use as many of the senses as possible. Concrete and Figurative Language are both used to describe a scene with great impact and meaning from the writer.

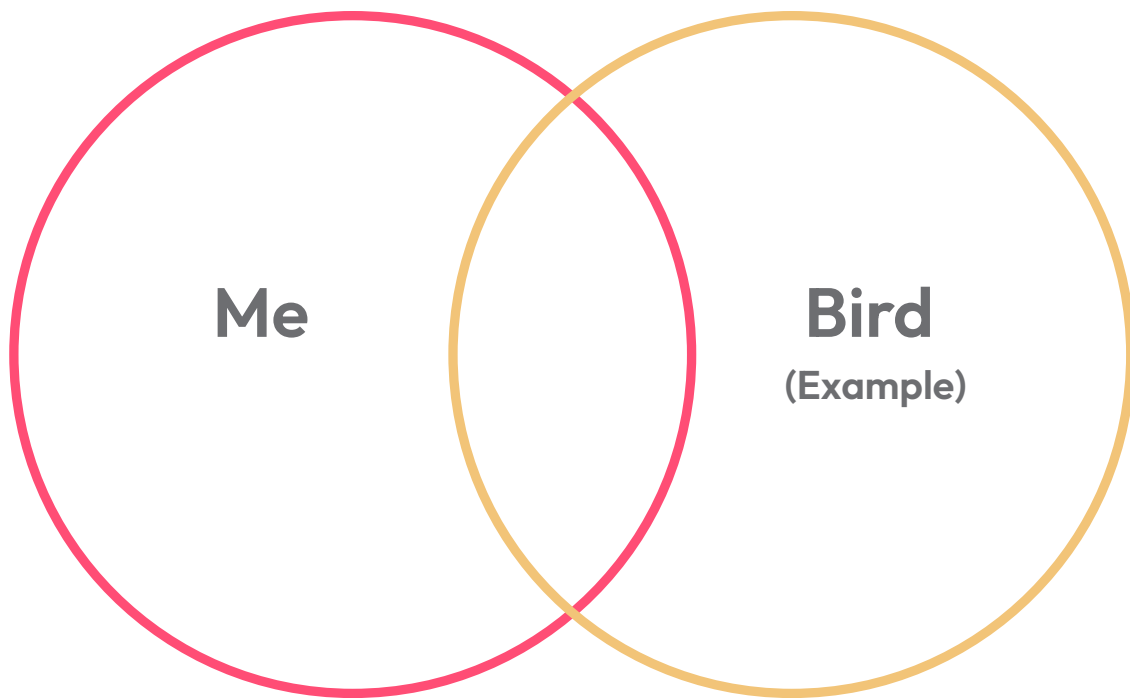
“As soon as I open the door a warm wave of spices envelopes my senses. This familiar smell makes a home in my mind. It gets comfortable, soaks into these walls. It simmers for hours on the stove, releasing flavor, making your mouth water. It is the aroma of Grandma Soila’s menudo. This ritual is one I know well. Hug my family on my way to the kitchen. Fill a bowl with meat and hominy, perfectly married in broth, and make my altar. Sprinkle chili flakes, crush oregano in my palms over the bowl. Top it off with strips of crisp cabbage, fresh lime, and hot corn tortillas on the side. Let us bow our heads over our bowls in prayer and be grateful for this holy time. Grandma smiles as she watches us consume her creation, her heirloom from ancestors.”

Workshops

An easy and helpful exercise to help students understand these language concepts.



Venn Diagram Exercise - Comparison and Identity



The Venn diagram above can be an easy and helpful visual tool to help students understand language concepts. Elementary and college students alike can benefit from this visual exercise.

I'll have students close their eyes and visualize something. It can be a plant, animal, or object. It can be something that gives them joy.

Then, using the venn diagram, students brainstorm some words that describe a.) themselves and b.) the plant/animal/object they've chosen to visualize.

Say for example a student chooses their cat. They would come up with some words that compare and contrast the qualities of themselves and their cat. Pets are a common choice for younger students.

