

# “Transforming Current Events through Spoken Word Poetry”

## Ms. Cooper, 8<sup>th</sup> U.S. History



<http://pumirror.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Spoken-Word.jpg>

### Rationale

Sometimes, when we read about difficult or controversial issues in the news, we can feel overwhelmed, as if we're powerless to change things. There's even a name for this tendency: *compassion fatigue*, the feeling that you can't feel as strongly as you once did about important causes because the feeling is too painful.

Our spoken word poetry project is designed to tackle this conundrum head-on: to create “hard empathy,” or empathy that inspires creativity and action, [as game designer Jane McGonigal has observed](#).

In addition, your eighth-grade year offers many ways to get involved in world events, including discussing current events every day in history and preparing a Community Impact Project in science. With this spoken word history project, I hope you will open yourself even more to caring about world issues and to feeling that you have the capacity to make a difference in one or more of them.

## Overview

We've started the year by looking at key current events vocabulary and news articles. To translate our understanding of current issues into something even more powerful, we are going to do a spoken word poetry project during part of the first quarter.

This project will ask you to write and film a spoken word poem of 2 to 3 minutes that **brings to life** and **puts a human face on** an issue facing people somewhere in the world today. The issue can be local, national or international. It can be political, social, cultural, economic, or otherwise.

We will be spending a day in the library for you to browse and research the issue you want to write about, and then you will have time in class to think, write, and rehearse before you – finally! – film at home.

You may already know more about spoken word poetry than you think. Artists such as Beyonce and Blood Orange have incorporated it into their songs, and Daveed Diggs (the original Marquis de Lafayette and Thomas Jefferson in *Hamilton: An American Musical*) got his theatrical start by doing slam poetry when he attended Berkeley High School.

### Urban Dictionary's definition of "[spoken word poetry](#)"

Spoken Word is [poetry](#) intended for onstage performance, rather than exclusively designed for the page. While often associated with [hip-hop](#) culture, it also has strong [ties](#) to storytelling, modern poetry, post-modern performance, and monologue theatre, as well as [jazz](#), [blues](#), and folk music.

Due to its immediacy and direct rapport with its audience, this type of poetry often contains references to current events and [issues](#) relevant to a contemporary audience.

At its best, spoken word is a powerful, high-energy form of expression that attracts artists and audiences of all ages from a wide range of disciplines and socio-cultural backgrounds.

## Project Steps

(See TWSs for the weeks of Sep. 10, 17 and 24 for many more details.)

1. Decide on a topic you'd like to write about. We will spend time in the library browsing articles, so you'll have plenty of time to consider ideas.
2. Find at least three articles on that topic. At least two articles should be feature stories that go deeper. For more on the distinction between news and feature stories, take a look at the handout we discussed in class.
3. Create a bibliography of the articles you've found in NoodleTools, a wonderful research program (we'll go over how to do this in class).
4. Annotate (underline and write something in the margin about) at least 5-6+ facts or quotations from each of your articles. Underline especially quotations you could use in your poem, as some of your poem will consist of quotations from real people involved with the issue.
5. Write out a description of what you would like your poem to talk about, getting feedback from a classmate and then from Ms. Cooper. (I'll give you some questions to help guide you once you reach this step.) If you want to include a "[gateway line](#)" here, please do!
6. Begin writing, keeping in mind to:
  - a) Harness the power of internal rhyme and other language devices in your writing, as Ms. Burton explored by looking at Tupac's "The Rose That Grew from Concrete."
  - b) Include at least two quotations you have found in your reading from real people involved with the issue, identifying them if possible. In your final draft, please indicate words that are not your own with a different color, font or formatting (such as italics or underlined). Then, at the end, list which source each quotation came from. This list can be on a separate piece of paper from the actual poem.
  - c) Inspire "hard empathy" in your listeners – an emotion that makes people want to *act* on what you are writing about when they hear it.
  - d) Imagine what your poem will *sound* like, in addition to how it looks on the page. Ultimately you will be filming it to show everyone else in the class.

## What You Will Turn in at the End of the Project

1. The poem itself, printed out, with a title and heading.
  - In your final draft, please indicate words that are taken from a source (anything that is not your own words) with a different color, font or formatting (such as italics or underlined). Then, at the end, list which source each quotation came from. This can be on a separate piece of paper from the actual poem.
2. Works Cited list, done in NoodleTools and *exported* so that the formatting is correct.
3. Your video of yourself performing the poem, ideally uploaded from an iPad/iPhone to Google Drive and shared with me (scooper@flintridgeprep.org).
4. A written reflection on what you learned from doing the project. I'll give more details on this later.

