

Poetry Out Loud and American Sign Language: Guidance for Judges

Deaf or hard of hearing students reciting in American Sign Language (ASL) will be judged under the same evaluation criteria used for all Poetry Out Loud competitors. Created in consultation with the NEA Accessibility Office and ASL experts, this ASL addendum to the Judge's Guide provides guidance on evaluating an ASL recitation in terms of the Poetry Out Loud judging rubric. The criteria for judging a verbal recitation relates directly to judging a visual one. For instance, an oral recitation conveys articulation by tone and inflection of the voice, whereas a visual recitation conveys this through the clarity and nuance of handshapes and palm orientation. Furthermore, a poem translated into ASL and performed in a visual format can reflect the same desirable (or undesirable) traits as a verbal performance.

The following text supplements each evaluation criteria by explaining how it translates to an ASL recitation. Please consult this guidance in addition to the [Poetry Out Loud Judge's Guide](#).

Physical Presence

A student reciting in ASL should strive to reflect the same strong elements for this criterion outlined in the scoring rubric and in the Poetry Out Loud judge's guide. A strong ASL performance should include ease and confidence on stage with no evidence of stiffness in the body, or nervous gestures, such as fidgeting. However, there are instances when a rigid handshape or a glance off stage may be appropriate for the content of an ASL recitation as students are primarily using their body to interpret the work.

Voice and Articulation

An oral recitation is judged on inflection, volume, pace, and proper pronunciation, whereas a student using ASL would be measured on the clarity of their handshapes, visual pacing, and ability to articulate successfully the language of the poem in a manner that can be understood from the audience. An oral recitation that is mumbling, monotone, or too quiet will obscure a poem's meaning for the audience. Students reciting in ASL should project enough to catch the attention of each audience member, while avoiding an overly-dramatic recitation (see the next category for appropriateness of dramatization).

The student's visual pacing should proceed at an appropriate and natural speed, neither too quickly nor too slowly. Decide if the pauses come in appropriate places for the poem—are they abrupt and misleading or fluid and effective?

Dramatic Appropriateness

Although an ASL recitation is performed in a visual format, it's not a theatrical enactment. Similar to a strong oral recitation, a strong visual delivery should employ dramatization to subtly highlight the poem's meaning without becoming the focal point of the performance. Above all, recitation is about conveying a poem's sense with one's voice, whether visually or orally. For ASL recitations, a low score in this category should result when a performance includes excessive movement across the stage, overly exaggerated handshapes, inappropriate tone, or unnecessary emoting.

Evidence of Understanding

“Evidence of understanding” will measure the student’s ability to illuminate the poem for the audience. By proper visual pacing, tone, emphasis, and translation a student reciting in ASL must demonstrate that they know the meaning of every line and every word of the poem. Although the audience may not be fluent in ASL, an outstanding ASL recitation may make the audience see the poem in a new way. Through the visual language of ASL, Deaf or hard of hearing students can powerfully convey the meaning of the poem to both hearing and Deaf audiences. A weak ASL performance would obscure the poem’s meaning by lacking nuance, changes in tone, and appropriate dramatization.

The poet’s words should take precedence and the student who understands the poem best will be able to perform it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem more fully. The student will offer an interpretation that deepens and enlivens the poem.

Overall Performance

Overall performance is weighted more heavily than other categories, with the value up to nine points. This category is used to evaluate the total success of the performance, the degree to which the recitation has become more than the sum of its parts. Did the student bring the audience to a better understanding of the poem? Did the physical presence, 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? Use this score to measure how impressed you were by the recitation, and whether the recitation honored the poem.

A low score should 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

The process of judging accuracy for an ASL recitation will differ from that of an oral recitation. However, the scoring system for this category remains consistent—please see page 11 and 12 of the [Poetry Out Loud Judge’s Guide](#). Since an ASL performance is not a direct translation of the English text, it’s necessary to measure the accuracy of the live performance against the student’s original ASL translation.

A week or two before the competition, students reciting in ASL will submit a “perfect record” of their recitations via DVD, Dropbox, or thumb drive. This translation and performance will be the standard by which a student’s recitations are judged on the day of the event. Recording the student’s live performance with a video camera and then comparing it with the “perfect record” will determine accuracy for ASL recitations. The ASL accuracy judge must be fluent in ASL and should not serve as the accuracy judge for oral recitations.