

An Introduction to Poetry (POE)



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Event Description

Using a selection or selections of literature, students provide an interpretation of Poetry with a time limit of five minutes, including introduction. Poetry is characterized by writing that conveys ideas, experiences, and emotions through language and expression. Students may choose traditional poetry, often characterized by rhyme or rhythm, or nontraditional poetry, which often has a rhythmic flow but is not necessarily structured by formal meter (meter is a beat, pattern, or structure, such as iambic pentameter). Students may not use prose, nor drama (plays), in this category. Students must use a manuscript in Poetry, which typically consists of a small three-ring binder with page protectors. Reading from a book or magazine is prohibited.

Considerations for Selecting Poetic Literature

Students in Poetry Interpretation may choose literature on topics that are serious, humorous, non-linear, ethereal, or thought-provoking -- the key is to choose Poetry that works for the individual student. Poetry collections, often referred to as anthologies, or a single long-form poem may be selected. Considerations for an appropriate piece include the student's personality, maturity, physical and vocal performance range, and school standards.

Traits of Successful Poetry Performers

When considering what event you should choose, or which direction to point a student, here are some traits of successful Poetry students to keep in mind:

- Expressive and artistic
- Appreciates language
- Excellent verbal and physical control
- Emotional maturity
- Enjoys reading and performing
- Confident
- Engages an audience

Examples of Past Poetry Titles

- *Revolting Rhymes* by Roald Dahl
- *Soda Jerk* by Cynthia Rylant
- *Where the Sidewalk Ends* by Shel Silverstein
- *Prince Charming* by Cris Gibson
- *Season of Tears* by Adonis
- *Blood Dazzler* by Patricia Smith

Learn More! The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive & educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events. For Poetry Interpretation, we have videos of past national final round performances at the middle and high school levels. We have a full-length textbook on Oral Interpretation of Literature. We also have many other interpretation resources, such as webinars, activities for class or practice, and more!



Find Your Voice

When all words fail to express what you want to say, Poetry has the kind of language that can. It's a beautiful challenge that you can take in any direction, composing an arrangement that speaks to you yet also creates discussion among your audience. When you nail that performance, it's the best feeling in the world."

— Allison Macknick, Association Alum

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Basic Understandings

Poetry is characterized by writing that conveys ideas, experiences, and emotions through language and expression. Often Poetry is very creative in terms of vocabulary and composition. While Poetry may tell a story or develop a character, more often Poetry's focus on language and form are designed to elicit critical thought, reflection, or emotion. Students may choose what the National Speech & Debate Association refers to as traditional Poetry, which often has a formal meter or rhyme scheme, or nontraditional Poetry, which often has a rhythmic flow but lacks formal rhyme or meter (examples include spoken word or slam Poetry).

As there are so many different types of Poetry that can be performed, it is important to observe rounds to see what other students and teams are using. The Association has final rounds of Poetry from both the high school and middle school level to review. Local and regional tournaments may vary in their selection of Poetry to perform.

Research

When looking for Poetry Interpretation, start with what the student knows -- what types of literature do they enjoy? What types of themes or ideas can they relate to? Poetry collections, often called anthologies, are very prominent in bookstores or libraries. There are so many to choose from that a student can feel overwhelmed with the abundance of options. Thus, having an idea of themes or topics of interest might lead students to choose a specific collection to review. For example, if the student enjoys learning about cultures and customs, there are many Poetry anthologies from various parts of the world that communicate a wide range of experiences. Other collections include themes on motherhood, love, loss -- there is even a collection of outlaw Poetry!

In addition, many prominent authors who write books, or essays may also have written Poetry on a range of topics or issues of interest. Thus, conducting a search for authors in addition to specific topics, themes, or pieces is advisable. Many online reading sites offer suggestions for authors or pieces based upon interests. Enter poems the

students like and other recommendations will appear. The opportunities truly are limitless!

Read reviews of potential Poetry pieces to help narrow the choices. Scanning Poetry collections quickly and efficiently is often the best way to process significant amounts of material. Read a few poems aloud to get a feel for how the Poetry sounds. Ask the student the following questions: Is an accent or specific vocal quality called for in the literature? Is the theme something a student can relate to? Is the language accessible to the student? Is the language appropriate for oral interpretation? Some Poetry is meant to be read or visualized instead of being performed. Also keep in mind that some Poetry collections contain very vivid material that may not be appropriate for all ages.

