NATIONAL ENDOWMENT for the ARTS

POETRY OUT LOUD

AMERICA 250™

JUDGE'S GUIDE 2025-2026

www.poetryoutloud.org

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1. Program Overview

Poetry Out Loud® lifts poetry off the page, creating community and connection. Through this program, high school students across the country participate in a dynamic poetry recitation competition that is designed to improve their public speaking skills, help build confidence, and teach them about literary history and contemporary life. A collaboration with the National Endowment for the Arts, Mid Atlantic Arts, and participating state and jurisdictional arts agencies, Poetry Out Loud provides free lesson plans and other educational materials to teachers and organizers.

The program starts at the local level with a school or participating organization. Winners then may advance to a regional and/or state competition, and ultimately to the national finals. Awards and placements are determined solely by judges' scores based on the Poetry Out Loud Evaluation Criteria. Poetry Out Loud takes place in participating states and jurisdictions. Since the program began in 2005, more than 4.5 million students and 85,000 teachers from 21,000 schools across the U.S. have participated in Poetry Out Loud.

About Judging

Judging recitations is one of the most important roles in Poetry Out Loud. Teachers, parents, state arts agency staff, and volunteers—not to mention the students themselves—have dedicated many hours to coaching, practicing, promoting, and planning. The integrity of the competition rests on the work of judges at each and every level of competition. Familiarity with the evaluation criteria and advance preparation is essential. Please take time to review this guide prior to judging a Poetry Out Loud competition and be sure to be in contact with your competition organizer if you have any questions.

As a judge, you may be asked to judge an in-person or virtual event. For more information regarding POL virtual competitions and filming requirements, visit our website.

2. Judge Preparation

To best prepare for judging a Poetry Out Loud competition, here are a few things you should do:

- **Be sensitive to conflicts of interest**. Consider whether you may have an actual or perceived conflict of interest with any of the participating students or schools. If so, notify the event coordinator immediately. (See pg. 13 for more details.)

- **Familiarize yourself with the evaluation criteria and scoring rubric**. Review this Judge's Guide thoroughly and ask questions of the competition organizer if anything seems unclear to you.

- **Watch recitation videos on the National Endowment for the Arts YouTube Channel**. Student recitations from previous National Finals can provide a good model of what an excellent recitation looks like.

- **Practice scoring**. The scoring process is quick during a live competition. You will have less than a minute after each recitation to make your decisions and mark scores. Use copies of the competition evaluation sheet and online video examples to practice scoring the recitations in real time. Don't allow yourself more than 45 seconds or so to mark your ballot.

- **Read the poems the students will recite**. You will receive the students' selected poems in the weeks before the competition. Read them over and consider each poem's content, language, and length. If you have read the poems ahead of time, you will have a much better standpoint from which to judge the recitations. Some judges find it helpful to read the students' selected poems aloud beforehand.

- **Participate in any scheduled orientation**. Many organizers will hold an orientation, whether in-person or online, for judges about one or two weeks before the competition. Please mark your calendars and plan to join the session—it's a good time to ask questions of the organizer and your fellow judges.

3. The Competition

- To avoid the potential appearance of a conflict of interest, do not socialize with students, teachers, or parents prior to or during the competition.

- Prior to the competition, you will receive the evaluation sheets already personalized with the competitors' names and poems, in the order of recitation.

- When the competition begins, students will take turns reciting poems, each reciting one poem in each round of competition. The number of rounds in the competition will vary based on the level of competition.

- Complete your competition evaluation sheet directly after the student recites. Select one number for each element of the evaluation criteria. Score independently, exclusively based on merit. No other considerations should influence your decision.

- Live competitions move quickly. Judges will be given around one minute to complete their evaluations and turn in their completed forms to the tabulator or designated score collectors. Judges do not tally scores themselves.

- You will not be able to convene or discuss scores with other judges during the competition, nor can you revisit scores. Once you turn your scores in, the scores stand. Scoring is cumulative; the scores from each round will be totaled to determine the winner.

- For live competitions, there will be a staff member acting as a prompter, in case a student forgets a line. Use of the prompter will primarily affect the student's accuracy score, but their ability to remember their poem might also influence their "overall performance" score.

