The background features a blurred library setting with bookshelves. A semi-transparent dark grey horizontal band is overlaid across the middle. Below this band, an open book is visible at the bottom. Various white icons, including mathematical symbols like plus, zero, and X, and symbols like a question mark, a magnifying glass, and a person, are scattered throughout the scene. A white horizontal line is positioned in the upper right, and a white plus sign is in the lower right.

Spoken Word & Slam Poetry for Beginners

Presentation by Em Williamson for CCTC 2024



Agenda

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- Icebreaker Exercise
 - **Introduction to Spoken Word Poetry**
 - Exercise
 - **Break**
 - Exercise
 - **Introduction to Poetry Slams**
 - Exercise
 - Questions, Sharing, Final Thoughts

Part 1: Spoken Word

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! Icebreaker Exercise: The Poetic Exquisite Corpse

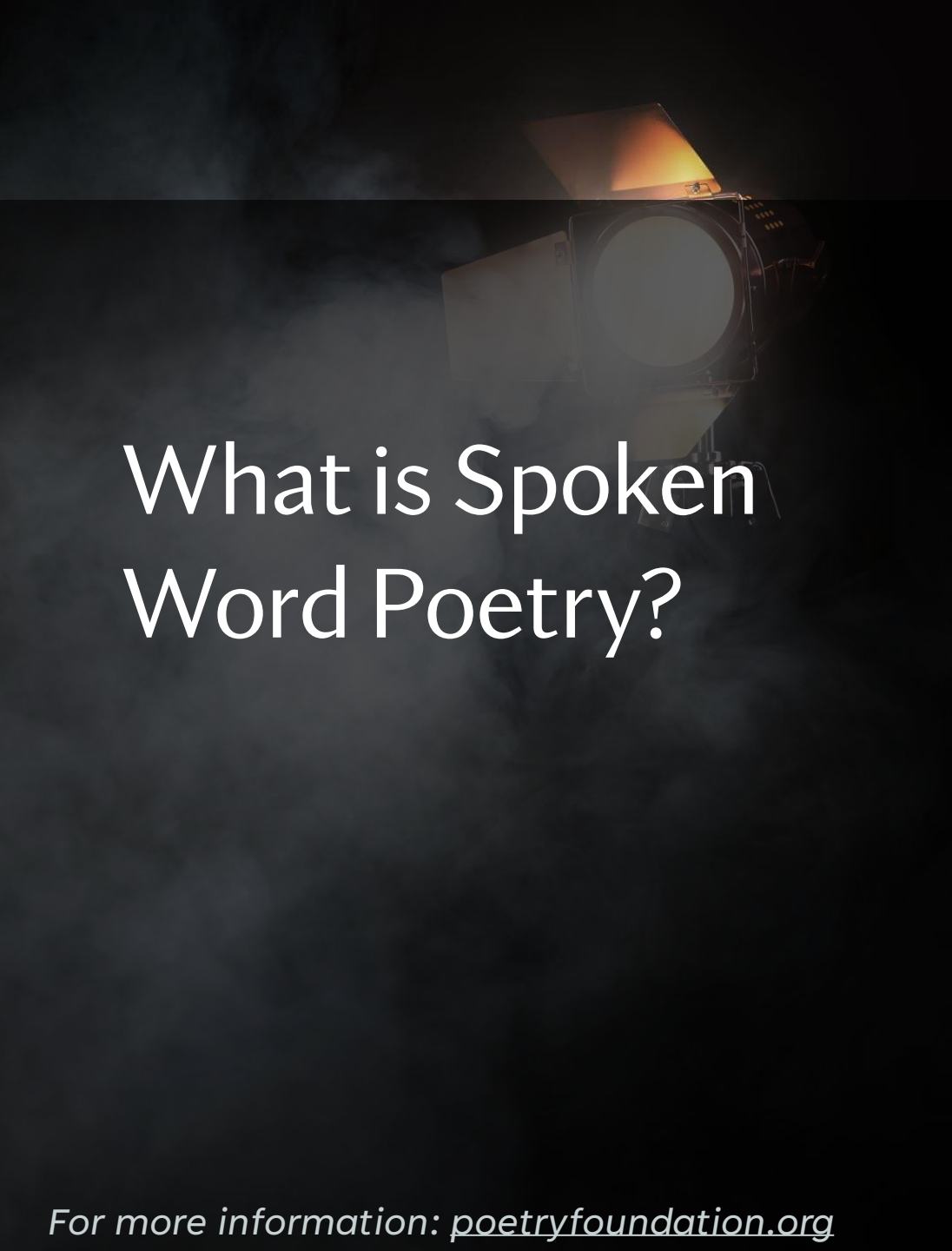
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1. One participant suggests a prompt
 2. On a blank piece of paper, each participant writes one line of poetry — there's no need to worry about making it "good"
 3. After writing one line, write a "half-line" underneath — basically, an incomplete line that could set up for something else
 4. Fold the piece of paper backwards so that you can only see the half-line
 5. Pass it to the person on your right
 6. Continue until you've filled up the entire page
 7. Read them — for best results, make it as dramatic as possible!

