

# ReelEducation

LESSON: Deaf Jam

Film length: 55 minutes

Lesson Length: 30 minutes

Grades 9-12

# Deaf Jam

 COMMUNITY  
CINEMA

ReelAbilities | TORONTO  
FILM FESTIVAL

 ITVS

 CPB  
Corporation  
for Public  
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ENDOWMENT  
FOR THE ARTS

 INDEPENDENT LENS 

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[WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/DEAF-JAM/](http://WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/DEAF-JAM/)

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## Lesson Title: Deaf Jam

### Synopsis:

Aneta is an Israeli immigrant and a Deaf teen. First introduced to American Sign Language Poetry, she boldly enters the spoken word slam scene where she meets Tahani, a hearing Palestinian slam poet. They embark on a performance duet, creating a new form of slam poetry that speaks to both the hearing and the Deaf.

**Film Length:** 55 minutes

### Resources:

**Film Link:** <https://vimeo.com/261557063>

**Activity Time:** 30 Minutes

## Before Viewing

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION

#### What is American Sign Language (ASL)?

ASL is the dominant sign language of Deaf communities in the U.S., Mexico. The language is not a signed version of English but is manual and visual, with information conveyed with the shape and movement of the hands and other parts of the body and with facial expressions. In ASL there are five components to a sign: palm orientation, location, hand shapes, movement, and facial expression (including movements of the head, mouth, or eyebrows).

Although gesture is used in sign languages just as it is in spoken languages, a sign language is fundamentally different, with its own grammar, syntax, morphology, and other language components. Thus, ASL is quite different from British Sign Language, even though the spoken languages of both countries are the same. Historically, American Sign Language is a derivative of French Sign Language. Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc established the first permanent school in the United States for deaf students in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut, now called the American School for the Deaf.

## What is ASL Poetry?

ASL poetry is a performance art form utilizing body language, rhythm, and movement to create a three-dimensional picture equivalent to one created by oral poetry. The similarity of hand shapes can act as alliteration, and using the same hand shape repetitively works as rhyme. Visual Vernacular (a term originated by Bernard Bragg) involves cinematic concepts, some of which are inherent in ASL. The technique involves references to close-ups, wide shots, and images dissolving into other images, as well as to “cutting” back and forth between characters to show different points of view in a scene. Signed poetry grew out of a tradition of playing with the language in Deaf clubs throughout the country, where deaf individuals and their families and friends would congregate for entertainment and to socialize.

ASL poetry has been described as “a kind of writing in space ... a language in motion, and, like oral poetry, truly inseparable from its realization in performance” (Edward S. Klima and Ursula Bellugi, “Poetry Without Sound,” 1983).

## Deaf Culture

Deaf culture refers to the beliefs, values, and behaviors, along with the shared institutions, of communities that are affected by deafness and that use sign language as their primary means of communication. A core view of the Deaf community is that deafness is a difference in human experience rather than a disability to be corrected. Deaf culture does not automatically include all people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Membership in the community is defined by the individual’s own sense of identity. Thus, the community may include family members of deaf people and sign language interpreters. Used as a cultural label, the word Deaf is capitalized; when used to describe the audiological condition, the word is written with a lowercase d.

## After Watching

### THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. What are your initial impressions of the film?
2. Did you identify with any moments or scenes in the film?
3. Have you ever been exposed to ASL poetry before?
4. Did you find any moments you related to from your own life?
5. What do you think about Aneta’s decision to not be voiced at the Nuyorican Poetry Slam and then her decision to collaborate with Tahani, the spoken word poet?

6. What kind of effect do you think the poetry workshops had on Aneta?
7. What do you think about Aneta's redefinition of "deaf" at the end of the film?
8. What other ways can poetry be expressed?

## Suggestions For Action

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Is ASL offered at schools in your community?  
If so, ask ASL students (deaf and hearing) to do a presentation about their language learning experiences for a local civic or other organization. Arrange a screening of **Deaf Jam** with the goal of having the deaf and hearing students create some poetry and perform it together at the local library or another venue.  
**(This will need the support of an interpreting program or organization.)**
2. Work with a local youth organization to start a poetry slam in your community. Get the participation of others who are familiar with the spoken word movement and/or hip-hop to help organize the activity.  
  
For rules and guidelines for poetry slams, check this website: [www.poetryslam.com/index](http://www.poetryslam.com/index)
3. **Organize a poetry group that meets regularly.** For each meeting, have one member choose a favorite poet whose poems are read at the meeting or shown on a computer with subtitles and lead a brief discussion about the poet. Or, make the meetings thematic, with members bringing in poems to perform about a particular topic, e.g., love, nature, separation, travel, etc.

# Deaf Jam

4. **Provide an opportunity for young people**—hearing and deaf—in your community to develop their literacy and creative expression skills. Start a Youth Speaks chapter or a club modeled after Youth Speaks ([youthspeaks.org/voice](http://youthspeaks.org/voice)). Alternatively, work with a local youth organization such as the Boys & Girls Club to start a program modeled on Youth Speaks or another spoken word organization.

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.itvs.org/engagement](http://www.itvs.org/engagement), the website of the Independent Television Service (ITVS). For local information, check the website of your PBS station.

## Canadian Resources

The following information is for reference should questions arise about this subject matter during discussions. The filmmaker requests that facilitators offer the resources listed if necessary but gear discussions away from these topics as they are not relevant to the film.

## Cochlear implants

[www.ohio.edu/ethics/2001-conferences](http://www.ohio.edu/ethics/2001-conferences)

This brief paper from Ohio University's Institute for Applied & Professional Ethics discusses Deaf culture's opposition to cochlear implants from an ethical perspective.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochlear\\_implant](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cochlear_implant)

This site contains a clear illustration of the inner ear and location of a cochlear implant, along with links to how speech and music sound with an implant.

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