In addition to the above considerations, remember that it is important for the student to perform material that they connect with and is a match for their style and personality. Some students and coaches might want the student to challenge their weaknesses, but in competitive speech activities it is often best to focus on the students' strengths at a young age, especially as they learn the creative process of selecting, cutting, and performing literature. If a student identifies good Poetry that isn't a match for that particular student, consider setting it to the side to help out a teammate who might be better suited to the material. A very important question to ask: Is the content appropriate for general, middle school audiences?



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Structural Components

Your **cutting** is the 5 minute collection of poems or a single poem you are performing. The cutting is how the student has arranged the poem(s) based upon the themes/ideas expressed. Your cutting may look something like this (taken from *Interpretation of Literature, Bringing Words to Life*). *Note that these times are approximations.

TEASER • 0:00 – 0:30

Previews the topic, theme, and mood through selected poems. Teasers are not required.

Example:

Poem #1 (15 seconds)

Poem #2 (15 seconds)

INTRO • 0:30-1:00

The student, in his/her own words, discusses the literature. Must be memorized and include titles and authors.

EXPOSITION • 1:00-2:30

Develops all of the pieces, themes, and ideas.

Example:

Poem #2 (20 seconds)

Poem #1 (25 seconds)

Poem #3 (20 seconds)

Poem #2 (15 seconds)

BUILD TO CLIMAX / CLIMAX • 3:30-4:30

Poetry changes pace, tone, volume as it builds. Creates emotional peak of the performance. Student continues to go from one poem to the next.

RESOLUTION • 4:30-5:00

Poetry changes pace, tone, volume as it pulls back. Concludes the major themes and ideas with the end of one or more poems.

Blocking is a term used to describe movement in a performance. Sometimes blocking is expressive in nature, symbolizing how a character is feeling emotionally, while at other times blocking denotes events that are occurring in the imagined space. Keep in mind that movement should always be motivated by elements in the text or

found within a poem. Blocking for the sake of blocking is not necessary, and in many tournaments there are specific rules for how much movement, if any, is allowed. Those performances emphasize vocal or other nonverbal forms of communication.

Blocking is one type of **nonverbal communication**, which may also include gestures, facial expressions, posture, and eye contact. Much of oral interpretation is contained in the nonverbal elements of performance as tone, setting, mood, and character all can be established through various physical representations.

Organizing

Cutting Poetry is a challenging process as many poets compose their material with language and style in which cutting one part of a poem affects the entire piece. Poetry that is organized by verse or stanza with clear patterns of language and style should be carefully considered. Poetry participants may cut out an entire section of a poem for time limitations, for example, but will not want to modify the words within a stanza nor eliminate individual lines that affect the rhythm or meter.

Once you have your cutting, take the time to “beat” out your script. This means reading the script aloud and making notes as you go. As you read aloud, use symbols to indicate shorter pauses “/” or longer pauses “//.” Consider the emotional qualities behind each line. Consider how the lines affect your verbal and nonverbal communication.

Whether the Poetry has a formal structure and rhyme pattern or is free verse, it is important to examine the conventions within the Poetry selections and determine what to emphasize during the performance. For example, rhyme patterns provide flow for the Poetry, but can also call attention to themselves, as students anticipate the rhyme and hit the beat hard. Performances may fall into predictable patterns as a result. Students should pay special attention to repetition and decide whether to repeat the words in the same fashion each time or vary their vocal qualities.

Bookwork is the use of the manuscript within oral interpretation. The bookwork can be very basic, such as

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closing the book during the introduction and conclusion, as well as turning pages with each change of poem. Other students will have more extensive bookwork, including page turns to express dramatic moments or changes in tone, or holding the script to represent an imaginary property, such as a photo album.

Indicate potential choices for blocking, bookwork, and rhythm/meter of your script, as needed, while developing the Poetry Interpretation.