Why This Exercise?



- Reduces pressure on students
 - Students aren't as bogged down by feeling like they "can't" or "don't know how to" write poetry if they only have to write one line at a time
 - There is less pressure for each individual line to be "good" — plus the poems usually end up being pretty absurd regardless!
- Encourages collaboration
- Helps to start literary discussions
 - Students are able to consider where each person's train of thought went as the poem continued, leading to discussion surrounding literary tropes and styles





What is Spoken Word Poetry?


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- "Spoken word" generally describes any poetry intended to be **performed out loud** rather than read off a page
 - May contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music
 - Often refers to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community (but doesn't have to — we'll get into that!)
 - Because it is intended to be delivered orally, spoken word poetry sometimes makes use of more straightforward language than page poetry; however, elements of traditional poetry such as wordplay, rhyme, and metaphor can still be used

Rudy Francisco: "My Honest Poem"



Taylor Mali: "The The Impotence of Proofreading"





Spoken Word Poetry & Literary Discussion

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- Showing spoken word poetry videos in class can encourage discussion of poetic techniques such as metaphor, wordplay, rhyme, alliteration, etc...
 - Students can practise interpreting poetry as a group and building on one another's ideas through watching a video, which many find engaging
 - Students can be encouraged to explore their own tastes in poetry — for example, they could be assigned to find a spoken word video they enjoy and watch them as a class
 - But how about *writing* poetry?

Things My Students Have Told Me...

"I thought all poetry had to rhyme, but I'm not good at writing rhymes"



Poetry only has to rhyme if you want it to

"I thought all poetry had to sound 'fancy'/'poetic'"



All poets have their own unique style, so find what works for you!

"I thought all poetry had to be about 'poetic' (i.e. sad, romantic or philosophical) topics"



You can write a poem about whatever you want, including a funny or silly poem

"I didn't know poetry could be so much fun!"



Poetry IS fun, you just need to find what's fun for you!



The Benefits of Spoken Word for Students

In the Classroom

- Students learn to recognize and analyze elements of poetry such as metaphor, rhyme, alliteration, wordplay, etc. in a way they find accessible/approachable
- Students become better writers as a whole, learning to improve the flow of their writing, use poetic techniques, and make use of new vocabulary
- Students broaden their understandings of literary genres, literary history, and what poetry can look like


Outside the Classroom

- Students are able to use spoken word poetry as a form of self-expression to tell their own stories
- Students are able to build confidence through performance and through improving as writers
- Students develop a newfound love of poetry and literature, which may become a new hobby or even a career
- Students learn to collaborate with others and build a writing community of their own





A Big Reason Students Like Spoken Word: Self-Expression!

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- A lot of students, for whatever reason, come into poetry units feeling like they don't like poetry because the subject matter isn't relatable and has nothing to do with their lives
 - Being exposed to spoken word poetry on a variety of topics often allows students to learn that they can actually write about whatever they want, and still put together a fantastic poem
 - Students who used to think they "couldn't" write poetry end up realizing that actually, they totally can! Because to start writing a great spoken word poem, all you really need to do is...
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! Exercise: R-E-A-R pt. 1 — Rant

*Inspired by a similar exercise by Alberta poet
Jenna Butler (jennabutler.com)*

A lot of students think they can't write poetry. Well, maybe they don't know how to write poetry right now, but they probably know how to rant!

- Start writing down a rant about *any* topic you personally feel strongly about — it can range from funny to serious
- At this point, **don't** think about whether your writing is "good" or "poetic" — you can even start writing in prose if it's easier for you!
- The goal is to make sure your pen keeps moving no matter what, even if some of what you're writing makes no sense

