

# TEN TIPS FOR POETRY

## OPEN MICS

Leilani Squire

### OVERVIEW

Poetry comes alive when it is spoken and when it is heard. The poetry open mic is one of the best places to experience the power of poetry and develop the poetic voice. It is a place where you can create bonds of friendship with like-minded people. Regularly attending poetry open mics will inspire and push you to write poetry because you will always want new poems to read. Here are ten tips for participating in and benefiting from poetry open mics.

#### TIP ONE: READ YOUR BEST WORK

Carefully select your best poems. Reading your best efforts will strengthen your poetic muscle and inspire the audience. It's a good idea to have a constant source of new poems to select from because you will want to read new poems. Don't get in a rut and read the same poem over and over; you will lose confidence as a poet and bore the audience. Even if you have just written the next greatest poem, wait and work on it before you read it at an open mic. Some poets attempt this but very few can pull it off. Poets appreciate hearing a poem that relates to a current crisis. There are times when a global, national or maybe even local event occurs, and an older poem you have read before is the perfect one to read. Arrive early so you can sign up and be assured a place in the open mic.

#### TIP TWO: WORKSHOP YOUR POETRY

A poet workshops. This is the place where you hone your craft and become a better poet. Regularly attending a workshop makes you accountable for the work, in other words, you write poetry. Generally a facilitator leads the workshop in which everyone brings a poem to be reviewed by the group. Belonging to a supportive and encouraging group with both seasoned and new

poets, one where you feel a sense of camaraderie, is the best kind of workshop. Avoid toxic criticism as it cripples the creative process. If there are no poetry workshops in your area, start one! Or attend one of the many held around the country. Google poetry workshops, find one that looks interesting, then go! The Internet provides online workshops, which is another option. To be a part of the community of poets is vital to sustaining the work and developing your voice. And just think that the wonderful poetry you work on in the workshop will be the poems you read at the open mics!

### TIP THREE: LISTEN TO OTHER POETS

Reading poetry is an art. One of the best ways to learn this art is to listen to other poets. There are many different reading styles and you will probably prefer one style to another. Practice reading your poetry or your favorite poet. Get a tape recorder or use the recording application on your phone or computer and record yourself reading. Then listen. Repeat the process until you are satisfied with the quality and style of your reading. Many poetry open mics also have a featured reader or two. This is a good opportunity to hear the more experienced and popular poets in your community. If there are no featured poets in your area, listen to recordings of the great poets at the library or on the Internet. Remember, developing your own style will take time, so listen to other poets and practice reading out loud as much as you can.

### TIP FOUR: RESPECT THE TIME LIMIT

Different open mics have different time limits to read. It's best to know before you go to the open mic if you have 2 minutes or 1 poem, 3 minutes or 2 poems, 5 minutes or 7 minutes. Each time limit is different when you are in front of the microphone. Time each poem so you know which poems will fit in which time frame. During the open mic the moderator keeps track of each reader's time. Asking, "How much time do I have left?" or "Do I have time for one more?" oftentimes seems arrogant or spacey. These questions not only break the flow of the read, but it could vex the moderator, not to mention the poets waiting in the wings. Nor do you want to be cut off before you finish the poem. If you go over the time limit, you will be cut off. So, get out a stopwatch or use the clock on the wall and read your poems out loud and time them. Less is more couldn't be truer here!

### TIP FIVE: KEEP A LOG

Knowing what you read and where you read will give you confidence because you won't read the same poem again and again at the same open mic. It's boring to hear the same poet read the same poem over and over; it indicates the poet isn't practicing her craft. Keep track of the poems you read and where you read them. You may think you'll remember what you read last month, but you probably won't. Some poets keep their poems in a manila envelope and write the log on the front. Maybe your cell phone can serve as a log. Perhaps keeping a three-ring binder of poems with the log inside suits you. A notebook might also be handy at the reading, just in case you change your mind about what to read. Better yet, someone may request a poem of yours they particularly like.