This is an imaginative challenge that allows them to identify with word bank of vocabulary they've had a hand in curating.

Poems about our identities will always be impactful because we as people can each make an impact on the world around us.



Warm Up Questions

Below is a sample of prompt questions from a workshop I facilitated at the Center for the Arts, Escondido. The prompt themes were inspired by the intentions of the Staged Reading Series Festival, which included community, accessibility, representation.

Typically I would open up with some introductions, as well as opening discussion of relevant topics and values.

Time frames for these questions can be adjusted to accommodate the needs of the particular group of students

Questions:

1. What comes to mind when you think of “home” ? What colors, images, textures, sounds, and smells do you recognize?
2. What brought you here, to this point in space and time? What events or occurrences had to happen? Were any of them surprising? Why or why not? What did that look and feel like?
3. When was the last time you felt seen? What was the experience like? Was it comfortable? Was it uncomfortable? Was it through a screen, a story, a shared connection?



4. What pulls you deeper into the story of your life? What calls your attention? How can we start to play with the rules of “reality”?
5. What’s moving the plot forward? What is the challenge you are facing?
6. What songs might play in the soundtrack of your life? Who/what are the supporting roles? What items aid you in this story? What do you need for the journey?

End of Workshop

Open Mic Practice!

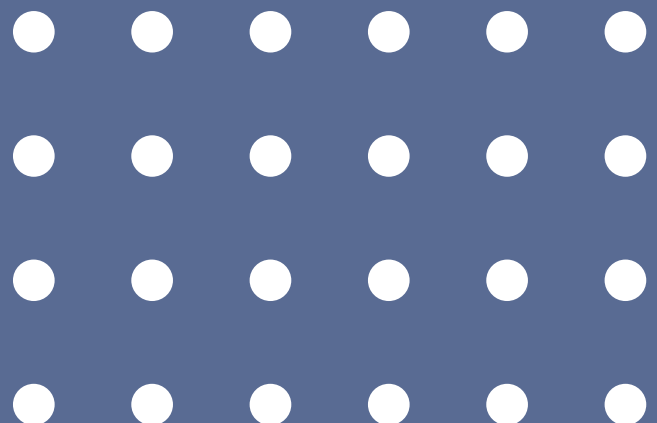


Beyond The Poem

It can feel so gratifying to have an idea for a poem, sit down and write the majority of it in a single “brain dump.” It’s very easy for some of us to be self-critical or sensitive to criticism or the views of others. We may not think very highly of our writing at times. It’s important to Step away from it, focus on something else, and take time to build kinder self- dialogue around the poem. You’ll be happily surprised to read it later, exclaiming to yourself, “Wow, I wrote that?”

It’s important to listen to experienced poets, either in person or online, and talk about the creative process with others, as there are gems of wisdom that only experiences can provide.

The radical power of spoken word is that the existence of the poet is part of the artwork itself, so simply remember to be uniquely you.



Performance

Poetry, when read and spoken aloud,

becomes just as much a part of the poem

as the words on the page.

Styles of performance vary among poets, in different regions, different personalities, and different contexts.

Poetry performed in a library is going to be vastly different than poetry read in a busy pizza parlor. Both can be an extremely valuable setting to practice in.

The nature of spoken word and poetry slam encourages poets to learn by watching other poets and observing varied techniques.

Through performing we can notice the sounds, rhythms, and feelings as they come out.

Public speaking is often referenced as a common fear, but by seeing and practicing performance we can learn how to overcome the fear of being seen at various times in our life.

CA Regional Poetry Resources

California has a rich interconnected web of poetry networks. These listed resources are a great place to start when learning and connecting with other writers.