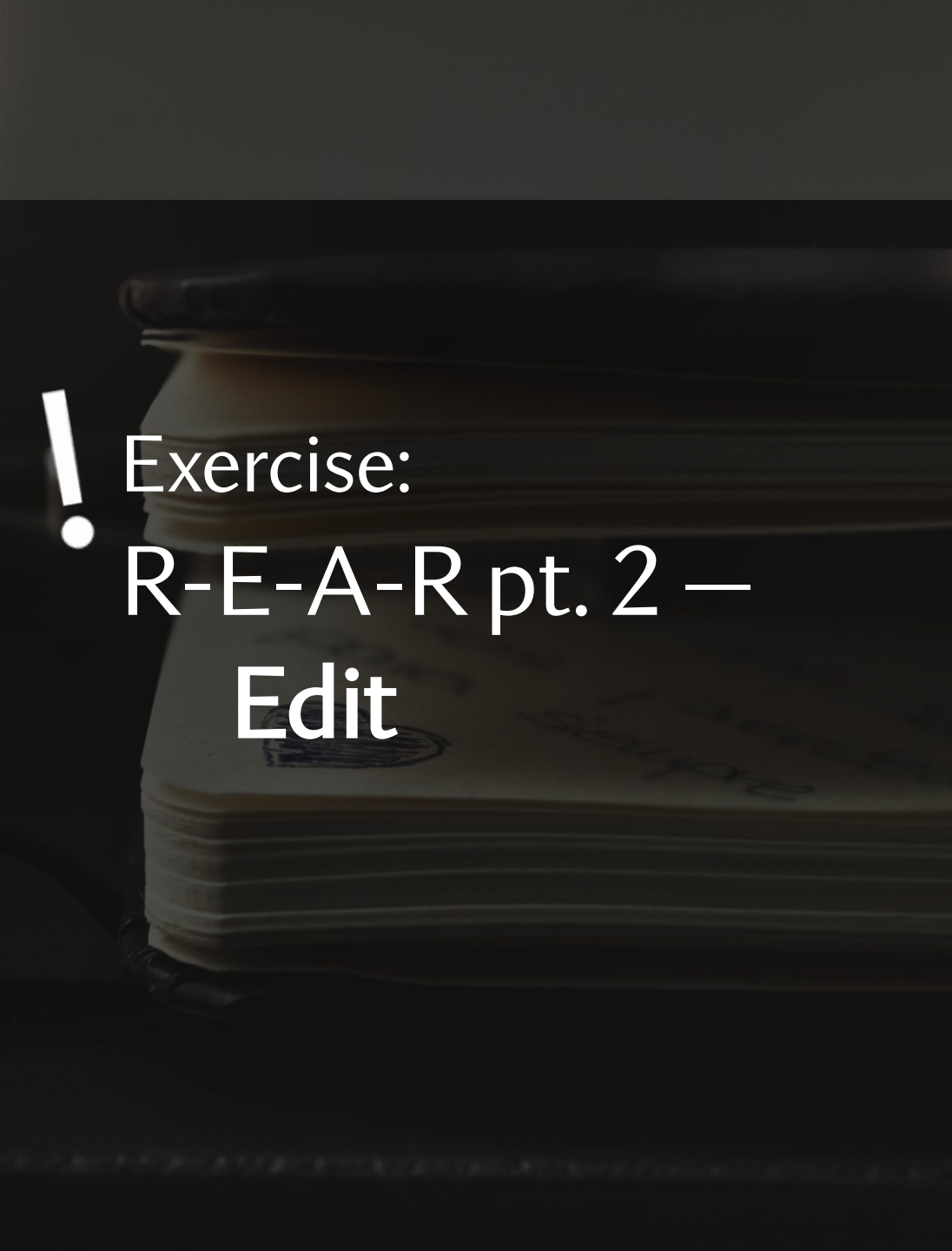
Why This Exercise?



- Takes the "writing poetry" out of writing poetry
 - If students start writing as a rant rather than actually starting to write a poem as a poem, they will feel less like they're being forced into something they don't know how to do
 - ... Though, if you have them write a rant after showing them some spoken poetry, they might start writing "poetically" without even noticing
- Everyone's got an opinion
 - If students are encouraged to write about whatever they want, writing itself becomes easier
- Encourages students to develop a creative process for writing and editing their work
 - It doesn't have to start out perfect!

Part 2: Poetry Slams





! Exercise:
R-E-A-R pt. 2 —
Edit

The editing phase is sort of like taking a hacksaw to your work.

The point isn't to make it perfect quite yet, but rather to just turn it into something workable. This could involve steps like:

- Rearranging the piece so that it more closely resembles poetry, or so that the ideas connect better
- Adjusting the wording so that it sounds more like a performance piece rather than an unhinged rant
- Entirely taking out any completely unusable sections
- If you want, you could even rewrite the whole thing more neatly!

Why This Exercise?



