

An Introduction to Storytelling (STO)



Event Description

Students select a published story that meets a specified theme and perform the story for no more than 5 minutes. Storytelling themes range widely and may include mysteries, heroism, or fairy tales. Students select a story that would be appropriate for young children and tell the story as if presenting to that audience. Students may use a chair. Manuscripts are not permitted.

Considerations for Selecting Stories

Students in Storytelling select material based upon the theme and the audience. Children's books are commonly chosen as material. Students can also look for collections of stories on various themes. Considerations for an appropriate piece include the student's personality, physical and vocal performance range, and school standards.


Traits of Successful Storytellers

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

- Animated
- Outgoing
- High energy
- Captivating
- Enjoys performing
- Confident
- Engages an audience
- Enjoys working with children

Examples of Past Storytelling Themes

- Thriller and Mystery
- Americana
- Heroism
- Native American Tales
- Fairy Tales
- Tales of Adventure
- Campfire Stories

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 Storytelling, we have videos of past national final round performances at the middle and high school levels. We have a webinar specifically designed for Storytelling competition. We have a full-length textbook on Oral Interpretation of Literature in addition to many other general interpretation resources, such as webinars, activities for class or practice, and more! 

Find Your Voice

What I love about storytelling is it lets a competitor be goofy. Not just funny but outlandishly goofy. There's seldom a moment where you have to worry if something 'makes sense.' Most of the stories used in competition have plot lines that suspend reality in the first place. So, if I have a script with a talking iguana and I want to make him Australian, it works. I love how crazy it can get."

— Emma Wilczynski, Association Alum

Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

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Basic Understandings

Storytelling consists of sharing a story with an audience, performed as if the audience were a group of young children. The story must meet the theme of the tournament and not exceed five minutes. Students may use a full range of movement to express themselves and may incorporate a chair in a variety of different ways. Students may be seated but most commonly performers use a full range of stage space available to them.

As there are so many different types of stories 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 Storytelling from both the high school and middle school level to review. Local and regional tournaments may vary in the selection of stories performed.

Research

Storytelling research involves going to libraries and bookstores and enjoying their vast collections of children's books. Keep in mind that five minutes includes an introduction. Thus, the story must be fully conveyed in a very limited frame of time. Students should choose stories that are not only fun but have a story with sufficient plot and character development to keep the audience entertained and engaged.

Often one of the most difficult tasks is finding a piece that fits the theme. Before going to the bookstore or library, take a moment to look for lists of stories online. A simple Google keyword search will net many results. Students may also want to go to sources such as Amazon that provide recommendations on related books to get some additional ideas.

Another strategy is to search by author instead of themes or titles of specific pieces. Children's authors typically produce a large volume of work. By choosing favorite authors and writing styles, students can narrow their choices considerably. Many children's books become part of a larger series. By looking to online reviews or summaries, students can quickly find out what themes emerge from an entire set of books. Finally, keep in mind

that many children's stories are produced by more than one individual, such as an illustrator. Be sure to search for the names of all major contributors when doing your research.



Structural Components

Your *cutting* is the 5 minute portion of the story you are performing. The cutting consists of your arrangement of 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 story, characters, and style 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

Engages the audience in character, setting, and theme. Sends the conflict into motion.

RISING ACTION & CLIMAX • 2:30 – 4:15

Complicates the conflict. Creates emotional peak of the performance.

FALLING ACTION & RESOLUTION • 4:15 – 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 derived from the telling of the story. Blocking for the sake of blocking is not necessary. Some stories call for the performers to have more limited movement as the emphasis is on vocal or other nonverbal forms of communication.

One unique element of blocking in Storytelling is the presence of the chair. Some competitors sit down to chat with the audience as if they were children. Others will stand on the chair briefly for effect while others will use it to create a stage space, such as tipping it on its side and hiding behind it as if were a protective wall. Students need to take care with the use of the chair, both in terms of their personal safety as well as overdoing it, to the extent the chair becomes the focal point of the story instead of a compliment to the blocking.

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

Students should map out all of the activities of the story. This outline provides a snapshot of what takes place and allows for easy review when deciding what to cut or keep in the performance. In addition to maintaining any major plot points in the story, students will want to select the funniest and most dramatic parts of the storyline to draw in the audience.

Students can then choose the most relevant sections of the story and include those in the master manuscript. Once you have your cutting, take the time to “beat out” your manuscript. 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.

Indicate potential choices for blocking, nonverbal expressions, and audience engagement in the manuscript. Taking notes in the preparatory stages is very important for any type of performance.

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 manuscript and performance choices.



Standing it Up/Practicing

As Storytelling must be memorized, the first step after cutting and analyzing your piece is to memorize it. As it is a short event with simplified language, many competitors might find that memorizing a story is very easy. Other students struggle to memorize even short performances. Here are some things to keep in mind as you memorize your story.

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Our brains are a muscle. The more time you practice memorizing, the better you become. The more cues that you can give your brain to aid memorization the better. Sitting down staring at a script, re-reading the lines in your head, will not be beneficial. Memorize the story with the intent to perform it. Type up a clean version with only your finalized text and blocking. Then, tape it to the wall and actively memorize. Read the lines aloud moving with them as indicated by your cutting. Sometimes, it's helpful to do this in front of a mirror, so you can evaluate the effectiveness of your movements. It is helpful to memorize a paragraph at a time, building off of the paragraph that came before. This will significantly decrease the time it takes to memorize your performance.

Once memorized, you and your coach can then build off of the choices you've made for your story. Adjustments to blocking, characterization, and line delivery can be made.

Once the student has a solid grasp of the story, the coach and student can do some timed run-throughs with both oral and written comments. Focus on the big picture in early practices. Work on analysis of blocking, engagement with the audience, and energy. 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 section of the story, 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.



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 45 minutes long, you are only speaking for 5 of those minutes. The remaining minutes are for you to listen, learn, and support your competitors.

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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

We have many great resources for Storytelling, including a webinar specific to helping students in middle school select pieces, get ready for the tournament, and tips for competition. A great general source for interpretation strategies 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 Storytelling from past Middle School Nationals. Observe the rounds not only as entertainment, but keep your eyes peeled for effective blocking, cutting, and performance techniques. Ask yourself, how can I apply similar techniques to my performance? The best way to learn Storytelling, 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.