

Managing the Untameable Open Mic

Usually open mics work amazingly well considering the number of people involved. There's a lot of good will and support for people who take the risk of sharing a bit of their work or themselves.

Usually most people stay through the open mic after reading through courtesy even if too nervous to hear anything from the fright of public speaking. Some, by nerves of obliviousness, talk over the people in the open mic as if the performance they just did, when others do it, is like tv broadcast. Occasionally you'll have people speak, then bail.

Everyone has to start somewhere. To present is a different skill than to compose. Some people want an outlet to get confidence. Some want to get something off their chest. Some want to get air time about their new project or announce their series elsewhere.

At open mics you can get the most diverse voices. Some may be raw, some dramatically polished, some high on the random, some high on the predictable and occasionally, just high. Open mics can be a handful. They can be anyone, at any stage of craft, but often they have a certain number of people who are starting to write, just coming out of the secret writer closet and are baring their soul, often in vague terms of pain and death. They are often giving off waves of shaking fear with arms or voice quivering. At Dusty Owl if someone said this was their first time at an open mic there'd be a roar of cheers and hoots and applause at "popping their cherry" for reading.

Sometimes there's the person who wants to recite what they wrote 30 years ago to a new audience and sometimes there's someone who wants to share the brilliant bit they just wrote on the napkin while the previous person read.

In any case there's a chance to stand out and be seen and make new connections and to discover new people that wow you, or that you should avoid in break. You can give new writing a dry run on a real audience and see what flies and what clunks because reading in front of people tends to torque in a different way than in front of your mirror.

Sometimes with an open mic, as an organizer, you're beating the drum to get someone to come up. Sometime you're beating people off with a stick.

If you don't control the open mic in some way, you could have a room where everyone is there to read but not listen. You can become a collector for those who are there to promote themselves but more do a smash and grab than participating in the community.

Usually there's only a person or two who makes some sour move but it can be hard for organizers to sort out because it's never quite the same problem as last time.

Open mics can become long because someone takes over for 10, 20 – I've even heard of 40 minutes – with no one stepping up to stop it. Perhaps because it always seems on the edge of ending but doesn't. If your open mic is derailing regularly you can control who reads or for how long.

From what I've seen at various series, there have been many solutions for how long:

- a cap on number of poems per person, 1 or 2
- a cap on maximum time (1, 2 or 4 minutes for example)
- only doing open mic some part of the year
- limit the total time in a night to half an hour, regardless of how many read
- policing the time of any one reader with
 - a whistle,
 - a prominently placed stopwatch
 - reminders through the evening
 - a waved flag,
 - bouncers who bring cane towards stage
 - or someone who raises a hand at the 1 minute left, 30 seconds left marks

Solutions to who:

- pre-register the sign up at the previous open mic
- draw lots from a name in the hat

- first 5 to sign up get a place, rest of list draws lots for a spot. if they went the previous session, they aren't eligible for automatic spot, only for lot-drawing
- cap the total number of people, say 6 or 10, on first come, first read (then occasionally you have people who sign up and take off until they guess it is their turn)
- open only to those vetted by approved list of publishers
- open set is open only to those who do the workshop
- a run-off before the main event happens and judges rank who makes the cut
- keep track and limit to one time per month or a percentage of times
- a private word with someone who insists on reading every time at every series in town to share the wealth of time with others or ban them

Of course if you get that all running smoothly, there can be other wrinkles, like a drunk and disorderly audience member, either part of the reading or happened to wander in, who heckles. But if we wanted staid with no unpredictability, a poetry reading's probably not the ticket we wanted for the evening.