### TIP SIX: REMEMBER TO BREATHE

The more you read at open mics the better you will become. But this doesn't mean you won't be nervous. Sometimes we can't control the clammy hands or the adrenalin rushing through our body before a reading. As you wait to approach the microphone, focus on the various teas listed on the menu behind the counter or the poster of Macchu Picchu next to the mystery novels. And breathe. This will help channel the nervous energy towards your center, the place from which you read. Remember you have work-shopped your poems, you have re-written and polished them, you have practiced reading aloud, you have timed each one, and you know the order in which you will read them. You have dreamed of reading your poetry at an open mic, so read with confidence and good posture. Breathe, relax and give the world what you want to say.

### TIP SEVEN: SUPPORT THE VENUE AND OTHER POETS

If poets won't listen to other poets, who will? If you won't listen to another poet, who will? If another poet won't listen to you, who will? When you read at an open poetry mic, plan on staying for the duration. Sometimes the facilitator talks too long, sometimes there are too many readers, sometimes you need to leave early because life happens, but if poets won't stay and listen to all the poets, who will? It's disheartening to be eager to read and be the last one up at

the microphone and only two people are left sitting in the audience. So stick around. You'll want the same consideration. If the open mic is at a coffee house, buy a cup of tea or coffee. If it's at a bookstore, buy a book or a bookmark. If a hat is passed around for the featured poets, drop in a dollar. If chapbooks are for sale and you can afford it, buy one.

#### TIP EIGHT: FIND YOUR NICHE

In the larger cities there are many different poetry communities and, thus, different types of open poetry mics. There's the hip crowd, the young crowd, the mature crowd, the slam crowd, the late night crowd, and the Sunday afternoon crowd. You won't know where you'll fit in until you try out the different venues. You may feel comfortable in one and not the other. Go where you feel comfortable. But don't be afraid to try out new venues because you never know where you will hear the rich and authentic voices. If you live where there is no poetry open mic, then start one at a coffee house, a library, or a bookstore. If that doesn't work out, invite a few friends over and begin a salon. Word might catch on and you might be the next hottest, or coolest, thing in the poetry community.

#### TIP NINE: NETWORK AND BUILD YOUR REPUTATION

Poets write poetry alone, but it takes interacting with other poets to truly develop as a poet. Find where your local poetry open mics are happening and become a part of the community. When you are at the open mics, talk to the person next to you. Go up and tell a poet whose work you admire that you enjoyed their poetry. Poets love this and need it, too. Socialize even though it might be hard for you at first. Make friends. This will help you become a part of the community and build your reputation. The best poetry community is in real time and space, but if there isn't one in your area, join an established virtual community. Yahoo! Groups is a great source for networking. Maybe you will start your own virtual community one day.

#### TIP TEN: WRITE POEMS, AND THEN WRITE MORE POEMS

One of the best reasons to go to poetry open mics is that you will write new poems and revise older ones, because, if you don't, you will get bored. Be a poet who is always reading new and vibrant poetry. People tune out if they

have heard the same poem a hundred times. Even if you frequent a few different venues, most likely you'll run into some of the same poets. The poetry world is a small community, no matter how large a city you live in. Be the kind of poet people are excited to hear. Write. Then write some more.

#### ABOUT LEILANI SQUIRE

Leilani Squire's poetry and short shorts have been published in *The Sun*, *Gentle Strength Quarterly*, *The Taylor Trust* and is forthcoming in *Eclipse*. She has been a featured poet in the Los Angeles area and a facilitator at Beyond Baroque in Venice, California. Her second screenplay was optioned for its edgy subject matter. For the past ten years she has been on the jury for The HUMANITAS Prize. She facilitates a creative writing workshop at the West Los Angeles Veterans Administration. Leilani produces "Returning Soldiers Speak" where veterans from different wars and conflicts read their poetry or prose. She is a Creativity Coach, trained by Eric Maisel, and Screenwriting Consultant. Contact Leilani at [leilanisquire@sbcglobal.net](mailto:leilanisquire@sbcglobal.net)



