

SOUTHERN WORD SLAM GUIDELINES

(adapted from the Brave New Voices slam rules)

Although we de-stress the competition, we have come up with the following guidelines. Please abide by them so as to avoid controversy and keep the focus on the fun and expansive nature of poetry and the event as a whole.

- Participants must be between 14 and 19 years old (a poet's age is determined by their age on July 18, 2026).
- There are no wrong answers and the standard is yourself. Please show us all how dope you really are.
- All of the work used in the Slam must be original writing by the individuals slamming. Poets and teams that plagiarize will be disqualified. Plagiarism, as defined by Miriam-Webster, is to steal and pass off (the ideas or words of another) as one's own; use (another's production) without crediting the source; to commit literary theft; present as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.
- The Slam is about the poet(s) and the mic(s). Props may not be used in the Slam. Props are defined as any non-body piece of equipment. Musical accompaniment (excluding mouth/body percussion) may not be used in the Slam.
- **Please arrive 30 minutes prior to slam time.** Before starting the slam, we need to draw the order of the slam. We reserve the right to disqualify any poet or team from the slam who is not present in time for the drawing.
- Each individual will compete in a qualifying slam final for their school or county which leads to the statewide finals. Winner(s) of the school/county slam final will advance to the statewide finals. In some cases, it may be necessary to compete in a quarterfinal school event before reaching a county slam final.
- All slams are open to poets in other Tennessee counties interested in participating. Slams in Davidson (aka Nashville), Coffee, Williamson, and Shelby Counties will feed the statewide final. **However, an individual may compete in only one qualifying slam.**
- The individual county final will consist of one three minute round (pieces three minutes or less in length). Based on the event, a specified number of winners from each county final will advance to the statewide finals.
- The statewide finals will consist of two rounds. A one minute round (pieces one minute or less in length) and a three minute round (pieces three minutes or less in length). Scores will be combined for a cumulative total. The poet with the highest total will win. **You must perform two new pieces in the finals. Pieces performed in a county slam final may not be repeated in the statewide finals.** If you had to participate in a quarterfinal bout to reach the finals, you may repeat the piece you performed from the quarterfinal bout. **But, you may not repeat the piece performed in the school/county slam final.**
- You may only compete in one qualifying slam.
- We encourage you to become intimately familiar with the poems with which you will compete. Memorization is not required, but you do want to really bust your piece. Rehearse!
- All participating youth must submit a signed release form prior to participating in the **statewide finals** event as we will be filming the event.
- Since the slams are an all ages event, there is no alcohol or using of illegal drugs at any point as part of these events (this includes adults over the age of 21). Any participants violating this policy will be asked to leave, and will serve a probationary period of one year before being eligible for future Southern Word events.

JUDGES & SCORING

- The slam will be judged by a mixed panel of poets, adults, and youth. Many judges will be pre-selected and some will come from the audience.
- We are planning to have 5 judges at each event. Judges will score pieces from 0 to 10. The highest and lowest scores will be dropped. The three remaining scores will be added for a potential high score of “30” or 3 judges x 10 points each. If there are 4 judges, only the lowest score will be dropped. If there are 3 judges, no scores will be dropped.
- Judges will be given criteria for judging on both writing and performance quality, and will serve more as encouragers of young writers than judges. This will be as standardized as much as possible, but like each of us, judges come with their own biases for and against certain topics and styles. Remember, the standard is yourself. Be your own best “judge.”
- Judges will be seated together at a table on stage or in the first row. Their scores will be passed down to the scorekeeper who will tally the scores. The rankings will be announced at the end of the competition. If performers are interested in learning their scores, we can share these with poets after the event.
- Each individual and group piece must be under the specified length. We will have a 10 second grace period, after which significant time penalties will incur.
- If individuals or teams go over the time limits, their scores will be penalized .5 for each 10 seconds beyond the limit. (e.g. for a three minute piece: 3:11 to 3:20: – .5 point penalty; 3:21 to 3:30 – 1 point penalty; 3:31 to 3:40 – 1.5 point penalty, etc.)
- Each competition will have a scorekeeper/timekeeper and emcee.
- In the event that there is a tie in the score, teams and individuals will be given a short amount of time to write from a prompt. Participants will perform this piece and the judges will determine the winner based on this performance.
- In the event a team wants to lodge a protest against another team for an infraction of any of the rules, it is the responsibility of the protesting team to contact a slam organizer prior to the conclusion of the bout. WE STRONGLY DISCOURAGE this unless you really mean it. We will schedule a protest meeting if need be. Remember, it’s not the points that count. Of course, we all want to make the Finals. But we all can’t. Oh well.

