

Evaluation Criteria and Tips for Contestants

Teachers, coaches, and students may also find it useful to view the scoring rubric in the Judge’s Guide. Guidance on implementing Poetry Out Loud for students with disabilities is available on the Poetry Out Loud website.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

This category is to evaluate the physical nature of the recitation. Consider the contestant’s **eye contact**, **body language**, and **poise**.

Advice for the student:

- Present yourself well and be attentive. Use good posture. Be confident.
- Use eye contact to make a direct connection with the entire audience; don’t focus solely on the judges.
- Nervous gestures, poor eye contact with the audience, and lack of poise or confidence will detract from your score.
- Relax and be natural. Enjoy your poem; the judges will notice.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

The competitor appears at ease and comfortable with the audience. He or she engages the audience through physical presence, including appropriate body language, confidence, and eye contact—without appearing artificial. All qualities of the contestant’s physical presence work together to the benefit of the poem.

VOICE AND ARTICULATION

This category is to evaluate the auditory nature of the recitation. Consider the student’s **volume**, **pace**, **rhythm**, **intonation**, and **proper pronunciation**. At the National Finals, contestants will use a microphone; when appropriate, one should be used in school and state competitions as well.

Advice for the student:

- Project to the audience. You want to capture the attention of everyone, including the people in the back row. However, do not mistake yelling for good volume or projection.
- Proceed at a fitting and natural pace. People may speak or express themselves too quickly when they are nervous, which can make a recitation difficult to understand. Do not speak so slowly that the language sounds unnatural or awkward.
- With rhymed poems, be careful not to recite in a sing-song manner.
- Make sure you know how to pronounce every word in your poem. Articulate.
- Line breaks are a defining feature of poetry, with each one calling for different treatment. Decide if a break requires a pause and, if so, how long to pause.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

All words are pronounced correctly, and the volume, rhythm, and intonation greatly enhance the recitation. Pacing is appropriate to the poem.

DRAMATIC APPROPRIATENESS

Recitation is about conveying a poem's sense primarily with one's voice. In this way, recitation is closer to the art of oral interpretation than theatrical performance. (Think storyteller or narrator rather than actor.) Students may find it challenging to convey the meaning of a poem without acting it out, but a strong performance will rely on a powerful internalization of the poem rather than distracting dramatic gestures.

The reciter represents the poem's voice during the course of a recitation, not a character's. The videos of National Finals recitations on the Poetry Out Loud DVD and website will help illustrate this point. Appropriate dramatization subtly enhances the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the poem without overshadowing the poem's language.

Advice for the student:

- Do not act out the poem. Too much dramatization can distract your audience from the language of the poem. Your goal should be to help audience members understand the poem more deeply than they had before hearing your recitation. Movement or accents must not detract from the poem's voice.
- You are the vessel of your poem. Have confidence that your poem is strong enough to communicate its sounds and messages without a physical illustration. In other words, let the words of the poem do the work.
- Depending on the poem, occasional gestures may be appropriate, but the line between appropriate and overdone is a thin one. When uncertain, leave them out.
- Avoid monotone delivery. If you sound bored, you will project that boredom to the audience. However, too much enthusiasm can make your performance seem insincere.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

The dramatization subtly underscores the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the recitation. The style of delivery is more about oral interpretation than dramatic enactment. **A low score in this category will result from recitations that have affected character voices and accents, inappropriate tone and inflection, singing, distracting and excessive gestures, or unnecessary emoting.**

LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY

This category is to evaluate the comparative complexity of the poem, which is the result of several factors. A poem with complex **content** conveys difficult, sophisticated ideas that the student will be challenged to grasp and express. A poem with complex **language** will have intricate diction and syntax, meter and rhyme scheme, and shifts in tone or mood. Poem **length** is also considered in complexity. Please keep in mind that longer poems are not necessarily more difficult. In well-written verse, deep meaning can sometimes translate into brief poems, where each word resonates with the next. Poems with significantly challenging content and language may not need length to score well. Every poem is a different combination of content, language, and length, and the judges should score accordingly based on their independent evaluation of each poem.

Advice for the student:

- For competitions beyond the classroom level, select poems of various styles, time periods, themes, and tones. This diversity of selection will allow judges to see your mastery of various elements of complexity.
- Make sure each poem you choose is one that speaks to you, whatever the level of complexity. If you are able to connect with a poem, that internalization will ripple positively throughout all of your scores.

EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING

This category is to evaluate whether the competitor exhibits an understanding of the poem in his or her recitation.

Advice for the student:

- In order for the audience to understand the poem fully, you must understand the poem fully. Be attentive to the messages, meanings, allusions, irony, tones of voice, and other nuances in your poem.
- Be sure you know the meaning of every word and line in your poem. If you are unsure about something, it will be apparent to the audience and judges. Don't hesitate to ask your teacher for help.
- Listen to track 4 on the audio CD (or on the Poetry Out Loud website) in which poet David Mason introduces Yeats's "The Lake Isle of Innisfree." In his comments, he advises you to think about how you should interpret the tone and volume and voice of your poem. Is it a quiet poem? Is it a boisterous poem? Should it be read more quickly or slowly, with a happy or mournful tone? Your interpretation will be different for each poem, and it is a crucial element of your performance.

Qualities of a strong recitation:

The meaning of the poem is powerfully and clearly conveyed to the audience. The student displays an interpretation that deepens and enlivens the poem. **Meaning, messages, allusions, irony, tones of voice,** and other nuances are captured by the performance. A low score is awarded if the interpretation obscures the meaning of the poem.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE

This category is to evaluate the overall success of the performance, the degree to which the recitation has become more than the sum of its parts. Has the student captivated the audience with the language of the poem? Did the student bring the audience to a better understanding of the poem? Did the physical presence, voice and articulation, and dramatic appropriateness all seem on target and unified to breathe life into the poem? Does the student understand and show mastery of the art of recitation? The judges will use this score to measure how impressed they were by the recitation, and whether the recitation has honored the poem. Judges may also consider the diversity of a student's recitations with this score; a student is less likely to score well in overall performance when judges note that a student's style of interpretation remains the same regardless of poem choice. A low score will be awarded for recitations that are poorly presented, ineffective in conveying the meaning of the poem, or conveyed in a manner inappropriate to the poem.

ACCURACY

A separate judge will mark missed or incorrect words during the recitation, with small deductions for each. If the contestant relies on the prompter, points also will be subtracted from the accuracy score. Eight points will be added to the competitor's score for a perfectly accurate recitation. Refer to the accuracy score sheet on page 12.