KOESTLER ARTS - ART AID

Koestler Arts produce monthly Art Aid sheets featuring creative tasks that can be done in your cell or room with just paper and a pencil. We hope they inspire creativity and encourage you to try something new.

We are now accepting entries to the 2026 Koestler Awards! Send your entries and signed entry forms to 'Freepost KOESTLER ARTS' by 17 April 2026. For entry forms and full guidance on how to enter, ask your education department or contact Koestler Arts.

JANUARY 2026

For each Art Aid sheet, we commission an artist or writer who has engaged with Koestler Arts to set a creative task and share their experience with creativity. This month we asked Koestler Award winner and exhibited artist, Tom.

My Story

I never expected to go to prison but found myself in a B Cat local. There wasn't a lot to do in terms of jobs and education. The bang up was long. I found some books on the wing and started copying pictures out of them. I hadn't drawn since I was at school, but I really enjoyed it. When I got transferred to a different prison, one of the first night cells orderlies saw my work and handed me a Koestler Awards poster. I was determined to get my five pieces in. It was a month until the deadline and it focused my mind. I managed to win five awards in four different categories: poetry, drawing, mixed media and furniture making!

I spent most of my time in prison on the art course and fell in love with drawing and painting. It was a form of escapism. I also unexpectedly started writing spoken word. There was a lad in the cell below mine that I became friends with, who was really good at rapping. He kept calling me into his cell and performing his newest rhymes, which inspired me to write my own stuff and find my voice. I found the poems that people liked the most were the realest, most truthful ones.

Since being released, I have joined my local art society and become a committee member. They have exhibited my work several times and I'm looking forward to helping to run it next year.
I have worked on art competitions in prisons with another charity that I work with, and on an art project in the B Cat local that I was banged up in.

I perform my spoken word regularly at open mic nights and poetry slams. A highlight was performing at the Royal Society of Arts. Last year, I got a Platinum Koestler Award for a spoken word piece, and one of my paintings was included in their national exhibition, which made me extremely proud. I've done this while retraining as an electrician.

My Task: Finding Your Voice

This activity helps you write a spoken word piece and prepare to perform it. You don't need to sound like anyone else, your voice is enough! First, write without stopping for 5-10 minutes in response to the following prompt:

Write about something you know deeply. Something that you have lived and been through.

It's important to get your ideas out on to the page so don't worry about rhyming, grammar, spelling or making it "good". You can go back afterwards and adjust the words if needed. Spoken word often lives in the truth, not the cleverness of it. If it feels real to you, then it works!
Next, you can develop this writing into a spoken word piece to perform:

1. Read it out loud and make adjustments. You might change words to make the piece rhyme, remove words to improve the flow, or add in new words using a thesaurus. Don't change it just to sound clever, keep it true to you. If a line feels awkward to say, rewrite it until it feels natural.

2. Breathe with your words. Take a deep breath before starting, and use pauses intentionally. Silence can be powerful and pauses can create drama and give words more weight.

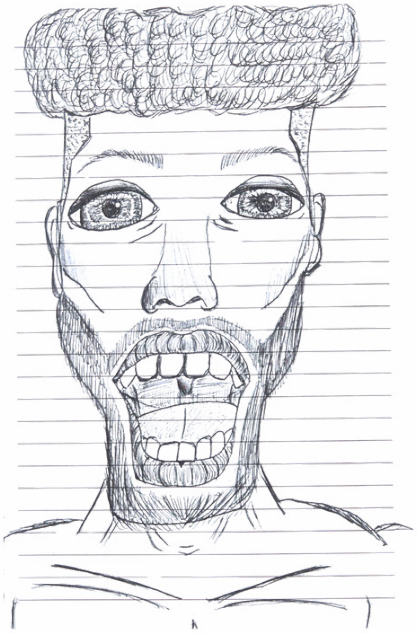
3. Find your natural voice. Don't try and sound "poetic". Speak how you normally do, just with more intention. Your accent, rhythm and tone are part of your power. It's your voice. Pick key words to stress and let unimportant words fall away.

4. Practice, practice, practice! You don't need to learn the piece off by heart, but practice it enough so you can occasionally look up when performing. This will make you connect more to the audience. When performing, look at people's foreheads rather than their eyes.
It makes the audience feel like you have made eye contact with them, but you don't get stuck on one person.

5. Let the imperfections exist. Your voice might shake at first, you might stumble on a word or two. Just try to shake it off and carry on. It doesn't make it a weak performance, it humanises it.

6. Reflect. After practicing, write a few lines answering:
What felt strong? What felt uncomfortable? What surprised you?

Spoken word isn't about being loud, it's about being true.
You don't find your voice by waiting for it to be perfect.
You find it by using it. Now go and perform.



Going Mad, Sandwell Children's Trust, Portrait, 2020

You don't need to send responses to these tasks to us, we just hope you'll enjoy them. If you do we'll be happy to see them but please note they won't be entered into this year's Koestler Awards unless sent with a signed entry form and we won't be able to return them to you.