

Working with Deaf Students and Poetry Out Loud

Poetry Out Loud presents an important opportunity to showcase your state's accessibility program. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing have successfully participated in Poetry Out Loud at the school, state, and national level. The 2009 Poetry Out Loud National Finals marked the first time that a deaf student competed in Poetry Out Loud at the national level—a student at the Oregon School for the Deaf was the state champion from Oregon. Since 2009, we've had many Deaf and hard of hearing students participate in Poetry Out Loud nationwide. In 2013, Iowa's state champion represented the Iowa School for the Deaf at the National Finals.

At the Classroom Level

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may choose to recite their poems in ASL. All students select poems to perform from the official print or online Poetry Out Loud anthologies. After selecting a poem, a Deaf student would translate the English text into ASL in order to interpret the work in a visual format.

Since poems composed in ASL are not currently included in the Poetry Out Loud anthology, students are encouraged to choose poems they can successfully translate to ASL. Translations must pay attention to mood, context, register, and handshape repetition. Students are responsible for creating a complementary interpretation that considers appropriate literary devices, such as length and scope of the poem, subject matter, theme, tone, and structure. The translation should be the student's own work. To guide students in poem selection and ASL translation, we recommend providing support through an appropriate teacher or visiting artist.

Students reciting in ASL should work with their teacher in order to identify the best environment for rehearsing their recitations. This may be at home with a parent, after school with a mentor, or in class with an appropriate partner.

Participating schools with students reciting in ASL should not hold a separate competition for these students. They must be able to participate in all levels of official classroom and school competition.

During classroom competitions, as a student is reciting in ASL, the English text of their poem should be made visible to other students. This will enable students not fluent in ASL to easily follow along. The poem could be projected or copied on the blackboard, out of view of the reciter. (Handing out a hard copy of the text will likely distract students, making it difficult for them to give the performance their complete attention.) Recitations performed in ASL will be evaluated under the same judging criteria as verbal performances. Please consult the [ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide](#) for further information on judging ASL recitations.

Within the context of POL, teachers may have the opportunity to introduce ASL recitation to their classes. Many students and parents will be unfamiliar with ASL recitation. It's helpful to remind

everyone that there are more similarities than differences between a spoken poem and a signed poem. Rhyming, alliteration, voice, and articulation can all be represented in a visual context. A visual recitation will reflect the same desirable (or undesirable) traits as a verbal performance.

At the State Finals

You must ensure that a school champion who is Deaf or hard of hearing is able to participate fully in all activities related to your state final. If your event includes workshops, lunches, and other activities, work with your 504/ADA coordinator to be sure that a student's accessibility needs are met. Accommodations may include interpreters to accompany the student to events to provide translation for casual conversations and official directions.

Any Deaf competitors should have someone with them backstage (or wherever the students gather) at the competition who will act as their personal stage manager, making sure they know when it is their turn to recite and translating any other instructions. It is essential that they have a walk through before the competition so they can orient themselves (as should all students).

At the student's turn, he or she should go to the same place on stage as all other reciters. A spotlight will presumably be set for that area; the microphone should be moved if it would block the audience's view of the performance. The student should sign the poet and poem's title in the same format that other students would be speaking it. A voice offstage should simultaneously read the poet and title so the audience knows when the recitation itself begins.

At this point, there are some choices to be made. An ASL performance is greatly enhanced by having a simultaneous translation available to the audience so they can follow along (in the same way that a spoken performance would be simultaneously signed by an ASL interpreter). One option is to have the poem projected onto a screen on stage. Another option is to have a professional interpreter (who has rehearsed with the student) reading the poem aloud at the same time that the student is performing their ASL interpretation. This works best when the interpreter has experience with theater interpretation. It should not be a "dramatic" interpretation, but should be clearly read and paced to flow with the student's performance.

We do not recommend distributing a printed copy of the poem to audience members, as the rustling of the paper would be distracting, and people might choose to look down to read rather than watch the performance; or a voice reading the poem either directly before or directly after the performance, as it disconnects the audience from the performance. We strongly recommend consulting with your student on their preference, as there may be circumstances you have not considered. For example, a synchronous voice-over may pose a challenge for students with residual hearing.

