



How to run a Poetry Karaoke session in your bookshop

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

National Poetry Day 2018 will take place on 4th October and the theme is **CHANGE**. With events, celebrations and special activities taking place the length and breadth of the UK, it's a chance for everyone to read, share and enjoy poetry.

Of course, there are good reasons for including poetry in your bookshop events offer every day of the year: sharing poetry promotes empathy and understanding between people, strengthens communities – and can provide a really enjoyable night out!

This toolkit includes suggestions on how to run informal poetry reading groups 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.

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

Conversation about poems and poetry is all about stories, whether a reader is telling the story of how a particular poem has been part of their life for years, or a group is sharing the adventure of reading a new poem.

By sharing a well-loved poem, readers often share something of themselves. Asking people to bring favourite poems is a great way to create a comfortable, easy atmosphere. In response to each poem, all people need to say is 'I like that' or 'It reminds me of...', or just settle back and enjoy listening.

Poetry Karaoke

Session purpose and process

- to enjoy reading and discussing poems and considering what makes them tick
- to enjoy sharing 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:

- Have a selection of poems ready in case not many readers come forward at first
- Setting up a poetry lucky dip is fun – let group members pick poems at random out of a hat, read and discuss them
- Prepare a poem to start and a poem to finish. Visit the [National Poetry Day](#) website, or the [Poetry Archive](#), or the [Scottish Poetry Library](#) for suggestions. America's [Poetry Foundation](#) and [Academy of American Poets](#) are also wonderful.
- As you read the poems, note the questions you want to ask yourself, and the sounds and words that intrigue, excite, jar or confuse you. Start simple and specific.
- 4 poems should be enough for a 1 hour session, but don't be surprised if you only discuss 2 or 3.

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
- 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 that people can simply come and enjoy the poems if they want: they don't HAVE to bring a poem.
- Make it clear that it is a chance to share existing poems, rather than a group for writers' feedback. (If you welcome poems people have written themselves, make that clear too – you might want to specify a maximum length.)

Environment

- Set up a comfortable area with refreshments
- Have a display of poetry books nearby so people can browse beforehand, 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 – talk to everybody beforehand and make a list of who wants to read (and how you'll cope if you have more than expected); or with a smaller group, whether you can simply set the ball rolling with a welcome and opening poems, then invite contributions.

Start

- Welcome, thank everybody for coming, and introduce yourself.
- Give a quick introduction and 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 selected poems from books*, or download them
- 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 read a poem aloud
- Thank them, and ask your opening question (see next sections).
- Ask if somebody else could 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.

**Make sure to credit appropriately and ensure the poem you're highlighting is in stock in some format in your shop.*

- 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. Say ‘I haven’t made up my mind, what do you think?’, ‘That’s a crucial question, what do you / what does everybody think?’, and 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 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, and try to note at least one observation by everybody.
- Plan a formal finish time, but add on 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
- 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.

See below for more questions developed to shape friendly, inclusive conversations about poetry

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

Your most essential tool is the preparation of questions with which you’ll open up discussion. Questions need to let readers do particular kinds of work at different stages in their reading: your aim is gradually to move conversation to a point where, instead of offering answers and observations, readers begin to ask the questions for themselves.

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?’ Strong rhythms, tongue-twisting phrases, emerging patterns?

‘Who/what/where/when...?’ Some poems are confusing to start with – acknowledge that, and spend a little time untangling a specific 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 else, 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?'



Poems to share



There are lots of poems on the theme of **CHANGE** on the **National Poetry Day** website, as well as recommendations of the best new poetry books.

Other sites worth checking:

[Forward Arts Foundation](#)

[National Poetry Library](#)

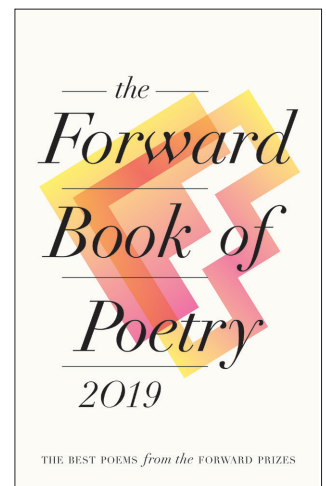
[Scottish Poetry Library](#)

[Poetry Book Society](#)

The **Forward Book of Poetry** showcases the best poetry published in the UK and Ireland over the previous year. It features all the shortlisted entries and highly commended poems from the Forward Prizes for Poetry, placing fresh voices alongside familiar name and is a great place to find the year's most exciting new poetry.

With questions, comments or for further information

email poetryday@forwardartsfoundation.org



Thanks to poet, artist and **National Poetry Day** Ambassador **Sophie Herxheimer** for producing four special **Poetry Social** posters. These can be downloaded too from the National Poetry Day website.



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www.nationalpoetryday.co.uk

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