4. Evaluation Criteria

Judging a Poetry Out Loud competition differs in several important ways from judging a poetry slam or original poetry competition. Students' recitations must be assessed according to the Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria, outlined below, and scores must be determined by the official competition evaluation sheet found on page 9. Poetry Out Loud competitors recite poems written by others, so it is important that they convey a tone and mood appropriate to the selected work.

The following explains the evaluation criteria used for scoring recitations. Strong recitations will reflect excellence in each area. The scoring rubric on page 10 will help you understand exactly how this information applies to your score.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

Consider the student's stage presence, body language, and composure.

The student should be composed—projecting ease and confidence to the audience. All qualities of the student's physical presence work together to the benefit of the poem. A weaker performance may be one in which the student displays nervous gestures or appears stiff and uncomfortable with the audience.

VOICE AND ARTICULATION

Consider the student's projection, pace, intonation, rhythm, and pronunciation.

The student should be clear and project enough to capture the audience's attention. Projection should not be excessive. Any changes in tone should be appropriate to the subject matter. Students should proceed at a fitting and natural pace, not communicating too quickly from nervousness. Students should correctly pronounce every word in the poem. With rhymed poems, or with poems with a regular meter, students should be careful to not fall into a singsong rhythm. Decide whether the pauses come in suitable places for the poem. A recitation that is at a too slow or hurried pace, poorly projected, has a distracting rhythm or monotone delivery will obscure a poem's meaning for the audience.

INTERPRETATION

Consider whether the student's interpretative and performance choices enhance the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the poem without overshadowing the poem's language.

This category evaluates the interpretive and performance choices made by the student. A strong recitation will rely on a powerful internalization of the poem rather than excessive gestures or unnecessary emoting. The interpretation should subtly underscore the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the recitation. The videos of student recitations on the National Endowment for the Arts YouTube channel will help illustrate this point. Low scores

in this category should result from recitations that have an affected pitch, character voices, singing, inappropriate tone, excessive gestures, or unnecessary emoting.

EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING

Consider the student's use of intonation, emphasis, tone, and style of delivery.

This category measures a student's comprehension and mastery of a poem. How well does the student interpret the poem for the audience? Does the student make difficult lines clearer? Does the student communicate the correct tone of the poem—angst, dry humor, ambivalence? The poet's words should take precedence, and the student who understands the poem best will be able to communicate it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem better. Students should demonstrate that they know the meaning of every line and every word of the poem through the way these elements are handled.

In a strong recitation, the meaning of the poem will be powerfully and clearly conveyed to the audience. The student will offer an interpretation that deepens and enlivens the poem. Meaning, messages, allusions, irony, shifts of tone, and other nuances will be captured by the performance. A great performer may even make the audience see a poem in a new way. A low score in this category should result if the interpretation obscures the meaning of the poem.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE

Consider whether the student's physical presence, voice and articulation, interpretation, and evidence of understanding all seem on target and unified to breathe life into the poem.

"Overall performance" is worth more than other categories, with the value up to nine points. This category evaluates the total success of the performance, the degree to which the recitation has become more than the sum of its parts. Has the student captivated their audience with the language of the poem? Did the student bring the audience to a better understanding of the poem?

Use this score to measure how impressed you were by the recitation, and whether the recitation has honored the poem. You may also consider the diversity of a student's recitations with this score. If a student seems to be stuck using the same style of delivery with each of their poems, that may be evidence that they've not taken the time to consider each poem individually. In addition to range, judges should consider the complexity of the poem, which is a combination of its content, language, and length—bearing in mind that a longer poem is not necessarily a more complex one. 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.

5. Tips for Judges

- For each of the evaluation criteria, a solid performance scores a 4 (or 5 for overall performance); please keep this in mind as you are scoring the first-round of recitations. You would not want to score higher or lower than the student deserves, as these early scores will set your standard for the rest of the competition.

- A score of 9 for overall performance is generally very rare. Save this for truly exceptional recitations.

- Be sure you score each category separately and carefully—you should not find yourself circling all 3's, for instance.

