© Henny Beaumont 2019

How to throw your own Poem-a-Thon

We have also created template communications for you to use in promoting your Guides. In this pack you'll find

Additional resources

1. Poem-a-Thon spreadsheet – keep track of your readers and running order
2. Poem prompts to share and develop
3. Planning checklist

What is a Poem-a-Thon?

A Poem-a Thon is a way for poets and poetry supporters to get together as a community to raise money revolving around sponsored poetry readings. To run a Poem-a-Thon you'll need:

- A cause you care about.
- Some dedicated and enthusiastic people.

The idea is to have a constant 'relay' of poets reading poems throughout a set period – a few hours, morning or afternoon or even a whole day. Poets can read their own work or choose poems to share that are important to them in reflecting on the theme of climate change, environmental emergency or associated areas. You may have specific local or community issues that would fit under this umbrella. The main thing is to create a chain of sponsored readings to raise awareness and funds for projects that are important to you and your community.

Poets signing up to read on the day should be encouraged to bring along guests to support the other poets, donate to your cause and enjoy some special poems and voices.

How does it work?

Each poet signs up to a timed slot during which they read their own choice of poems. We have found that allocating ten minutes per reader works well. This allows for a minute or so at the beginning and end of each slot for poets to changeover and be introduced, with about 8 minutes of reading time. This time could be longer if you have fewer poets to fit in, or shorter if, for example you organise a poem-a-thon with younger readers.

Defining your scope

These events can be as big or as small as you are comfortable with. You may have a group of friends who get together every month and share poems and you could make that a slightly more formal reading. You may wish to use your local Stanza group or invite poets from your region to come together for a particular cause. Decide if it will be invitation-only to read or open to a wider range of poets.

You could run two events – a Poem-a-Thon during the afternoon to be followed by a readings from more well-known local poets to round off your day. This is how the Poets for the Planet event has been structured. Or you may wish to intersperse some local musicians with your poets to create a wider event. There's scope for creativity!

Choose a name

The launch event for Poets for the Planet in London in 2020 is called 'Verse Aid'. You may wish to use that or choose your own name that chimes more specifically with your community, area or fund-raising concerns.

Once you've agreed on a name, ask everyone involved to use it for clarity of purpose, publicity and fundraising.

Fundraising – who is it for?

The purpose of a Poem-a-Thon, aside from consciousness raising, is largely fundraising for your chosen charity or cause. As Poets for the Planet we decided to choose two charities – one larger scale, global organisation and one UK-based. For our London launch these are Bees for Development and Earthwatch to support their crucial work. All funds raised by our Poem-a-Thon through sponsorship and through donations at the event will go to these charities.

You may want to set a minimum level of fundraising you'd like each poet to achieve, for example £20.

Each poet who reads will be asked to organise sponsors. This can be done through a group fundraising site (details will be provided once you have signed up) or individuals setting up their own pages. Go Fund Me and Just Giving are the most common, although there are several others. See below for more detail on setting up a group Just Giving page.

You can also include additional fundraising elements to your event, such as a raffle. Ask for prizes to be donated and sell tickets on the door. If any of your poets have pamphlets or collections, they may be willing to donate a proportion of any sales on the day to your cause. You can even have a bake-off and sell off the spoils! Just check with your venue first that they are comfortable with anything like a bake-sale.

Setting up Just Giving group pages

For the Poets for the Planet launch event 'Verse Aid', we have used Just Giving to raise donations. This allowed us to set up separate streams for both of our selected charities and readers could choose which one they want to support. There are other fund-raising platforms, but here's an outline of how we have connected Poem-a-Thon readers with sponsors and the charities.

- Each reader needs to create an account on JustGiving (if they don't already have one).
- Then they can go to the team page and click 'Join the team'. We have two options - one for each charity.
- Each reader can then create an event page for themselves which is linked to the main event JustGiving pages.
- Click Join the team
- Click Create your fundraising page
- Describe your event
- Post the link on your social media, send emails, tell your friends.

If individuals have already set up a fund raising page, they will have the option to link an existing page after joining the team.

Choosing a venue

You will need to estimate how many readers you will have and how many supporters they might bring along over the course of your event. If you already hold events locally and have access to free premises, that's ideal. Key issues to bear in mind are:

- Accessibility – the upstairs room of a pub may not work for anyone with access issues.
- Acoustics – will you need a mic and speakers? These could add cost if they are not already provided by a venue.
- Food, drink and facilities – if you're going to be in a venue that provides food and drink, encourage supporters to purchase and support the venue. If not, find out if you can or need to provide it. Be aware of any restrictions around alcohol, but you could do tea, coffee and snacks, depending on how long your event will be.
- Parking – it's always useful to include parking information in your event details, particularly if your event is not being held where there is simple access to public transport.

Finding your poets and readers

Once you've decided on a name, date, venue and your charities, you'll need to find your poets. Most of these will probably come from groups you are already part of, or a bringing together of different groups. Depending on whether you are setting up an invitation-only event or an open sign-up, you will need to ensure you keep an eye on numbers.

You can either run a spreadsheet with sign ups, allocating slots as people commit, or create a Doodle Poll which will allow you to automate the process and keep time conflicts to a minimum (see below). We have created a template spreadsheet for you if you are running a smaller event.

Ask your readers to provide a couple of lines of biography to introduce them. Give them a deadline at least a week before the event to send these in. They will give the audience a sense of each poet or reader and break up the readings. The biographies can be kept in a Word file or spreadsheet and printed out for those introducing the readers.

Running a Doodle Poll

https://doodle.com/en/

You can sign up for a free trial and set up your poll. Your poets can select their own time slots which saves you filling in and monitoring a spreadsheet. There's no double booking because everyone can see who has selected which slot. You can then download the file once it's filled in.

Publicising

Poem-a-Thons work best with a supportive audience. Encourage all your participating poets to use their networks, friends and social media platforms to invite supporterss to their reading and to support others. The most useful places to publicise your event are:

- Facebook – set up an event page where you can put up all the relevant details about time, place and readers.
- Twitter – your readers can alert their followers to their fundraising and the overall event
- Instagram – readers can put up information about the event, share poems and images before and after the readings
- Email – the old fashioned email to friends and family with details of fundraising is still effective

The more tech-savvy may wish to use Event-brite to set up a page and monitor who is interested or coming to help keep track of numbers, although this can incur costs.

On the day

You will need to ensure that you have enough organisers and stewards present throughout the day to greet guests and ensure the 'relay' runs smoothly. If your event will run over several hours, you should ask for volunteers to sign up to 'MC' during the day. Ideally each MC will take, for example, an hour's shift to cue up, introduce and time the readers. Again a spreadsheet or Doodle Poll will help you fill and track the time slots. For a smaller event you may only need one or two people to take turns.

Invest in an egg timer or use a mobile phone to time each reader. Interruptions shouldn't be intrusive, but you need to make clear that over-runs must be minimised or your event could be derailed.

Encourage your audience to stay and support poets they don't know or haven't heard before.

At the end of the event, collect any additional donations to be given to your chosen charity. Don't forget to take away any spare leaflets, raffles or other paraphernalia.

Above all, have fun!