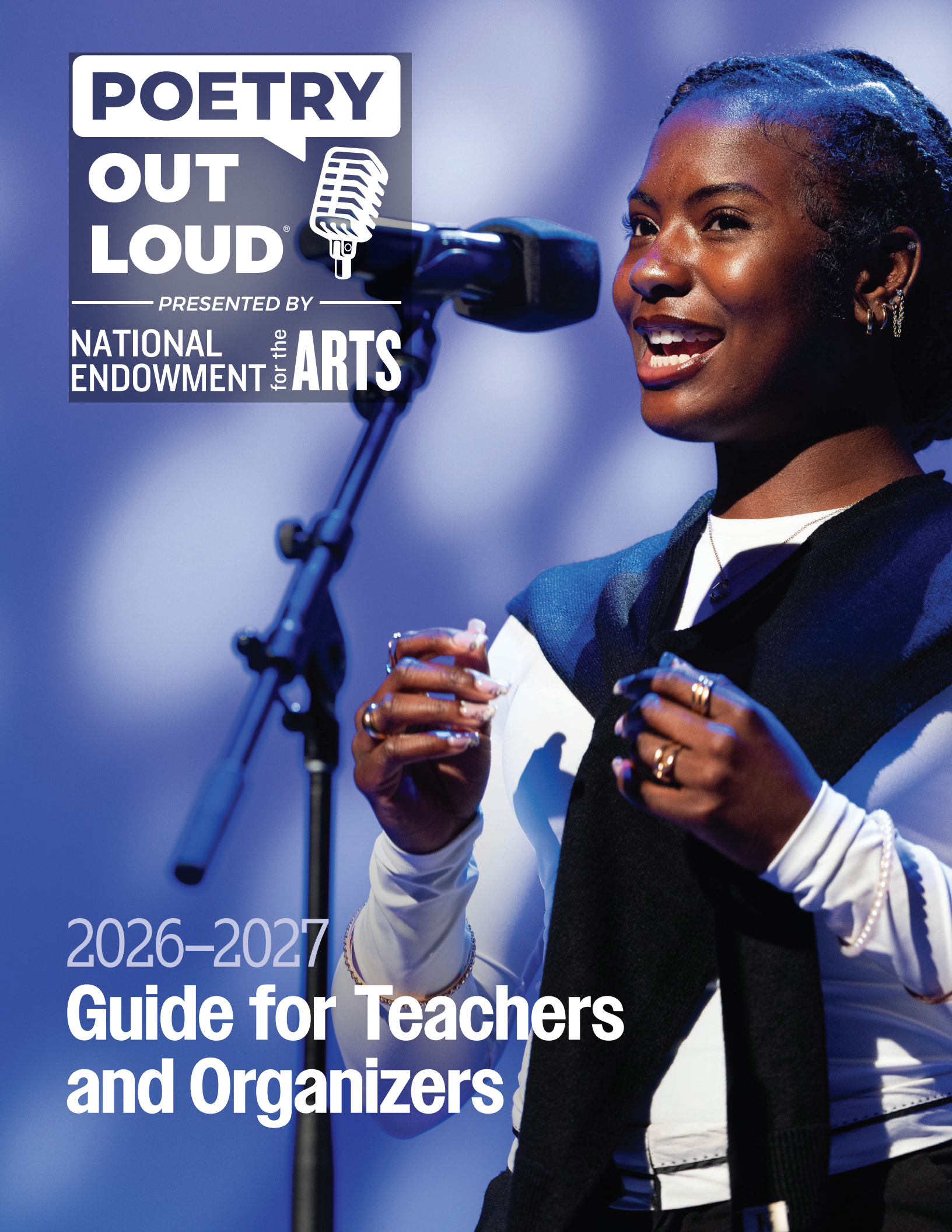


A woman with dark skin and braided hair is performing poetry into a microphone. She is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt under a dark blue or black vest. She has several rings on her fingers and a pearl bracelet on her left wrist. She is smiling and looking towards the microphone. The background is a soft, out-of-focus blue.

2026–2027 Guide for Teachers and Organizers

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS PRESENTS

POETRY OUT LOUD





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* Lesson plans are available at PoetryOutLoud.org.