Read your script aloud. Eliminate any excess language that sounds awkward or is unnecessarily redundant. After organizing, some students will consider cutting the Poetry differently as a result of choices that are made. As a final step, make sure that the introduction successfully represents the script and performance choices. Cut your script into segments which match the page turns, put it in the book, and let's get practicing!

Standing it Up/Practicing

You have done a lot of work to get to this point, but you are now ready for the reward -- stand it up! You will want to start by familiarizing yourself with your script. Although you are not required to be memorized, successful interpers have mastered their script so that they know not only what they are saying in the moment, but also know what is coming up next. You can gain familiarity with the script by reading it multiple times. Start by reading each page several times. As you learn the script, make notes about which words you might want to cut, or what is not flowing smoothly from one section to another, so that you can make adjustments after the practice session.

Students may want to practice one complete poem before going on to the next, even if it is split up in the actual script, so that the students have a clear understanding of each poem's vocal quality, intonation, and physical representations. After mastering each of the poems, the student can move on to the script. Keeping each poem consistent from page turn to page turn is a tremendous challenge but very rewarding when it all comes together!

Beginning interpers often struggle with bookwork. It can feel very awkward holding the book comfortably and turning pages naturally. Recognize that it takes time and lots of practice. Watch how other performers conduct their bookwork. Ask for help. Whatever you do, don't rush the bookwork. It is jarring to watch interpers rapidly opening and closing books and zipping through page turns. Even basic bookwork is a part of the performance and establishes an important connection between the student and the script.



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Once the student has a solid grasp of the script, the coach and student can do some timed run-throughs with both oral and written comments for the student. Focus on the big picture in these early practices. Work on analysis of language, tone, mood, rhythm, and flow. Consider carefully how students are using their voice, including pause, pitch, tone, volume, diction, and inflection. Eventually the student will be ready for line-by-line practices. Line-by-line is characterized by intensive rehearsal on each and every page and, at times, on every line, until the best possible interpretation is achieved at that moment. Make sure the performance is within the time limits.

The student is now ready to do some performances in front of other students, coaches, or even an audience. Attend tournaments and review ballots. At this stage, feedback is incredibly important. Take note of all comments, as having a fresh perspective on an interpretation is vitally important. Students must be willing to take that feedback and make modifications.

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Even the most naturally talented of performers need practice! Respect the time and resources of your coach and school. Be sure to give it your best effort every day and you will be successful no matter the tournament outcome.



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Performance Tips

It may sound cliché, but confidence is key! If you've put the legwork in, you should feel confident in the product you've created. Walk into that round with your head held high, ready to show the world what you've got! Trust what you and your coach created. Do what you practiced, and if you feel compelled to "try something new," review it with your coach beforehand. Consistency is key. It's hard to evaluate what to change in practice if your performance in the round is completely different than what you've been working on.

Pay attention to other performers. Smile! Be a warm, inviting audience member. There is nothing worse than getting up to perform and having an audience that either stone faces you or won't look you in the eye. Think of it this way: if your round is an hour long, you are only speaking for 5 of those minutes. The remaining minutes are for you to listen, learn, and support your competitors.

Keep a notebook for between rounds. Sometimes, another person's performance will inspire you, and it's a good idea to have a notebook handy to write down new ideas. It's also nice to know who you competed against in each round. This way, you have a better understanding of who your competition is. When you review your ballots after the tournament, you can go back through your notebook and compare your ballots to your notes.

Between rounds, figure out what room you will be performing in next. Congratulate your competitors on a good performance after the round ends, and make friends during downtime. Be gracious, and keep criticisms of other performers to yourself, even if someone else tries to start a negative conversation.

Resources

A great source is *Interpretation of Literature—Bringing Words to Life* by Travis Kiger and Ganer Newman.

They cover cutting, characterization, blocking, and the structure of a story. Watch final round videos of Poetry Interpretation from past Middle School Nationals.

Observe the rounds not only as entertainment, but keep your eyes peeled for effective bookwork, cutting, and performance techniques. Ask yourself, how can I apply similar techniques to my performance? The best way to learn Poetry Interpretation, outside of actively doing it, is by watching and learning from other performers.

The textbook, final rounds, and more can be found on www.speechanddebate.org.