- Gets students used to the creative process
 - By writing first and editing later, students may feel less paralyzed by the idea of writing, and will be able to start writing more freely without worrying about whether their first draft is "good enough"
- Builds self-confidence
 - Students are able to realize that creative work must *become* good, and may not be a work of genius when they first write it
- Helps students to think critically about their own work, and develop independence
 - Being able to edit their own work and notice their own bad habits becomes a transferrable skill

A silhouette of a person with long hair, seen from the side, holding a microphone and performing on a stage. The background is dark with a bright light source creating a glow behind the performer.

What is a Poetry Slam?

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- While "spoken word" refers to any kind of poetry designed to be performed out loud, the term "slam poetry" comes specifically from **poetry slams**
 - While spoken word poetry can be performed for any kind of audience, poetry slams are specifically competitive — poems are given a score from 1-10 by a panel of judges, and after several rounds of competition, a winner is determined
 - Poetry slams tend to be very lively events... and in a way that's completely intentional, often very unprofessional events too!

The History & Purpose of Poetry Slam

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- Poetry slam was originally born out of a desire to "**bring poetry to the people**"
 - In the 1980s, American poet Marc Smith believed the poetry scene of the time to be "too structured and stuffy," and began experimenting with turning open mic poetry readings into competitions
 - The idea became that anyone could write, perform and judge poetry, regardless of factors like their age, gender, race, cultural background, level of education, etc...
 - Since its origins, slam poetry has only become more popular, and slam competitions and communities are everywhere — including junior high and high schools!

Julia (Youth Speaks): Love Letter to Gaga Ball



Get Lit LA (Youth Speaks): Cat Poem



Poetry Slam in the Classroom

— Pt. 1 —

**To hold a poetry slam in your classroom,
you will need:**

- Individual students or teams of students who would like to **compete** (usually at least 4 individuals or teams works best)
- 3-5 students who will act as "**judges**"
- One student to **keep time** on their phone or with a stopwatch
- A student who's good at math to **keep score** (or if you *really* don't trust them, this can be your job)
- Something to **write the scores on**, like scorecards, whiteboards, or even just notebooks
- Optional: One student to be the "**MC**" who will ask for the judges' scores and announce the next poet coming up to the stage each round, or you can do this

Poetry Slam in the Classroom

— Pt. 2 —

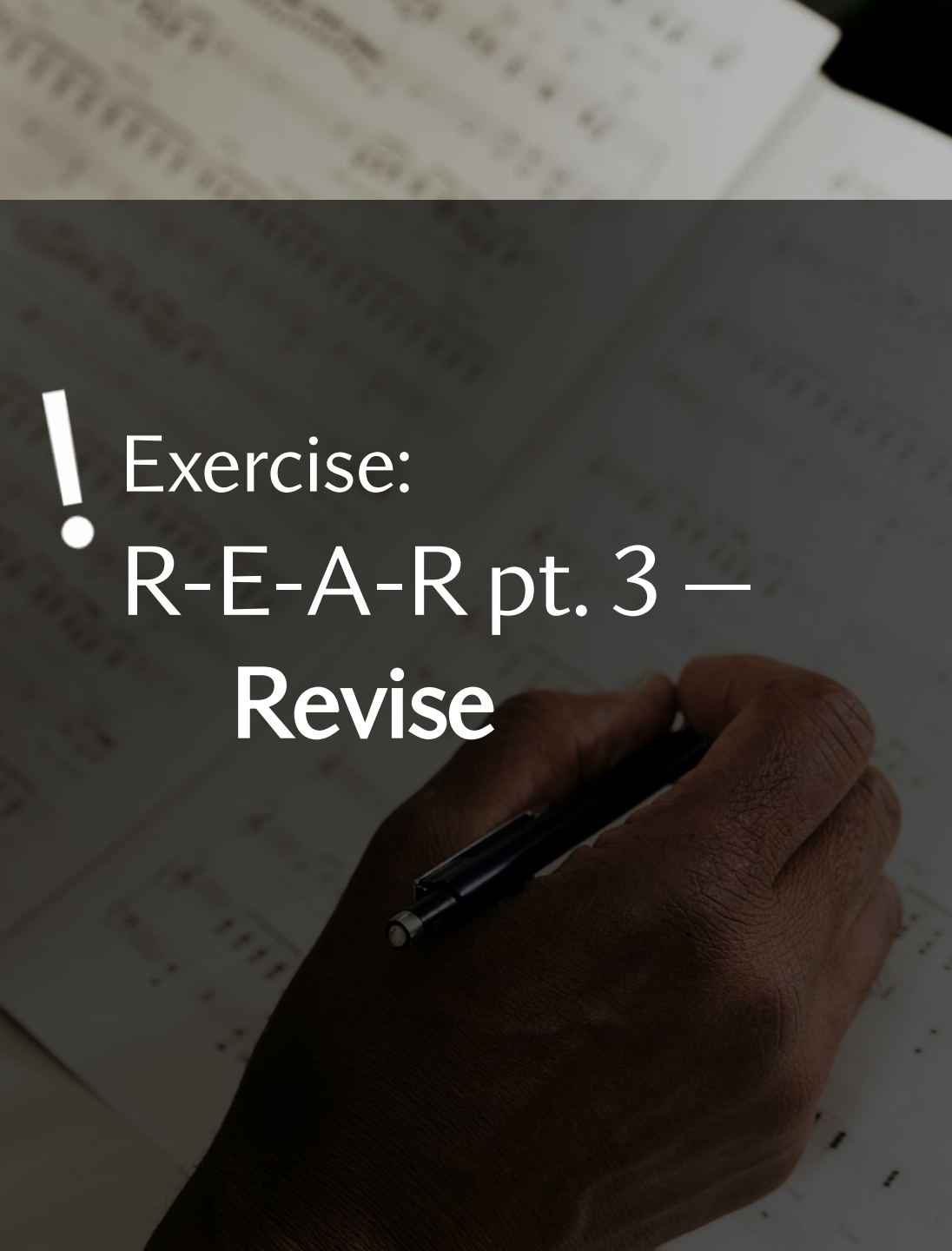
Once participants are ready...