Note: This guide includes information on how to hold in-person Poetry Out Loud events. For information on how to run Poetry Out Loud virtually, please visit PoetryOutLoud.org.

*The 2026 Poetry Out Loud National Finalists
gathered in Washington, DC.*

ON THE COVER:
*2026 Poetry Out Loud National Champion
Jayda Dawn*

Why Poetry Out Loud?



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 program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with participating state and jurisdictional arts agencies and administered by Mid Atlantic Arts, Poetry Out Loud provides free lesson plans and other educational materials to teachers and organizers, including an online anthology of classic and contemporary poems.

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. Since the program began in 2005, more than 4.6 million students and 89,000 teachers from 22,000 schools across the U.S. have participated in Poetry Out Loud.

“I was surprised by the confidence that performing on such a huge stage gave me. I went from never performing anything before to winning a state poetry competition!”

— Natalia Gatti, 2026 Delaware State Champion

Poetry Out Loud is a fun and dynamic way to introduce students to poetry.

- Poetry Out Loud builds self-confidence and helps develop social and emotional maturity.
- The thrill of competition encourages students to do their best and support their peers.
- Poetry Out Loud creates lifelong lovers of poetry and creative writing.
- Poetry Out Loud offers an opportunity for all types of students to succeed.

Poetry Out Loud is easy to implement.

- Poetry Out Loud materials are completely free.
- Participation is open to all types of high schools, as well as homeschool students, after school programs, libraries, and nonprofit organizations.
- The program is flexible and adaptable, allowing educators to integrate it into their current curriculum, and supports Common Core, National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and National Core Arts Standards.
- This guide, along with online supplemental materials, provides everything needed to teach the program and host a competition — whether in-person or virtually.

Poetry Out Loud inspires learning.

- Students strengthen analytical skills by reading, interpreting, and engaging with a wide range of poems.
- The program builds confidence in students' own writing and creative expression.
- Poetry Out Loud fosters meaningful connections between teachers and students.
- Participation encourages creativity and supports success across disciplines.

2026 STATE CHAMPION
Xariel Banton (Pennsylvania)



How To Get Involved

- 1** To register for Poetry Out Loud, contact your state coordinator by visiting PoetryOutLoud.org/StateContacts.
- 2** Once you've registered, invite others at your high school or organization to participate and plan to host a competition.
- 3** Create a simple timeline that outlines your Poetry Out Loud program, including deadlines and competition dates, and then get started!

How do we bring Poetry Out Loud to students?

Poetry Out Loud is flexible and can be implemented in a variety of ways at schools or area organizations. Here are a few examples:

- Poetry Out Loud is mandatory for all ninth-grade students at a school. Classroom competitions are conducted and a schoolwide competition is held at an assembly.
- Three teachers at a school bring Poetry Out Loud to their English classes. They hold individual classroom competitions and then hold a schoolwide competition to determine their school winner.
- One teacher makes Poetry Out Loud optional to all their drama students to receive extra credit. This winner moves on to the next level of competition.
- A teacher, librarian, parent volunteer, or a group of students lead an after-school creative writing club and hold a Poetry Out Loud competition amongst the participating students.
- A school partners with a library or arts organization to run Poetry Out Loud at their school, either in classrooms or as an extracurricular program.
- An arts organization recruits students in the local area whose schools are not participating in Poetry Out Loud. The organization runs a competition and the winner proceeds to the next level of competition.
- A homeschool organization partners with a teaching artist to administer Poetry Out Loud for their students.



Competition Structure

Local Competition

Poetry Out Loud begins at the **local level**, with competitions held by schools or participating organizations. Winners can advance to regional and/or state competitions, and ultimately to the National Finals. Awards and placements are determined solely by judges' scores based on the Poetry Out Loud Evaluation Criteria (pages 13-15).

Regional/State Competition

Regional/State Awards: Each winner at the state level will receive \$200 and an all-expenses-paid trip (with an adult chaperone) to Washington, DC, to compete at the National Finals. The state winner's representing school or organization will receive \$500 for poetry materials. One runner-up in each state will receive \$100; their school/organization will receive \$200 for the purchase of poetry materials.

National Competition

National Awards: A total of \$50,000 in awards and school or organizational stipends will be given at the Poetry Out Loud National Finals, including a \$20,000 award for the National Champion.

