

# Evaluation Criteria and Tips for Competitors

For video examples of these tips, view past student recitations on the NEA's YouTube channel.

## ► Physical Presence

This category evaluates the physical nature of the recitation. Consider the student's stage presence, body language, and composure.

### Advice for the student:

- **Present yourself well and be attentive.** Use good posture. Be confident and make a direct connection with the audience. Exhibiting these presentation qualities is important for your score.
- **Relax and be natural.** Enjoy your poem; the judges will notice.



### QUALITIES OF A STRONG RECITATION:

*The student appears at ease and comfortable with the audience. They engage the audience through physical presence, including appropriate body language and confidence. All qualities of the student's physical presence work together to the benefit of the poem.*

## ► Voice and Articulation

This category evaluates the student's delivery and clarity of the recitation. Consider the student's projection, pace, rhythm, intonation, and pronunciation.

### 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 shouting for good volume or projection.
- **Proceed at a fitting and natural pace.** People may speak too quickly when they are nervous, which can make a recitation difficult to understand. Do not speak so slowly that the language sounds awkward or unnatural.
- **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.** You'll never be penalized for your natural accent; however, affected character accents are strongly discouraged.
- **Line breaks are a defining feature of poetry, with each one calling for different treatment. Decide whether a break requires a pause and, if so, how long to pause.**



### QUALITIES OF A STRONG RECITATION:

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

## ► Interpretation

This category evaluates the interpretive and performance choices made by the student. A strong recitation must rely on a powerful internalization of the poem rather than excessive gestures or unnecessary emoting. Effective interpretation enhances the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the poem without overshadowing the poem's language. Videos of past student recitations on the NEA's YouTube channel will help illustrate this point.

### Advice for the student:

- **Movement 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.** 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 interpretation subtly underscores the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the recitation. A low score in this category will result from recitations that have affected accents and character voices, inappropriate tone and inflection, singing, excessive gestures, or unnecessary emoting.*

## ► Evidence of Understanding

This category evaluates the student's comprehension of a poem. The poet's words should take precedence, and the student who understands the poem best will be able to voice it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem better. To do this, a student must effectively use intonation, emphasis, tone, and style of delivery.

### Advice for the student:

- In order for the audience to have a full understanding of the poem, **you must have a full understanding of the poem.**
- **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 or coach for help.
- **Think about how you should interpret the tone and voice of your poem.** Is it a quiet poem? Is it a boisterous poem? Should it be recited 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, tone, and other nuances are captured by the performance. A low score is awarded if the interpretation obscures the meaning of the poem.*

## ► Overall Performance

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This category evaluates 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 recitation honor the poem? Judges should also consider the range 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. In addition to range, judges should consider the complexity of the poem, which is a combination of its content, language, and length. 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.

### Advice for the student:

- For competitions beyond the classroom level, select poems of various styles, time periods, complexities, themes, and tones. When considering the range and complexity of your poems, remember that a longer poem is not necessarily a more difficult one.
- Make sure each poem you choose is one that speaks to you. If you are able to connect with a poem, that internalization will ripple positively throughout all of your scores.

## ► Accuracy

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

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**“I was surprised by how much it taught me about the power of voice and delivery. When you think about poetry, it's easy to focus on the written words, but performing them reveals so many layers of complexity.”**

Reagan O'Donnell Sutherland,  
New Hampshire 2025 State Champion

**Note: Overall Performance and Accuracy are weighted slightly more than other criteria.**

2025 Tennessee  
State Champion  
Elizabeth Silva