

Evaluation Criteria and Tips for Competitors

For video examples of these tips, view past student recitations on the National Endowment for the Arts' YouTube channel.

Physical Presence

This category evaluates how the student uses posture, focus, facial expression, movement, and overall stage presence to support the poem. Physical choices should appear comfortable, purposeful, and connected to the poem without drawing attention away from the words.

Judges will consider:

- Posture, poise, confidence, and overall stage presence.
- Eye focus and audience connection.
- Purposeful use of movement, gestures, facial expressions, or other physical choices.
- Whether physical choices appear natural and comfortable rather than stiff, rigid, or forced.
- Freedom from distracting or repetitive nervous behaviors.

Tips for students:

- Stand in a way that feels grounded and comfortable.
- Allow gestures and facial expressions to arise naturally from the poem.
- Avoid pacing, fidgeting, or repetitive movements.
- Avoid locking your body into a rigid posture; flexibility and ease can help create a more natural connection with the audience.

KEY QUESTION:

Do the student's physical choices help communicate the poem and engage the audience?

Voice and Articulation

This category evaluates how a student uses vocal delivery to communicate the poem clearly and effectively. Vocal choices should help the audience hear, understand, and experience the poem while remaining responsive to its language, meaning, and emotional content.

Judges will consider:

- Whether the student's voice can be heard clearly throughout the performance without strain or excessive volume.
- Clear pronunciation and articulation of words. Note: Natural regional, cultural, or multilingual accents should not be considered.
- Whether the pace allows the audience to follow and absorb the poem and whether variation in pace supports the poem's meaning, structure, or emotional shifts.
- Vocal variety, including changes in pitch, emphasis, tone, and energy.
- Use of pauses that clarify meaning, emphasize important moments, or allow ideas to resonate.
- Freedom from defaulting to a singsong, chant-like, overly rhythmic delivery, or any vocal choices that become distracting.

Tips for students:

- Learn the correct pronunciation of every word in your poem, including unfamiliar vocabulary, proper nouns, and words from other languages.
- Learn the correct pronunciation of the poet's name and, if applicable, the translator's name.
- Consider line breaks when shaping your delivery, and do not assume every line break requires a pause. Some lines will carry the thought seamlessly into the next line.

2026 STATE CHAMPIONS:

Amelia Rylak (Virginia);

Jaden Conley (Illinois);

Riley Grace Saenim (Wisconsin)

- Consider the poem's punctuation, including commas, periods, dashes, and other marks that can also help determine pacing, emphasis, and meaning.
- Be aware of meter, rhyme, and sound patterns, but avoid letting them create a singsong or overly rhythmic delivery.
- Avoid rushing through important ideas or using drawn out pauses or slowing down so much that the poem loses momentum.

KEY QUESTION:

Does the student's vocal delivery help the audience clearly hear, understand, and connect with the poem?

Interpretation

This category evaluates the student's artistic choices in bringing the poem to life through tone, emotional range, pacing, emphasis, and delivery style. Strong interpretation remains grounded in the language of the poem and avoids melodrama, exaggeration, and performative emotionality that draws attention away from the poem itself. Interpretation should feel authentic, restrained when appropriate, and responsive to the poem's shifts in tone and meaning.

Judges will consider:

- Whether tone, emotional expression, and poetic voice feel authentic and grounded in the poem rather than exaggerated, theatrical, or performative.
- Whether gestures, facial expressions, and other performance choices support rather than overshadow the language.
- Whether interpretive choices feel intentional and aligned with the poem rather than generic or imposed.
- Whether restraint is used effectively when the poem calls for subtlety.

- The degree to which interpretive choices deepen the audience's engagement with and understanding of the poem.
- Freedom from affected or imitated accents.

Tips for students:

- Let the poem guide emotional expression rather than adding emotion on top of it.
- Avoid acting out every line.
- Avoid the use of affected or imitated accents.
- Use emotional shifts sparingly and intentionally, based on the poem's actual turns.
- Remember that a quiet or restrained delivery can be just as powerful as an intense delivery.
- Focus on clarity and truthfulness over performance intensity.

KEY QUESTION:

Do the student's interpretive choices reveal and support the emotional and tonal truth of the poem without becoming exaggerated or theatrical?

Evidence of Understanding

This category evaluates how clearly the student demonstrates an accurate and nuanced understanding of the poem, including its meaning, language, themes, and rhetorical choices. Strong performances make the poem easier to understand and reveal thoughtful attention to how the poem works.

Judges will consider:

- Whether the meaning of the poem is communicated accurately and consistently.
- Whether emphasis is placed on words and phrases that are important to meaning, not just sound or rhythm.
- Whether the student reflects awareness of figurative language, imagery, irony, or other ambiguity when present in the poem.

- Whether the recitation avoids distortions of meaning caused by misplaced emphasis, rushed phrasing, or overly performative delivery choices.
- Whether the student demonstrates awareness of any shifts in tone, perspective, or progressions of ideas in the poem's language.

Tips for students:

- Make sure you fully understand the literal and implied meaning of every word, line, and historical or cultural reference in your poem.
- Identify key shifts in the poem (e.g. changes in speaker, tone, time, or perspective).
- Pay attention to how sentence structure and punctuation affect meaning.
- Ask yourself: "Would someone unfamiliar with this poem understand it more clearly because of my performance?"
- Avoid letting rhythm or emotional delivery override meaning.

KEY QUESTION:

Does the recitation make the poem's meaning, structure, and language clearer and more understandable to the audience?

Overall Performance

This category evaluates the effectiveness and lasting impression of the recitation as a complete artistic performance, including the extent to which the student's physical presence, voice and articulation, interpretation, and evidence of understanding work together in a unified and intentional way to bring the poem to life.

Judges will consider:

- The overall cohesion and effectiveness of the performance as a whole.
- The success of the performance choices to illuminate the poem's tone, meaning, and style.
- The level of audience engagement and sustained attention generated by the recitation.

- The overall sense that the performance is intentional, polished, and well-resolved.
- The memorability of the performance.
- Judges may also consider the complexity* of the poem in relation to how effectively it was performed.

*Complexity refers to the overall demands a poem places on memory, interpretation, and delivery. This may include, but is not limited to, unusual or complex syntax; irregular, nonlinear, or fragmented structure; long, complex sentences; historical or cultural references; density of figurative or abstract language; repetitive language with slight variations; shifts in voice or tone; the use of more than one language or archaic language; and poem length, keeping in mind that a longer poem is not necessarily a more complex one.

Tips for students:

- Choose poems that you feel authentically connected to or that challenge you in meaningful ways, not just in length or difficulty.
- When considering the complexity of your poems, remember that a longer poem is not necessarily a more difficult one.

KEY QUESTION:

Does the student's recitation succeed as a unified and compelling artistic performance?

Accuracy

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.

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