Awards are offered for the official competitions conducted by the state arts agencies and the National Endowment for the Arts. The awards do not apply to unofficial competitions. Awards will be made in the form of lump sum cash payouts, reportable to the IRS. Tax liabilities are the sole responsibility of the winners and their families. Mid Atlantic Arts provides and administers all aspects of the monetary prizes awarded in Poetry Out Loud as well as all travel for state champions to the National Finals.

Getting Started

1. EXPLORE

Have students browse the poems.

Visit PoetryOutLoud.org to browse the online anthology of poems. Allow time for the students to explore the anthology and search by poem, poet, or theme.

2. UNDERSTAND

Ask each student to select poems to memorize.

Allowing students to choose poems that resonate with them is key to helping them recite more effectively. The process of memorizing and performing helps students internalize the author's message and explore complex language and ideas. Find student videos about the selection and memorization of poems at PoetryOutLoud.org.

Discuss the poems.

Understanding the text is the most important preparation for reciting poetry. If a student doesn't understand the text, neither will the audience.

Have students memorize the poems.

Share these memorization tips:

- Rewrite your poem by hand several times. Each time, try to write more and more of it from memory.
- Read your poem before going to sleep at night, and repeat it when you wake up.
- Carry around a copy of your poem in your pocket or bag and find several moments throughout the day to reread or recite it.
- Practice reciting your poem for family and friends.

3. RECITE

Model recitation skills.

- Recite poems yourself — this is a powerful way to show students it can be done.
- With the class, develop a list of bad habits that take away from the performance, such as insufficient projection, speaking too quickly or too slowly, monotone voice, fidgeting, excessive body language, and mispronunciations.
- Then develop a list of elements of a successful recitation, such as sufficient projection, good pacing with proper pauses, voice inflection, evidence of understanding, correct pronunciation, and composure.
- Play videos of past student recitations found on the NEA's YouTube channel.
- Allow class time for students to practice their poems. Peers can offer constructive feedback, using the competition evaluation sheet and evaluation criteria as a guide.

4. WRITE

Include creative writing exercises.

Creative writing is a natural complement to Poetry Out Loud. There are several optional writing exercises and lesson plans at PoetryOutLoud.org.

Note: Please let students know that they can request accommodations for a disability. Teachers and organizers may refer to the Accessibility page on PoetryOutLoud.org for more information or contact their state coordinator for further assistance.

Sample Schedule



Week 1

- Students explore the anthology and choose poems to memorize.
- Read and discuss some of the poems as a group.
- Model effective and ineffective recitation practices.



Week 2

Have students practice their poems with different partners each day.

Students should have their poems completely memorized by the end of the week.

Hold practice competitions.

Break up the students into groups. Have one student at a time perform for the rest of the group, who act as judges. Encourage discussion about how the student interpreted and presented the poem.

Implement the lesson plans and writing exercises.

Teachers and organizers may offer a more complete poetry unit by using the lesson plans provided at PoetryOutLoud.org

Hold the competition at the end of the week.

Keep in mind that it takes an average of three or four minutes to recite a poem and judge the recitation. Organizers should structure the competition in a way that best fits their schedules.



Week 3

Hold the schoolwide recitation competition, if applicable, at the end of the week.

Winners of the classroom competitions will prepare two or three poems for recitation and will compete in the schoolwide competition at the end of this week. Ideally, the schoolwide competition will take place at a public venue, whether in-person or online, thus enhancing the entire student body's exposure to poetry and giving the competitors a larger audience.



“Poetry Out Loud has been such an amazing experience because it's been an opportunity to meet other people like me; teenagers who have a great love of poetry and the arts.”

—Lillian Baker, 2026 Arkansas State Champion



The Competition

A Poetry Out Loud competition may be conducted in-person or virtually. For more guidance on how to conduct a virtual competition, please visit PoetryOutLoud.org.

Lead Organizer(s)

We recommend that each school or organization identify one or two leaders to serve as the Poetry Out Loud coordinators. Lead organizers will recruit needed participants and staff, distribute materials, organize events, and keep in touch with the state Poetry Out Loud coordinator.

Competition Rounds

State and national finals consist of three rounds of competition. Competitions at lower levels may have fewer rounds, but students must recite only one poem in each round.

