

# Correctly spell xerophthalmia and the crowd goes wild

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One of the things I did in San Francisco was attend a performance of The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee. I went into the show with some trepidation, fearing that it would recall painful memories from my own career on the spelling bee circuit as a middle-schooler. Fortunately, my experience as a spelling bee participant only served to make the show more enjoyable. Each performance is different because four volunteers from the audience are invited to join the six student characters on the stage to participate in the bee. Things got off to an unexpected start when the first audience member misspelled “Mexican”, which threw the script for a minor loop since one of the characters complains later about that “easy” word. A second audience member dropped out shortly thereafter, but the last two managed to hang on a bit longer. The third eventually dropped out on “dengue”. The last audience member, on the other hand, kept spelling words correctly. It was obvious that we had reached the point in the script where all audience participants were to be eliminated, because they kept calling him to the microphone for another word. He was doing so well that the cast members had trouble keeping straight faces. The crowd went nuts when he spelled xerophthalmia correctly. (You could tell who the spelling bee veterans in the audience were, because we were the ones who cheered wildly as soon as he finished spelling, before the judge ruled him correct. After all, *xerophthalmia* is not a difficult word, being a simple combination of the Greek roots *xeros*, meaning dry, and *ophthalmos*, meaning eye.) After *xerophthalmia*, he got the “word” *pharmacologicalmum*. (Yes, the judge mumbled the end of the “word”.) And as soon as he started spelling with “p”, the judge eagerly rang the bell and declared “no, it’s an f.” The first half of the show was extremely funny, for it is then we are introduced to each of the (cast member) spellers and their quirky spelling techniques. That’s also where the bulk of the spelling takes place, and where we are treated to the wickedly twisted sample sentences, two examples of which can be found in the clip I linked to above. (We also get Olive’s sweet *My Friend, The Dictionary* and the wonderfully out-of-control *Pandemonium*.) The second half drags a bit, but *I Speak Six Languages* injects some long-absent freneticism, including a little fourth-wall breakage when Marcy displaces the orchestra pianist and starts playing her own accompaniment!

If this show ever comes into your area, I wholeheartedly recommend seeing it.

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