- Before you turn in your scores, double check you have selected a number in each category. It is easy to skip a category while judging so many recitations quickly!

- If you happen to dislike the work of a particular poet, please keep a fresh and objective perspective while scoring a recitation of one of their poems.

- If you are judging a virtual competition, please judge based on the official evaluation criteria and not the quality of the audio or video.

- While pronunciation is key to the "voice and articulation" category, remember that some students may be learning English as a second language or may hail from a particular region of the state or country, and these students should not be penalized for reciting with an accent.

- Be consistent with yourself throughout the entire competition—don't decide to change your scoring style halfway through the event.

- Give each student your full attention, whether they are first or fifteenth.

- Enjoy the company of your fellow judges before and after the competition; however, during the event, please don't converse.

- If the opportunity arises to interact with student competitor(s) after the competition, offer encouraging feedback and avoid comparing one student to another.

6. Competition Evaluation Sheet

Name of Student: _____

Title of Poem: _____

	Needs Improvement	Below Average	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
Physical Presence	1	2	3	4	5	6
Voice and Articulation	1	2	3	4	5	6
Interpretation	1	2	3	4	5	6
Evidence of Understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6
Overall Performance	1	2	3	5	7	9

TOTAL: _____ (MAXIMUM of 33 points)

ACCURACY JUDGE'S SCORE: _____ (MAXIMUM of 8 points)

FINAL SCORE: _____ **(MAXIMUM OF 41 POINTS)**

7. Poetry Out Loud Scoring Rubric*

The scoring rubric is meant to provide a consistent measure against which to evaluate recitations. It is not intended to be comprehensive but serves as a companion to the evaluation criteria. We suggest you review it before the competition to get a sense of what you should look for in individual performances.

	Needs Improvement	Below Average	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
Physical Presence	Stiff or agitated; lacks connection with audience; appears uncomfortable	Timid; unsure;body language reflects nervousness	Body language is at times unsure, at times confident	Comfortable; confident body language	Composed; body language reveals strong stage presence	Self-assured; body language shows compelling stage presence
Voice and Articulation	No projection; slow pace; distracting rhythm;singsong; hurried; mispronunciations	Insufficient or excessive projection; monotone; paced unevenly; affected tone	Clear, adequate intonation, even pacing	Clear, appropriate intonation and pacing	Very clear, crisp, effective use of projection, intonation, rhythm, and pacing	Very clear, crisp, mastery of rhythm and pace, skillful use of projection and intonation
Interpretation	Poem is overshadowed by excessive gestures and expressions; affected accents or inflections; acting out of poem; singing; over-emoting; inappropriate tone	Poem is secondary to style of delivery; includes instances of excessive gestures, expressions, and vocal inflections; inappropriate tone	Poem is neither overwhelmed nor enhanced by style of delivery	Poem is enhanced by style of delivery; any gestures, expressions, and movement are appropriate to poem	Style of delivery reflects precedence of poem; the poem's meaning is well conveyed by delivery and gestures	Style of delivery reflects internalization of poem; any gestures and movements feel essential to poem's success
Evidence of Understanding	Obscures meaning of poem	Doesn't sufficiently communica temeaning of poem	Satisfactorily communicates meaning of poem	Conveys meaning of poem well	Interprets poem very well for audience; nuanced	Masterfully interprets poem for audience, deftly revealing poem's meaning
Overall Performance (Consider poem complexity in this category)	Ineffective or inappropriate; does disservice topoem	Inadequate; lackluster; does disservice to poem	Sufficient; lacks meaningful impact on audience	Enjoyable; successfully delivers poem	Inspired performance shows grasp of recitation skills and enhances audience's experience of the poem	Captivating performance—whole equals "more than the sum of the parts"; shows mastery of recitation skills

*Note that all elements need not be present. Semicolons often represent "or," especially in the negative categories.

8. Role of Accuracy Judge

Each panel of judges has only one accuracy judge—other judges need not concern themselves with this category. Accuracy is the first element of a recitation—the most basic task for the student is to keep the poet's language intact for the audience. Given that accuracy is the foundation of a good recitation, serving as an accuracy judge is a critical component of the evaluation process.