For instance, we recommend classroom and smaller organization competitions have students recite at least one poem; for schoolwide and larger organization competitions, we recommend students recite at least two poems.

Poem Selection

Eligible poems are available at PoetryOutLoud.org.

Students must provide the titles and authors of their poems and the order in which they will be recited in advance to the competition coordinator. *Students may not change their poem selections or order once they have been submitted.*

Introducing and Reciting the Poem

Competitors will recite each poem once individually. The emcee should introduce students as they come to the stage to recite. It is the student's job to identify the poem by accurately announcing both the title and the author, and, if necessary, the translator. (For example, [Poem] by [Author] translated by [Translator].)

- A student's own editorial comments before or after the poem are not allowed.
- Once a student begins their recitation, they should not start over. Starting over will count against a student's accuracy score.
- 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.
- Stanza numbers and dedications included with the original poem are optional, and their inclusion or omission should not affect the accuracy score.
- Students must include the name of the translator, if applicable.
- Students should not remove microphones from stands or walk around the stage during their recitation.
- The poem must be delivered from memory.

Competition Venue

Classroom competitions can be held during class periods; organization competitions can be held during a regular meeting time with students. Reserve a school theater, auditorium, or other appropriate venue for a schoolwide competition. The ideal setting will have a stage and theater-style seating. Depending on the size of the venue, amplification may be appropriate.

Staffing the Competition

At the schoolwide or larger organization competition, you will need volunteers to serve in a variety of roles:

Coordinator (1 or 2)

The lead organizer(s) may be best suited for this role. The coordinator will ensure that the event runs smoothly, all volunteers are present, judges are briefed before the event, and scoring is accurate.

Emcee (1)

An emcee will guide the competition from start to finish, providing welcoming remarks, introducing judges and students, and announcing winners.

Judges (3–5), accuracy judge (1)

See page 10 of this guide for advice on selecting and preparing judges.

Prompter (1)

It is important to have someone following along with the recitations, ready to prompt a student who may get stuck on a line. Prepare a notebook or PDF with a large-font copy of each poem, in the order of recitation, for the prompter. Seat the prompter in the center of the front row, and have them follow along with the text as each student recites. Show the students where the prompter is sitting before the competition begins so they know where to look if they get lost during their recitation. If a competitor is stuck for several seconds and looks to the prompter for help, the prompter may provide the next few words of the poem to get that student back on track.

Score tabulator (1–2)

While the competition is taking place, someone should input the judges' scores in a database so that no time is wasted totaling scores after the recitations are finished. An Excel spreadsheet works well for this purpose. A template is available at PoetryOutLoud.org. It may be helpful for the tabulator to have an assistant collect the competition evaluation sheets. Remember to test your tabulation system before the event.

For accessibility requests for students, judges, or the public, please refer to the Accessibility page on PoetryOutLoud.org. For further assistance or questions, please contact your state coordinator.

Judging

Local Levels

For a classroom or small organization-level competition, the teacher or lead organizer can serve as the sole judge.

For a school-level competition, it is recommended to have two or three judges. These may be teachers from the school or invited members of the local community. Appropriate judges might be local poets, actors, professors, arts reporters, or members of the school board. Judges should have some knowledge of poetry, although they need not be experts. Be sensitive to conflicts of interest — actual or perceived — with your judging panel. Make sure to choose judges who will conscientiously prepare for their roles in advance.

- Although they will score individually during the competition, it is useful to have judges discuss their scores in orientation practice rounds.
- During an in-person competition, separate the judges a bit from the rest of the audience so they are not distracted. Judges should not have any interaction with the competitors or the audience until after the competition.
- Judges must not convene to discuss their scores. They should rate recitations individually and then immediately turn in their evaluation sheets. This practice not only keeps the competition moving, but also ensures that judges are scoring independently, based on merit only. Notify judges that they will not be able to revisit scores after they turn them in.

Preparing the Judges

- Send the judges the students' poems ahead of time, so they are familiar with them and can consider students' poem choice in regards to range and complexity. No judge other than the accuracy judge should be following along with the text during recitations.
- Send them a copy of the Judge's Guide, available at PoetryOutLoud.org, and ask them to review it fully in advance, paying close attention to the Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria.
- Encourage them to watch the Poetry Out Loud judge training video in the Poetry Out Loud Resources playlist on the NEA's YouTube channel and invite them to ask questions as needed.
- Encourage them to view the video examples of student recitations on the NEA's YouTube channel; they should practice scoring these before the competition.

