

# Page Fright

Connecting historical poems with contemporary spoken word: a resource for students from **The Poetry Society**



*Benjamin Zephaniah  
and Dylan Thomas*



## Benjamin Zephaniah & Dylan Thomas

This Page Fright resource looks at the work of two poets: Benjamin Zephaniah and Dylan Thomas. It is designed to support the filmed performances available at [poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright](http://poetrysociety.org.uk/pagefright)

Before you try the activities here, watch the films and explore the information provided alongside them. By exploring the Page Fright webpages you will see how contemporary spoken word artists continue to be inspired by historical writers and how the same themes can prompt very different responses and very different poems.

**Benjamin Zephaniah** is a poet from Birmingham, but whose poetry is strongly influenced by the music and poetry of Jamaica, and by what he calls 'street politics'. **Dylan Thomas** was a Welsh poet writing in the middle of the twentieth century. He lived a flamboyant life in London and New York, before his untimely death aged just thirty nine. Both poems explored here use repetition and repeated lines (refrains) to try and elicit a strong emotional response from the audience about topics that are important to the poet.

These exercises will help you explore poetic techniques and will guide you through writing your own poems inspired by the themes, form and style of Zephaniah and Thomas.

## Poetry and music

Benjamin Zephaniah came to prominence in the 1980s with his powerful political poetry that challenged the established order. Along with Linton Kwesi Johnson, he popularised Dub Poetry, a form of performance poetry that evolved from Reggae music. Dub poetry is sometimes performed over music, which adds another dimension to the meaning.

### Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece inspired by and performed over a piece of music. First, find a piece of instrumental music that inspires you. You can use YouTube for this. Try searching for 'instrumental reggae' or 'instrumental jazz'.

Once you have decided on your piece of music, listen to it several times, making notes on the different associations you make while it is playing. For example, you could:

- Note down words or phrases that pop into your head as you listen
- Write down the feelings the music evokes. Does it make you think of particular memories or people? What mood does it put you in?
- Close your eyes while you listen. What colours and images does the music make you think of?

Once you have listened to your piece of music a few times and have made notes, start to write a poem. Continue to listen to your piece as you write and think about how the words fit with the music. You may need to repeat this process several times. This is not necessarily rap so don't worry about hitting the beat exactly, it's more about your vocals sitting well on top of the music.

For inspiration, listen to a different version of 'Rong Radio Station' accompanied by music ([bit.ly/1SJpLyS](http://bit.ly/1SJpLyS)) or 'Five Nights of Bleeding' by Linton Kwesi Johnston ([bit.ly/1OV3XwJ](http://bit.ly/1OV3XwJ)).

## Repetition

'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' is an emotional and compelling poem about the death of Dylan Thomas's father. It is written in a form called a villanelle. A villanelle is a complex form of poetry that only two rhymes throughout, and includes two refrains (repeating lines).

### Have a go

Your challenge is to write a poem or spoken word piece using a refrain at the end of each verse. The idea isn't to follow all the complicated rules of a villanelle, but to include a refrain in your poem which reinforces its message.

First, think of an issue which you feel strongly about. This could be youth unemployment, education, inequality, or even public transport – anything that you feel passionately about.

Now note down all the opinions you have about your chosen issue, the way it affects your daily life and how it makes you feel.

As you start to shape your notes into a poem, think carefully about what you use as a refrain. It could be a realisation like Zephaniah's "I've been listening to the rong radio station", a question, or even a statement of propaganda. Whatever you chose to use, it needs to make sense each time it is repeated at the end of a verse.

For some inspiration, try watching 'Beasley Street' by John Cooper Clark ([bit.ly/1Ln5f52](http://bit.ly/1Ln5f52)) or 'Villanelle for the Wound' by Sean Patrick Muloy ([bit.ly/1Rw7XEV](http://bit.ly/1Rw7XEV)).

If you'd like to try writing a villanelle, you can find all the rules that they follow here: [bit.ly/1QkKryr](http://bit.ly/1QkKryr)

### Oral tradition

The oral tradition of sharing stories, songs and poems verbally predates the written word by thousands of years. Poets used rhythm, rhyme and repetition to make their poems memorable and performance was incredibly important.

Benjamin is one of many poets who are passionate about the importance of spoken poetry. He says: “The oral tradition thrives when there are restrictions on people’s abilities to speak or when they have no access to the media.” ([bit.ly/1JwAiuy](http://bit.ly/1JwAiuy)).

### Have a go

Your challenge is to choose one of the poems you have written so far and learn it by heart so you can perform it completely from memory.

Before you start to learn your chosen poem, you may want to edit parts of it to make sure that it is optimised for performance. Read it through a few times and change any sections that feel strange to say out loud. Consider adding internal rhyme and alliteration to drive the lines and make it easier to remember. Don’t be afraid to edit your poem as you go along.

### How to learn your poem

There are many techniques you can use to learn your poem, but the one that really works and which most performers use is simple repetition. You could also try the following:

- Record yourself reading the poem and play it back to yourself many times, joining in with the lines you know
- Challenge yourself to memorise two lines at a time
- Copy your poem out in long hand
- Move around while you recite the poem
- Try and recall the feelings you had when you wrote the poem as you learn it

Once you have learnt the poem, think about how you can perform it to have the most impact on your audience. Consider using volume, tone of voice and pace to emphasise important sections. Think about your physicality and use gesture, body language and facial expression as you perform. Remember to leave pauses in your reading – this allows the audience to catch up and gives extra resonance to what you say.

If you need some inspiration, go back to the Page Fright films again and pay close attention to how Benjamin Zephaniah uses his body and voice as he performs.

### Performance

Finally, perform your poem to an audience. This could be your family, friends or classmates. As you perform, pay attention to the audience’s reactions – this will help you improve next time.

### Create your own Page Fright film

We hope these writing exercises have allowed you to think about Zephaniah and Thomas’s poems and to explore your own responses to the themes, forms and techniques they contain.

You can continue to edit and develop your response poems, or write a new poem in response to other themes these pieces have inspired you to think about.

Once you are happy with a poem, then you can have a go at creating your own Page Fright film at [poetrysociety.org.uk/my-page-fright](http://poetrysociety.org.uk/my-page-fright)