

How to Host a Favorite Poem Community Reading

Local Favorite Poem readings allow diverse members of a single community to come together for an afternoon or evening to share unique, personal treasures: the poems they love. Over the past three years, we have documented nearly 1,000 Favorite Poem readings across the United States. Invariably, the readings contribute to a convivial community spirit. Many schools and libraries have made Favorite Poem readings annual events.

The project staff has offered suggestions to people planning readings at large-city book stores, small-town libraries, elementary and high schools, even birthday and anniversary parties. Below, you'll find our best advice.

Types of Events

The planning required for the reading will depend upon how you design the event. You may decide to host a casual event: an "open mic" occasion with people signing up to read just before you get started. If you choose to do a low-key reading, you might want to have an open sign-up some weeks before the event, on a first-come first-served basis. That way, the readers will be prepared ahead of time—and they'll be less likely to break the rule about not reading their own poems.

More formal events tend to go better, but they take more planning. A carefully produced community event involves a selection process. You should start planning about six to eight weeks before the scheduled date, so that you can solicit and select readers. Such events have the advantage of ensuring an exciting variety of readers and poems. Your early publicity can ask people from your community to send you their favorite poems, along with a brief statement about the poems' significance in their lives. You or your staff will make the selections for your event and will extend invitations to those selected. You may decide to ask a local poet to help you make selections. Fifteen is a good number of readers. Of that number, perhaps three or four—or more, if you choose—may be prominent people in your community.

Selecting Readers

A broad range of readers, from school children to elected officials, makes for a lively event. You may solicit readers from schools, religious and civic organizations, programs such as Poets-in-the-Schools, etc. A variety of backgrounds, languages other than English, different kinds of education and profession, all add variety and interest.

Because Robert Pinsky is interested in the civic presence of poetry, he's included some eminent Americans in the Favorite Poem Project's recorded archives: former President and Mrs. Clinton, Georgia Supreme Court Justice Leah Ward Sears, Boston's Reverend Michael Haynes. Local Favorite Poem readings have featured many public figures: the governors of Maine and Iowa, the mayors of Los Angeles and Saint Louis, and senators from several states. However you proceed with your event, it's worthwhile to invite some civic figures from your community to participate—the mayor, an alderman, the president of a local college or university, a philanthropist or community leader.

The Only Rule

The only rule for an event affiliated with the Favorite Poem Project is that poems recited are NOT poems the readers or their friends or relatives have written, but ones they have read, perhaps many times, and to which they feel a personal attachment. Poems, for example, from the great history of American poetry, perhaps by Walt Whitman or Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes or Gwendolyn Brooks, Wallace Stevens or Robert Frost. A reader might also choose Robert Browning or William Shakespeare—or a poem written in another language, along with an English translation. At various readings, we've heard poems in Chinese, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, Yiddish, Vietnamese and other languages.

Planning Your Reading

How you plan and organize the reading should be consistent with your interests and resources. Here are the steps we suggest:

1. **Set a date** six to eight weeks from the time you begin planning. (The Festival would like to have a density of Favorite Poem events in May, 2009. If your organization can plan an event during that month, that is preferable. However, events can be planned for other times as well.)
2. If you don't already have one, **secure a space** for your reading.
3. **Solicit general readers.** Announce in a newsletter, on local bulletin boards or in classified or free ads that you're looking for readers for a Favorite Poem event. You might even make up a contact form that asks "What's your favorite poem—and why?" and place drop-boxes at some high-traffic places: your local library check-out desk, the grocery store, some schools. What you'll look for, along with good poems, are the most interesting personal attachments to poems.
4. **Make a poster** to publicize both the event and the need for readers.
5. **Invite special readers.** The solicitation process, handled correctly, is sure to uncover some interesting participants. However, beyond that you might need to seek out and invite some interesting poetry-lovers. Send invitations and make some calls to local public figures to see who might join you.
6. **Write a press release.** Once you begin to finalize your reader list, you can write a brief press release that includes the date, time and location of the event. Quotations from the participants may add texture and generate press and public interest. We suggest making events free and open to the public. Send or fax your press release to the local media—newspapers, TV and cable stations. Follow up with phone calls a day or two after the release goes out.
7. **Spread the word.** Get your posters up around town, get free listings in local papers' "Going Out" sections and tell everyone you know!
8. If you want the audience to follow along, **create a program** to pass out the night of event. It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Even a simple program that presents the order of readers, their names and their chosen poems is useful. It's better not to include the text of the poems to be read, as this can be distracting.

Important Suggestions

The readings Robert Pinsky has hosted have been unique and wonderful. Audiences really like this kind of evening, and the readers themselves are inspired by it. People always leave the events thinking, often audibly, about what poems they would choose. Having had successful readings we've learned a few things. Here they are:

- The readers should be personal, not general, in answering the question, "Why have I chosen this poem from among my favorites?" This is the big, important point to emphasize: not a term paper, but an account of the reader's experience.
- Tell everyone, emphatically, that they are limited to **five minutes**. That way, even the most long-winded readers won't go on too long. Five minutes is a long time, and should be enough for the poem and for explaining their connection to it. If a poem takes longer than five minutes to read, an excerpt will do.
- Absolutely nothing in writing should be allowed, except for the poem. There should be no reading of prose; participants who speak informally, from the heart, are far more effective. This prevents homework assignment or book report style digressions away from why readers are reading a particular poem. People who are lively and interesting as themselves can become dull and monotonous when reading from prepared text.
- Also, there are advantages to having the readers sit on a stage or in the front of the room in a crescent of chairs: the audience can watch their responses to each other and can also mark the progress of the reading.

(This content is taken from "Favorite Poem Community Readings" on www.favoritepoem.org)