Accuracy Judge

Assign a separate person to serve as an accuracy judge. The accuracy judge will mark missed or incorrect words during the recitation. The accuracy score sheet can be found on page 19, and also can be downloaded from PoetryOutLoud.org. Make sure to prepare accuracy score sheets before the competition and fill in the names of the participants and the titles of the poems they will recite. Have these in order of recitation before the competition and give a set to the accuracy judge, along with a notebook or PDF with large-font text of each poem, in the order of recitation, so they may follow the recitations.

Scoring

A copy of the Poetry Out Loud competition evaluation sheet may be downloaded at PoetryOutLoud.org. Prepare the evaluation sheets before the school competition by filling in the names of the participants and the titles of the poems they will recite. Have these in recitation order before the competition, with one set for each judge.

At in-person competitions, the score tabulator or an assistant will collect the completed competition evaluation sheets after each recitation. The accuracy judge's score will be added to each evaluation sheet as scores are tabulated. Scoring is cumulative; the scores from each round should be totaled to determine the winner.

“I used to feel that poetry was a dying art or was at least losing popularity. But ever since becoming affiliated with Poetry Out Loud, I've noticed that there are so many individuals my age who like me, appreciate poetry and want to spend time reciting it to benefit themselves.”

—James Ware, 2026 Utah State Champ

2026 STATE CHAMPION AND
SECOND PLACE WINNER

Damien Andre Deen (South Dakota)





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.

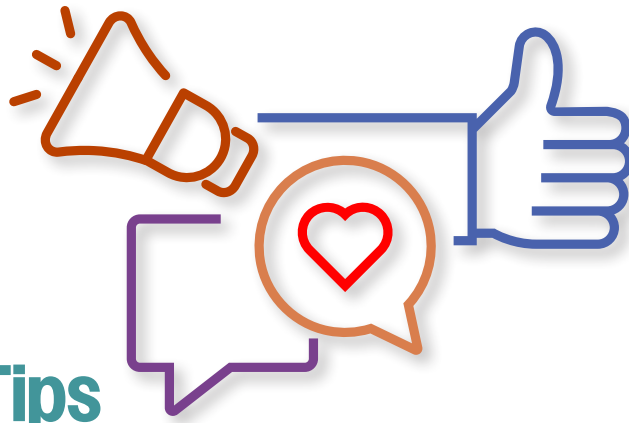
KEY QUESTION:

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.



Publicity Tips

Since 2005, Poetry Out Loud has reached more than 4.6 million students and 89,000 teachers from 22,000 schools and organizations nationwide. Poetry Out Loud is a great way to raise school spirit and generate positive visibility for your school or organization.

Here are some simple ways to increase awareness of Poetry Out Loud, and share your students' achievements with the community at large.

- ➔ Remember to use the other Poetry Out Loud hashtags — **#POL27** and **#IAmPoetryOutLoud** — to be part of the larger conversation about Poetry Out Loud throughout the school year.
- ➔ Post notices announcing the competition and champions at your school/organization and/or on your website, newsletter, student newspaper, or social media pages. Use the Poetry Out Loud logo to celebrate your involvement.
- ➔ Announce classroom winners and the schoolwide competition in the daily PA broadcast or at assemblies.
- ➔ Include a “poem-a-day” poetry recitation in the daily PA broadcast or at assemblies.
- ➔ Use your school’s or organization’s social media accounts to share information about your Poetry Out Loud program.

2026 STATE CHAMPIONS:

Salvador Gonzales (Missouri);
Astrid Santos (Rhode Island);
Emma Oleson (Iowa)



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)**

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*

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”)
- Omitting the poem title
- Omitting the author
- Omitting the translator
- Confusing the order of words (“hops and skips” instead of “skips and hops”)
- Skipping a word
- Repeating a word
- Adding a word

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
- Skipping 1 line/skipping 3 or more words in the same line: -3 points
- Reversing 2 stanzas: -5 points
- Skipping 1 stanza: -6 points

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

The inclusion or omission of stanza numbers or dedications should not affect scoring. Likewise, the addition of a student introducing themselves by stating their name, state, and/or school at the beginning of a recitation, or the inclusion of a “thank you” at the end of the recitation, while discouraged, should not affect the accuracy score.

