

An Introduction to Prose (PRO)



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Event Description

Using short story, parts of a novel, or other published work of prose, students provide an interpretation of one or more selections with a time limit of five minutes, including introduction. Typically a single piece of literature, *Prose* can be drawn from works of fiction or non-fiction. *Prose* corresponds to usual (ordinary/common) patterns of speech and may combine elements of narration and dialogue. Students may not use poetry, nor drama (plays), in this category. Students must use a manuscript in *Prose*, which typically consists of a small three-ring binder with page protectors. Reading from a book or magazine is prohibited.

Considerations for Selecting Prose Literature

Students in *Prose Interpretation* may choose literature on topics that are serious, humorous, mysterious, thought-provoking -- the key is to choose *Prose* that works for the individual student. Non-fiction publications, such as essays, articles, and biographies, or works of fiction, such as short stories and books, may be sources for *Prose Interpretation*. Considerations for an appropriate piece include the student's personality, maturity, physical and vocal performance range, and school standards.


Traits of Successful Prose Performers

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

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

Examples of Past Prose Titles

- *Imagination: A Memoir* by Elizabeth McCracken
- *Long Shadow of Little Rock* by Daisy Bates
- *The Fault in our Stars* by John Green
- *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos
- *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll
- *The Elizabeth Stories* by Isabel Huggan

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 *Prose 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

I love Prose because it's all about connecting to the audience. I want them to care about a story and connect with it on a very emotional and personal level. A good Prose lets you suspend time for a few minutes and just enjoy the ride."

— Emily Anderson, Association Alum

Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

Prose



Basic Understandings

Prose is often classified as the “other” category of interpretation. It’s not poetry. It’s not drama. It’s not storytelling. So what is prose? Prose combines multiple elements of oral interpretation of literature. Prose corresponds to usual patterns of speech -- that which you would find most every day in a particular space and time (in contrast to poetic form and language). Prose typically has a narrative with its related rises and falls, much like Storytelling. Prose may also feature character development and dialogue, much like Dramatic Interpretation. Prose may have humorous elements embedded, much like Humorous Interpretation. In short, while many categories have specific interpretation focal points, Prose Interpretation is very wide open, and choices of material may vary from region to region or even tournament to tournament.

Research

When looking for Prose Interpretation, start with what the student knows -- what types of literature do they enjoy? What types of themes or ideas can they relate to? Short story 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, ideas, or authors might lead students to choose a specific collection to review. For example, if the student enjoys learning about cultures and customs, there are many anthologies from various parts of the world. If the student enjoys reading detective stories, there are many collections focused on mystery and suspense.

In addition, many prominent authors who write novels may also have written short stories or essays 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. Plus there is a host of young adult literature that may be appropriate for interpretation as well. The opportunities truly are limitless!

Read reviews of potential Prose pieces to help narrow the choices. Read summaries to find out the basic plotline

before diving into the literature. And do a quick scan of any short story or book to see if it is a good match for the student -- how many characters are there? Is an accent called for in the literature? Is it set in a place and time the student can relate to? Is the language accessible to the student? Is the language appropriate for oral interpretation? Can the essence of the scene or plot be conveyed in less than 5 minutes? Asking these questions while scanning the literature will help certain pieces rise to the top of the list. Ultimately, the student needs to know him or herself enough to know what can and cannot be performed. If the student cannot perform a southern accent, for example, consistently and authentically, then the student either needs to work very, very hard on that vocal ability or choose another piece. 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.



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Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

Prose



Structural Components

Your **cutting** is the 5 minute portion of the selection you are performing. This is how you've arranged the narrative and what aspects of the story you've decided to tell. 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 and mood of the selected literature. Teasers are not required.

INTRO • 0:30-1:00

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

EXPOSITION & INCITING INCIDENT • 1:00 –2:30

Introduces characters and setting. Sends the conflict into motion.

RISING ACTION & CLIMAX • 2:30 – 4:30

Complicates the conflict. Creates emotional peak of the performance.

FALLING ACTION & RESOLUTION • 4:30-5:00

Resolves the conflict . Concludes the story.



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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 character. 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

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 narrative and emotional qualities behind each line. Consider how the lines affect your verbal and nonverbal communication.

Bookwork is the use of the manuscript within oral interpretation. The bookwork can be very basic, such as closing the book during the introduction and conclusion, as well as turning pages with scene changes. 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.

If the Prose selection has characters speaking to each other, students can mark focal points in their script. Focal points (sometimes referred to as offstage focus) are used when a character is speaking to another character. Instead of turning their head dramatically back and forth, students can pick a point in front of them to represent the placement of the character. For example, a mother speaking to her daughter might be positioned with a lower

Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

Prose



focal point to indicate that she is taller than her daughter. When in the voice of the daughter, the focal point might be higher to represent her looking up to an authority figure.

Indicate potential choices for blocking, bookwork, and focal points in the margins of your script, as needed.

Read your script aloud. Eliminate any excess language that sounds awkward or is unnecessarily redundant. After organizing, some students will consider cutting the piece 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 several times in a row. 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.

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.

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 scenes, characters, language, and the overall impact of the story. 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.

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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Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

Prose



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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 five 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 Prose 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 Prose 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.