The accuracy judge will have a binder or PDF with all poems in the order they will be recited. (Students will use the version of poems in the Poetry Out Loud anthology.) For in-person competitions, the accuracy judge will have an assigned seat with the other judges in a location where they can both read the text and hear the recitations.

During the competition, students will begin each recitation by accurately announcing both the title and the author, and, if necessary, the translator. (For example, [Poem] by [Author] translated by [Translator].)

- Epigraphs included with the poem in the Poetry Out Loud anthology should be recited, and their omission will affect the accuracy score.
- Footnotes included with the poem in the Poetry Out Loud anthology should not be recited, and their inclusion will affect the accuracy score.
- Reciting stanza numbers and dedications is optional, and their inclusion or omission should not affect the accuracy score.
- Mispronunciations *are not* accuracy errors and should not affect the accuracy score.
- A student's own editorial comments before or after the poem are not allowed. However, the addition of a "*thank you*" at the end of the recitation, or a student introducing themselves by stating their name, state, and/or school at the beginning of a recitation, while discouraged, should not affect the accuracy score.
- Once a student begins their recitation, they should not start over. Starting over will count against a student's accuracy score.
- Students must include the name of the translator, if applicable.
- The poem must be delivered from memory.

The accuracy judge will work independently, following the text of the poem as the student recites. It is essential that the poem be recited as written, word for word. After each recitation, the accuracy judge's score sheet will be collected. The score tabulator will add the accuracy judge's score to all competition evaluation sheets for each recitation.

Instructions for scoring accuracy: mark the text each time there is an error in accuracy. You should mark all minor inaccuracies the same (since each is worth a 1-point deduction) and flag the bigger mistakes differently. After the recitation, use the guidance on the accuracy score sheet to assign a point deduction to each mistake. To get the final accuracy score, count up the point deductions, and subtract them from the maximum accuracy score of 8 points. The minimum accuracy score is one point.

Example: If the competitor repeated a word (-1 point), confused an article (-1 point), and skipped one line (-3 points), that would be 5 points subtracted from the maximum score of 8. The final accuracy score would be 3 points.

9. Accuracy Score Sheet

Name of Student: _____

Title of Poem: _____

Maximum Score	8	points
Inaccuracy Deduction (subtract)	– ____	points
Prompt Deduction (subtract)	– ____	points
FINAL ACCURACY SCORE	____	points*

*Lowest possible score is 1 point

Minor inaccuracies, resulting in a 1-point deduction per occurrence, include:

- Confusing a pronoun (“he” instead of “she”)
- Confusing an article (“a” instead of “the”)
- Pluralizing a word or vice versa (“horses” instead of “horse”)
- Replacing a word with a similar word (“jump” instead of “leap”)
- Confusing the order of words (“hops and skips” instead of “skips and hops”)
- Skipping a word
- Repeating a word
- Adding a word
- Omitting the poem title
- Omitting the author
- Omitting the translator

Major inaccuracies, resulting in larger deductions per occurrence, include:

• One line out of order	-2 points
• Repeating a line	-2 points
• Omitting an epigraph	-2 points
• Including a footnote	-2 points
• Skipped one line/skipped three or more words in the same line	-3 points
• Reversed two stanzas	-5 points
• Skipped one stanza	-6 points

Use of prompter: Each time a student uses the prompter, 3 points will be deducted from the final accuracy score.

10. Conflict of Interest

If you feel you may have a conflict of interest, please speak up—the earlier the better. Disclosure of any potential conflicts of interest (or the appearance of conflicts of interest) will help organizers to preserve the integrity of the competition and make it fair for all students.

Potential conflicts of interest include:

- Relative or friend of one of the competitors or of a competitor's parent or teacher
- Teacher or coach of one of the competitors (at regional, state, or national level)
- Alumni of represented school (at regional, state, or national level)
- Poet whose work appears in anthology

If you have any questions about this, please ask your competition organizer.

Credits and Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge all state arts agencies, assessment experts, students, and teachers for their assistance in helping us shape and test this guide.

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We appreciate your feedback to improve this guide and the judging process. Please send comments to poetryoutloud@arts.gov.

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