Restarts: If a student restarts their recitation, an accuracy point will be deducted for every repeated word.

Accuracy judge: Follow along with the text of the poem as the competitor recites. Mark the text each time there is an error in accuracy (mispronunciations are not accuracy errors). You should mark all minor inaccuracies the same (since each is worth a 1 point deduction), and flag the bigger mistakes differently. Be consistent. After the recitation, use the guidance below 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 score of 8 points. Remember that the accuracy score is added to the evaluation sheet of each judge.

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.

Rules

Only those who registered with their state Poetry Out Loud coordinator are eligible for the official competition.

Student Eligibility

- **Grade Level:** Only currently enrolled students in grades 9-12 are eligible, with an exception made for 8th-grade students participating in a 9th-through 12th-grade class.
- **State Finals:** A student may not advance to the state finals without competing in a lower-level competition.
- **Legal Participation Requirements:** No student may be excluded from participating in Poetry Out Loud on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, disability, or national origin. Schools may determine eligibility for classroom and school level Poetry Out Loud programming pursuant to local and state law.
- **Prize Requirements:** Mid Atlantic Arts provides and administers all aspects of the monetary prizes awarded in Poetry Out Loud. State champions and runners up must submit a properly completed IRS Form W-9 or Form W-8BEN in order to be eligible to receive the prize money. Prizes are not transferable and are taxable to the recipient; prizes issued to individuals submitting a Form W-8 may be subject to additional withholding requirements.
- **Travel and Accommodations Requirements:** Mid Atlantic Arts produces the finals competition and administers all aspects of the travel for State Champions to the Poetry Out Loud National Finals. State Champions (or their legal guardians) and their chaperones must submit a properly completed IRS Form W-9 or Form W-8BEN before travel and lodging are arranged by Mid Atlantic Arts.
- **Homeschooled Students:** Homeschooled students may participate by competing in a competition at a local school (at the school's discretion) or with other local homeschooled students. Contact your state coordinator for more information.
- **School Not Participating?** Students unable to participate at a local school should contact their state coordinator to discuss other opportunities for inclusion in the state's official competition.
- **Repeat Champions:** National Champions are ineligible to compete in subsequent years even if they are still in grades 9-12.
- **Relatives:** Avoiding any potential conflicts of interest (or the appearance of conflicts of interest) helps to preserve the integrity of the competition and make it fair for all students. Relatives of the national organizers (National Endowment for the Arts and Mid Atlantic Arts) may compete in school, local, regional, and state competitions, but are not eligible to advance to National Finals. Relatives of State Arts Agency Coordinators or affiliated contractors and sponsors may not compete past the school level in that particular state. *Relatives for this age group are defined as child, sibling, or any member of the employee's household.*

“I prepared by first familiarizing myself with the meaning of each poem before actually memorizing it. I wanted to really get a feel for the emotions and ideas behind the words, so that when I performed, it wouldn't just be memorized lines, but something that felt alive and true.”

—Brielle Brandon, 2026 Guam Jurisdictional Champion

Poem Eligibility

- **Poem Anthology:** All poems must be selected from the Poetry Out Loud online anthology, which is updated every school year. Check PoetryOutLoud.org after September 1, 2026, to view the official Poetry Out Loud anthology for the current school year. Only versions of poems from the official anthology may be used in the competition.
- **Can't Find a Poem?** Poems may be removed from the online anthology before September 1, 2026. These poems are no longer eligible for competition.
- **Poem Criteria:** At the state and national finals, students must have three poems prepared. One must be 25 lines or fewer and one must be published before 1930. One poem may be used to meet both criteria and may be the student's third poem.

