

# How To Create a Persian Poetry Forum

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Poetry is an important part of art and culture. In Persian literature, poetry plays the role of a mass medium that communicates teachings, such as values, philosophy, education, ethics, and faith, feelings, such as love, joy, and sorrow, entertainment, eroticism, even food recipes, and a lot more. Persian poetry is a vehicle of storytelling. While a reader enjoys the literary beauty and the rhyme of the poetry, they strive to understand the meaning that is masterfully enveloped in words, so they can take away a lesson for life. Deservingly, a few verses of a poem by Rumi, Hafiz, Sa'di, Attar, or Khayyam can serve as a compelling argument in a disagreement between two Persian (Farsi) speakers.

The strength of Persian poetry in bringing people together and its focal place in the Persian community's shared identity, makes poetry a well-qualified substance for library programming, especially if the goal is to create a place of belonging. Regardless of educational background or reading preferences, everyone can recite a few lines of a poem of a well-known poet. Frequently, they surprise you by presenting a well-composed poem by themselves. Whether you plan for academic-level lectures or target a group of community members who just want to casually enjoy literature, poetry is your winning ticket.

## Recipe

*Courtesy of the Persian Poetry Forum of Los Angeles*

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Total: 12+ months

Prep: 2 months

Steep: As long as possible

Yield: 1 community-size serving

### INGREDIENTS

- ✦ Sieve
- ✦ Community partners: at least two; the more, the better
- ✦ Poems: several core books, Rumi, Hafiz, Sa'di, Parvin, and Forough to start
- ✦ Poets: preferably local/home grown
- ✦ Fun: bundles
- ✦ Music performances: live or video clips, a couple of generous pinches
- ✦ Organic judgment-free presence
- ✦ Fresh care and advocacy →

### STEPS

1. **Strain your thoughts through the community sieve.**

Remember, you are creating a “place.” Your core ingredient and the context for everything else is “with” (not wheat)! Strain your thoughts thoroughly through a fine-mesh sieve of “community” and remove all “for”s. A successful poetry forum is made *with* community members, not *for* them! Don’t assume you know what your community needs. Don’t let the demographic data give you tunnel vision. Listen to community members.

2. **Onboard your partners.** Start with identifying assets in your community, i.e. one or two community members who are knowledgeable in poetry or have strong ties in the community and know others. You sometimes find them in the next door coffee shop, local senior center, recreation center, or chamber of commerce; sometimes, you need to look no farther than your circulation desk to find them while borrowing a poetry book. A flyer can go a long way.

Once you’ve identified one or two community assets, meet with them, talk about your idea of bringing people together around poetry. Then, listen to what they “care” for, or what they think their friends and community “care” for. Instead of looking for gaps to fill, try identifying things that bring people together, whether it is a friendly recurring gathering to recite poetry or a lecture series on the therapeutic aspects of poetry.

3. **Develop the program mission and goals.** In collaboration with your community partners, develop a mission statement and a set of goals for your program, type them in a shared document, and use that document as the backbone of your program. When programming and promoting your Poetry Forum, or at the beginning of each session, refer to this document and take a few minutes to talk about the why of your program.

4. **Select a topic.** For the first few sessions, work with your partners to choose the topic of the program. Pick a theme for each session, such as love, dating, courting, sorrow, or

grief, something that your community is currently dealing with. Alternatively, you can consider introducing a poet and talking about different themes in their poetry. As the Forum comes together and participants form a cohort, consider polling their ideas.

Persian poetry is a never-ending cultural treasure; make an effort to find the sweet spots where it meets the daily life of your community as well as the values of the greater society. Be culturally sensitive toward both the Persian heritage and your society.

5. **Research.** Well, it’s time to get your hands on the materials and craft the content of your program in close collaboration with your partners, speakers, etc. Autopilot is not a very good choice for this step. You’d want to spearhead your team in the research phase of each program session. It doesn’t mean that you have to be the subject expert in that field. Familiarize yourself with the topic enough to be able to introduce it at the beginning of the session, then hand it over to your speaker for the lecture. Your presence, curiosity, and involvement in the research phase brings cohesion to the efforts, especially because you’ll be coordinating with the graphic designer (or creating the promotional materials yourself), local media and others to promote the event, etc. Knowing the content will give you perspective, help you in your role in vetting the materials, and improve the quality of your program.

6. **Make it fun.** In collaboration with your partners or in conversation with participants, identify the ways in which you can make the program more engaging and fun. Adding a music performance or simply playing a record with lyrics based on a poem relevant to the theme of the session can add a new dimension to your event.

Consider dividing up your event into different parts, such as introduction, lecture, music performance, discussion, poetry open-mic, etc. Make an effort to add and diversity →

### STEPS, CONTINUED

voices in your program. Not only does it make your event fun, but also it will give your program an opportunity to be inclusive of different ideas and preferences.

7. **Make sure people know about the events** Utilize your assets to spread the word about your event. Task your partners and volunteers with reaching out to the local, Persian media (broadcast, online, and print), and posting to community pages on social media or groups in encrypted messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Telegram. Allow them to find creative ways to promote the events. Your role, however, is to prepare the content and materials, and lead the team efforts.
8. **Let participants participate.** Make it possible for the community to own the programs by suggesting a topic or speaker, volunteer to present a part of the program, recommend performers, or merely recite their own poems. Empower your partners and “members” to advocate for the program, bring their friends to the Forum, and care for the sustainability of the program series. Delegate some tasks to volunteers, such as managing the chat and Q&A messages in a virtual session.

Harness the force of intention and build participation into the structure of the program. Then, communicate it as a responsibility for all members of the Forum, experiencing the sense of shared ownership is the key to feeling a sense of belonging!

9. **Suspend judgment, encourage open-mindedness, then enforce it.** You’ve worked hard with your partners to create a delicate space of belonging, protect it! As the leader of this community effort, model open-mindedness and practice equity, diversity, and inclusion, especially when it comes to choosing topics that may not be in line with your personal beliefs or preferences. Talk about suspending judgment openly in the introductory part of each session or right before you start the open-mic segment.

Work with your partners and members (if possible) to develop norms for your meetings. Then, champion enforcing those norms when someone goes off track. Point out the issues clearly but kindly, acknowledge personal differences, leverage what the group has in common, and be sincere about your responsibility to keep the space free from prejudices. Remember, your main goal is to bring people together, not to censure.

10. **Keep the momentum.** You are the cheerleader of this program series. Plan ahead; queue a few months’ or a year’s worth of topics in collaboration with your partners or members. It’s a good tactic for ensuring your program doesn’t lose steam. If you have to be absent from a session –because you are going on a vacation, having a surgery, etc.-- let your group know in advance (if possible). Remember, you and your library are the glue that holds the group together. Sometimes the best choice is to cancel a session. But continue the communication and bring the program back online as soon as possible.

If, for sustainability purposes, you’d like to vest ownership in individuals from the Forum, plan for it. Don’t just transfer the responsibilities from yourself to someone else haphazardly. Trust is the most valuable asset in your Forum which is built over time.

11. **Enjoy.** You have brought people together and created a safe space for them to share their interest in poetry. Sit back and enjoy the lectures, discussions, poetry recitals, music performances, and above all, the fulfilling positive energy and appreciation of the community for your efforts.

*This activity is presented as an accompaniment to Belonging at the Los Angeles Public Library, a zine by Christine Wong Yap and contributors and newly commissioned work supported by the Library Foundation of Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Public Library, and the Wellcome Trust, as part of its international cultural program about mental health, Mindscapes. Learn more at [belongingLAPL.ChristineWongYap.com](http://belongingLAPL.ChristineWongYap.com).*