Judging

The best way to ensure that the competition remains fair to all competitors is to prepare your judges well. At the 2009 and 2013 national finals, we had two ASL-fluent (but hearing) judges for the semifinal round that included a Deaf competitor. One served only as an accuracy judge for the performance, while the other served on our panel of judges and

scored all performances. We recommend recruiting two well-qualified judges with additional expertise in ASL. These judges will provide support and guidance for other judges who may be less familiar with ASL. You may want to consider including a Deaf judge on your panel.

Before reviewing and scoring an ASL recitation, all judges must be briefed on how to translate the criteria and the scoring rubric to a visual performance. Please refer to our [ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide](#) for specifics on how an ASL performance can be evaluated according to the Poetry Out Loud criteria.

As you will see in the ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide, the biggest difference in scoring comes with the evaluation of accuracy in an ASL performance, since ASL is not a direct translation of the English. A week or two before the competition, students reciting in ASL should submit a “perfect record” of their recitation 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 competition. At the national finals, we use a small video camera (actually, two, so we have a backup in case one fails), and film the student performance from the front row of the audience. After the performance, the video is downloaded to a laptop backstage, where the ASL accuracy judge views the student’s live recitation side-by-side with the “perfect” recitation on a second laptop to note any differences in performance. The accuracy judge assigned to this task should be ASL fluent, and should not be the same accuracy judge who is scoring the other competitors, as they will need to be backstage during competition reviewing the videos.

Although they should be made aware of the rules that will be in effect at the state finals, schools for the deaf may use some discretion in applying the evaluation criteria to their school finals. Of particular interest and importance at the school level may be the students’ success in translating their poems to ASL. Since the entire judging panel would be ASL fluent, they might measure accuracy as how accurately the student translated the poem to ASL. Evidence of understanding could also include evaluation of how effectively the ASL translation reflects the intent of the original poem.

Briefing Other Competitors and the Audience

When you include Deaf students in your state final, you will need to prepare the audience and the other students for a recitation in ASL. It is most important that participants who are unfamiliar with ASL be briefed prior to the program. At the national finals, we give each student a packet of materials as they arrive in DC. (At the state level, you may consider giving them this information in the week before, as they may not have time to read through it on the day of the competition.) In our packet of materials, we include a document titled “what to expect at the competition” that details the process of the event. If a Deaf state champion is participating, the document also explains that a competitor is Deaf and that we take an inclusive approach to Poetry Out Loud. Here is the language we developed:

A state champion competing in semifinal three is Deaf and will be reciting their poems in American Sign Language (ASL). The judging panel includes a judge who is fluent in ASL and all judges have been trained in evaluating an ASL performance according to Poetry Out Loud criteria. The poems will be read simultaneously by an offstage narrator as he/she recites in ASL so that hearing audience members can

also follow the performance. The narration will not be considered by judges when scoring.

During the competition, we provide minimal explanation for the audience, but add language to the script, to be read as the student walks onstage for the first time:

[This student] will be reciting his/her poem in American Sign Language. A narrator will simultaneously read his/her poem aloud during the performance.

Access for Audience Members

Registered sign language interpreters should be provided during the entire program for audience members. Have your ASL interpreter in a visible, well-lit spot for your audience. Events of more than 1.5 hours may require two interpreters, who will switch off throughout the event. You will also want to send the poems to the sign language interpreters beforehand so they have a chance to read them over. Send them the same notebook that you prepare for your accuracy judge. The poems should be in the order of performance and in large font.

As we experienced at the national finals, a participant who is Deaf may spark the interest of the Deaf community in your Poetry Out Loud competition. Be sure you advertise your event as being ASL accessible.

Media and Other Inquiries

Poetry Out Loud can be an exciting event covered by the media. Be sure to go over event logistics with all staff involved and prepare talking points to address questions about the participation of Deaf students in the competition. Designate spokespeople to handle such inquiries and provide clear and accurate information about the competition. Please feel free to call the national POL staff to talk about how we prepare for these inquiries at the national finals. We also encourage you to communicate with the Deaf community, expert educators, and accessibility professionals in your state. A local [VSA affiliate](#) may assist you with issues related to arts and accessibility.

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