Online resources:



Button Poetry

Videos of spoken word competitions including semi-finalists and published poets



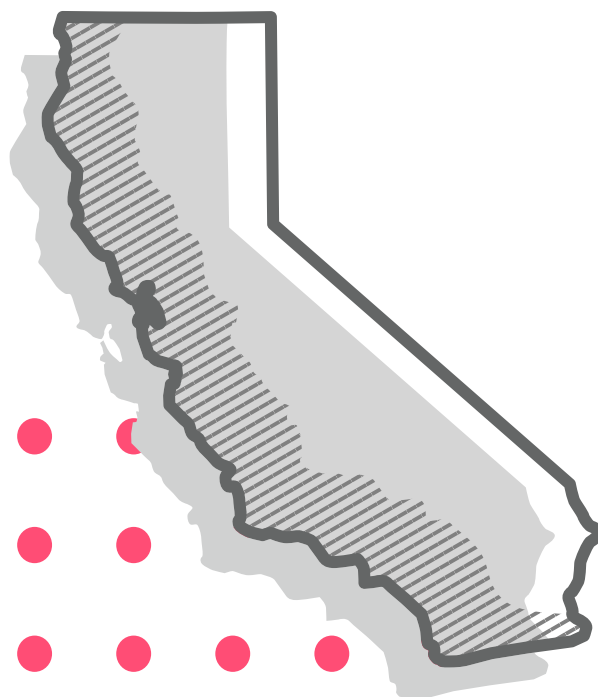
Youth Speaks

Videos from youth poetry competitions



Poetry Foundation

An internet archive of notable poets



Poet Laureates: Who and what are they?

In major cities across the nation, Poet Laureates are appointed to act as renowned representatives and liaisons for the local poetry community over a two year term.

Born in Sanger, Juan Felipe Herrera was the Poet Laureate of California in 2012 and went on to become the first Latino to be appointed U.S National Poet Laureate in 2015. Herrera cites his childhood memories, singing songs of the Mexican Revolution with his migrant farmworking mother as his introduction to poetry.

Learning about your local Poet Laureates is a great way to connect and learn about literary history in the making.

Poet Community Spaces:

Humboldt - Redwood Reworded

RichOak Events' Berkeley Slam & Oakland Slam

Santa Cruz - Mic Drop! at the 418 Project.

Stockton - With Our Words (WOW) Youth Poetry

San Jose - San Jose Poetry Slam

Fresno - Inner Ear Presents: The Beat Down Poetry

Visalia - The Loud Mouth Poetry Jam

San Diego - San Diego Poetry Slam

Note: The above list includes community spaces that I have come across in my 10 year journey as poet and organizer.

It is by no means extensive or exhaustive. However, it is a good directory of access points into spoken word poetry communities throughout California.



Acknowledgments:

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Poetry slam organizers like Bryan Medina, Michael Dominquez, Michael Jasso and many more in the Bay Area and all throughout the State of California.

Teachers that enrich their students with potent ideas, like Kenneth Chacon, Ariana Brown, & Rios de la Luz.

The creative collaboration of independent artists, like Jazz Diaz and David Cuevas.

The reciprocal care of creative friends that all do such amazing work in community.

The fantastic CCAE Theatricals non-profit team at the CA Center for the Arts, Escondido.

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A Word From the Director of Engagement

At CCAE Theatricals, we believe in the transformative power of storytelling—on stage, in classrooms, and within communities. The Poetry Curriculum Toolkit is more than just a resource; it's an invitation for educators and students to explore language, identity, and creative expression in meaningful ways.

Developed by our Arts Administration Fellow, Christina, this toolkit reflects their deep passion for arts education and their commitment to fostering creative youth development. Through their thoughtful curation of exercises, prompts, and adaptable lesson plans, Christina has crafted a resource that empowers young people to find their voice, build confidence, and connect with others through poetry.

Rooted in CCAE Theatricals' mission to illuminate individual experiences and cultivate a collective voice, this toolkit blends artistic exploration with social-emotional learning. Whether in a classroom, an afterschool program, or a theater workshop, these tools help young artists harness the power of words to express, engage, and inspire.

Thanks to Christina's dedication, this toolkit stands as a testament to the impact of arts engagement and education. Let's build a world where every young person has the opportunity to create, share, and be heard.

Dr. Tom Abruzzo
Director of Education & Engagement,
CCAЕ Theatricals



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