CONTENT

- Southern Word creates platforms for young people to speak about the real hopes and challenges in their lives. We want poets to address issues and subjects that they feel need to be addressed.
- Southern Word is part of an inclusive spoken word movement and the Southern Word Grand Slam will bring together a wide range of people of all ages and backgrounds. It is an incredible opportunity to expose the region to the magic of spoken word.
- Please create your pieces to reach this audience by prioritizing profundity and realizing that part of being heard is understanding your audience and crafting your message accordingly.
- Poets and teams should regulate themselves and avoid excessive violence, sexually explicit content and/or language that is degrading to any group of people. Judges will be incorporating this factor into their scoring in determining who is prepared to appear in the final events. Please, do it for the love.
- There will be a collective content/trigger warning issued by the MC at the top of the bout.
- A trigger warning (TW) is a statement delivered prior to the performance of a poem to indicate that content is potentially distressing to the audience (i.e. violence, assault, abuse, addiction) so that they may either prepare themselves or opt out of viewing the content.

- Poets are allowed to deliver a TW themselves, but time will start at first utterance or audience engagement as specified earlier in the rules.
- If poets or teams would like a specified TW before a particular poem, but would like it to happen outside of the poem's clocked time, they will have the option of having the MC issue a more specific trigger warning directly before any poem. Please notify the slam manager in advance of the bout.
- The TW will be as follows: "For the next poem from _____ (poet listed on card) there is a trigger warning for (list content written on the card). If you would like to step out of the room now or at any point throughout the poem to take care of yourself, feel free to do so."

FILMING

- We will be filming the finals event and will ask that all performers sign a release form that will permit usage of the footage for educational, archival, and promotional purposes.
- Due to the fact that there will be many youth performers, we will not permit filming of the event by outside cameras without special permission. Please contact info@southernword.org if you have special needs in this regard.

PRIZES

- Prizes and exposure may emerge over the course of the year and competition. However, the main goal is to grow the young writer community in the region, perform at the highest level possible, and realize our potential as individuals and as a group.
- For poets from and residing in Middle Tennessee, we will award the three top finalists from the finals slam with the first option to compete at Brave New Voices 2026 in San Francisco, CA.
- In addition to the competition, this event is about building a young writer community and providing artistic and educational opportunities to high school students from the region. To attend Brave New Voices as part of the team, you must have attended high school in Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, or Kentucky.
- While our main focus is the region's public schools, we are dedicated to creating community by building bridges. Students who attend private high schools are encouraged to compete, but only one private high school student will be eligible to serve on the team travelling to Brave New Voices. The top private school finisher who places in the top three winners of the Southern Word Grand Slam Final will have first option at the slot. This does not guarantee a slot to a private school student. If a private school student is not one of the top three finishers at the Southern Word Grand Slam Final, then there will be no private school student representative.
- To ensure widest accessibility to this opportunity, a maximum of two poets per school will be eligible to attend Brave New Voices as part of the Southern Word team.
- "First option" means that the winner must also indicate a willingness to write and rehearse this summer in preparation for Brave New Voices as part of a team. Talent only takes you so far at Brave New Voices and in life. Dedication and work ethic ultimately will differentiate you and us on the national stage. While we may or may not win, we are determined to represent the region in its best light.
- We also fundraise together as a team to make the trip to Brave New Voices possible. We are trying to create an organization in which artists support their own development as writers, performers, leaders, and people.
- We set aside a couple slam team slots to recognize the youth poets who have been working hard with us all year on their craft and the organization, to create balance to the team in terms of skill or regional representation, or recognize an emcee who can also hold their own as a spoken word poet.