Competition

- **Competition Participants:** Poetry Out Loud competitions must have at least two students to select a winner. If the winner is unable to attend the next level of competition, the runner-up should be sent.
- **Evaluation:** Students must be judged according to the Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria (pages 12–14).
- **Rounds:** State and national finals consist of three rounds of competition. Competitions at lower levels may have fewer rounds, but students must recite only one poem in each round.
- **Poem Order:** The order in which the poems are recited is up to the student, but poem order may not be switched once submitted to the competition organizer. Competition organizers may not dictate poem order.
- **Judging:** Rankings are based solely on the official Poetry Out Loud evaluation sheets submitted by judges. Judges should not convene to discuss performances during the competition. Judges may not reconsider their scores after they are submitted. *Judges' decisions are final.*
- **Scoring:** Scoring is cumulative. The scores from all rounds should be added together to determine the winner.
- **Ties:** In the event of a tie, the tied student with the highest overall performance score should win; if that also results in a tie, look to the highest accuracy score. If scores remain tied, consider having students pick one poem to recite again as a separate score to break the tie.
- **Memorization:** Students must recite their poems from memory.
- **Other Competition Rules:** Students may not use props, wear costumes, remove a microphone from its stand, or walk around the stage during their recitations.

English Language Arts Standards

Poetry Out Loud fulfills the following NCTE Standards: 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12.

Teachers who make use of the optional writing activities and lesson plans found at PoetryOutLoud.org will also satisfy Standard #5.

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Common Core Standards

Poetry Out Loud aligns with the following Common Core Standards depending on each individual teacher's lesson plan.

Anchor Standards for Reading (RL.9-10, RL.11-12)

Key Ideas and Details

1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Craft and Structure

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas

7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence.
9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity

10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

Anchor Standards for Language (L.9-10, L.11-12)

Knowledge of Language

3. Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

Vocabulary Acquisition and Use

4. Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and consulting general and specialized reference materials, as appropriate.
5. Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

National Core Arts Standards

Poetry Out Loud aligns with the following Common Core Standards depending on each individual teacher's lesson plan.

Anchor Standard #4. Select, analyze, and interpret artistic work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #5. Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Anchor Standard #6. Convey meaning through the presentation of artistic work.

Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins or other markings visible.

“One thing that surprised me about Poetry Out Loud was the community. I think that before I joined, I expected it to feel really competitive, but through the competition I have gotten the opportunity to connect with people just like me: people who love poetry, art, and who are excited to see others succeed. The people make the experience so much more meaningful than just a ‘competition.’”

— Emma Rose Frisbie, 2026 Connecticut State Champion





“I didn't expect to learn so much about other people through POL. Each champion picks their poems for a reason. It truly shows what they're passionate about and what they want to share to the world.”

—Joy Ogunsakin, 2026 New Jersey State Champion

**Additional copies of this publication can be
downloaded at PoetryOutLoud.org**

**NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS**
 **arts.gov**

Established by Congress, the National Endowment for the Arts is an independent federal agency that is the largest funder of the arts and arts education in communities nationwide and a catalyst of public and private support for the arts. By advancing opportunities for arts participation and practice, the NEA fosters and sustains an environment in which the arts benefit everyone in the United States.

400 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20506-0001
202-682-5400
arts.gov

Poetry Out Loud is a program of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with participating state and jurisdictional arts agencies and administered by Mid Atlantic Arts.

2026 STATE CHAMPION
Rory Berg (Georgia)

All photos by James Kegley

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS presents



Poetry Out Loud National Champions

2026

Jayda Dawn
Indiana

2025

Isavel Mendoza
Pennsylvania

2024

Niveah Glover
Florida

2023

Sreepadaarchana Munjuluri
Indiana

2022

Mia Ronn
California

2021

Rahele Megosha
South Dakota

2020

No champion due to the
COVID-19 pandemic

2019

Isabella Gallery
Minnesota

2018

Janae Claxton
South Carolina

2017

Samara Elán Huggins
Georgia

2016

Ahkei Togun
Virginia

2015

Maeva Ordaz
Alaska

2014

Anita Norman
Tennessee

2013

Langston Ward
Washington

2012

Kristen Dupard
Mississippi

2011

Youssef Biaz
Alabama

2010

Amber Rose Johnson
Rhode Island

2009

William Farley
Virginia

2008

Shawntay Henry
U.S. Virgin Islands

2007

Amanda Fernandez
District of Columbia

2006

Jackson Hille
Ohio

2005 (PILOT YEAR)

Stephanie Oparaugo
Washington, DC

and

Devin Kenny
Illinois