1. The teacher or **MC** explains the rules
2. A "sacrificial poet" who is *not* competing performs a poem, and the **judges** score it just to practise
3. There are several rounds of poetry slam in which **each poet or team** performs *once*, and each time, they receive scores out of ten from the **judges**
 - However, keep in mind that poems can only be a maximum of three minutes with a ten second grace period, after which point 0.5 points is deducted for every ten seconds over — that's why you have a **timekeeper!**
4. After as many rounds as you like, have your scorekeeper total up the scores and decide a winner! If you're short on time or have a lot of participants, you can also do things elimination-style.

The Benefits of Poetry Slam for Students

- Offers opportunities for students who are competitive to get invested in something they wouldn't normally do
 - But meanwhile, students who are anxious about competitions can fulfill other roles, like judging, scorekeeping or timekeeping; it's always a collaborative effort
- Boosts students' confidence
 - Students will get a confidence boost from getting a good score, but also potentially from something like judging, as they've been deemed competent enough to judge the quality of poetry!
- Students write, experience & judge poetry on their own terms
 - Students don't have to feel like they're being forced to do something they find boring, but rather, they work to establish their own styles, tastes and group norms





! Exercise:
R-E-A-R pt. 3 —
Revise

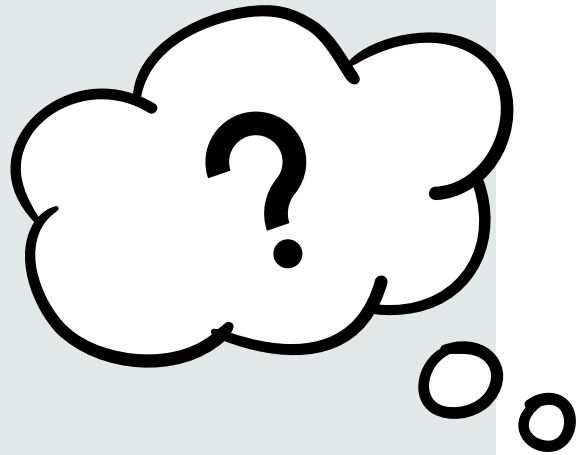
The revision phase is the final step, in which you work on making the piece as good as possible.

Watching a few of your favorite poetry videos for inspiration beforehand is a great way to get started — think about what makes a good spoken word poem, to you personally.

This can be done alone, but peer revision is also a great way to encourage students to collaborate and get used to accepting feedback:

- Exchange your poem with someone else
- Discuss briefly where *you* want the poem to go, and what you'd like to improve
- Read one another's work, and give specific, respectful feedback — the "compliment sandwich" can be a good method

Why This Exercise?



- Helps students to develop their own personal style, and refine their own writing
 - By critically examining what they like and what they think makes "good" writing, students are able to improve their own writing in a way that transfers to both critical and creative work
- Students learn to both give and receive feedback
 - Giving and receiving feedback on creative work helps students to build confidence and develop strong collaboration skills
 - Editing other people's work also helps to build critical thinking skills, as students examine the features of other artists' work and learn to articulate how it "works" and what might be improved



Questions?
Comments?
Complaints?
Tomatoes to throw at me?



Resources! (Scan the QR Code)

