

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS
presents



Judge's Guide

2026-2027

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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 partnership with the National Endowment for the Arts and state and jurisdictional arts agencies, 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.

1. 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 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.
- **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 & Tips for Competitors

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

Judge's 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.
- 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.

Judge's 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.

Judge's 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 Impact and Accuracy are weighted slightly more than other criteria.

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 provides a concise, consistent measure for evaluating recitations. It is intended as a companion to the full evaluation criteria and tips, not a replacement for them. Please review the evaluation criteria in full before the competition.

	Needs Improvement	Below Average	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
Physical Presence	Physical choices distract; stiff, agitated, repetitive, visibly uncomfortable, or little audience connection.	Uncertain or timid; posture, focus, movement, or expressions may seem nervous or forced.	Adequate but inconsistent; at times comfortable and connected, at times unsure or distracting.	Comfortable; physical choices generally support the poem and audience connection.	Composed and purposeful; physical choices support the poem and engage the audience.	Compelling presence; physical choices are fully integrated and deepen engagement.
Voice and Articulation	Hard to hear or understand; rushed, dragged, or singsong delivery; several pronunciation errors.	Uneven or distracting vocal choices; inconsistent projection, pace, tone, pauses, or articulation.	Mostly clear; pace, tone, and pauses are adequate, with limited variation or occasional distractions.	Clear, well-paced, and easy to follow; pronunciation and emphasis support language and meaning.	Very clear and expressive; effective vocal variety, emphasis, tone, energy, and pauses.	Skillful delivery; articulation, pacing, pauses, and variety are precise, natural, and responsive to poem.
Interpretation	Delivery overshadows or distorts poem through over-emoting, singing, or affected accent.	Interpretive choices feel generic or imposed and pull focus from language.	Interpretive choices neither overwhelm nor strongly enhance the poem.	Tone, emotion, pacing, emphasis, and style are intentional and generally grounded in the poem.	Authentic and nuanced; choices reveal tonal and emotional shifts with appropriate restraint.	Deeply internalized; choices feel essential, authentic, and responsive to the poem.
Evidence of Understanding	Meaning is obscured by misplaced emphasis, rushed phrasing, or distorting choices.	Meaning is partial; key words, images, references, or shifts are missed or unclear.	Communicates basic meaning, with limited attention to the poem's nuance, language, or structure.	Conveys meaning accurately; emphasis, phrasing, and pacing clarify important ideas.	Thoughtful, nuanced understanding of meaning, language, imagery, tone, and progression.	Clarifies the poem skillfully; major choices show accurate, subtle, sophisticated understanding.
Overall Performance (consider poem complexity)	Ineffective or inappropriate as a complete recitation; choices work against the poem.	Inadequate or lackluster; lacks cohesion, polish, and/or meaningful audience impact.	Sufficient complete performance, but limited in cohesion, intention, polish, or impression.	Enjoyable and effective; combined choices work together to deliver the poem.	Polished, intentional, and engaging; combined choices illuminate the poem.	Unified, compelling, and memorable; the whole equals more than the sum of the parts.

*Note that all elements need not be present. Semicolons often represent “or.”

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 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.

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.

10. Conflicts 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.

11. Credits & Acknowledgements

Poetry Out Loud is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with participating state and jurisdictional arts agencies and managed by Mid Atlantic Arts.

We gratefully acknowledge all state arts agencies, students, and teachers for their assistance in helping us shape this guide. We also acknowledge NEA's Public Affairs staff for their recommendations and revisions. We appreciate your feedback to improve this guide. Please send comments to poetryoutloud@arts.gov.



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent federal agency whose funding and support gives Americans the opportunity to participate in the arts, exercise their imaginations, and develop their creative capacities. Through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector, the Arts Endowment supports arts learning, affirms and celebrates America's rich and diverse cultural heritage, and extends its work to promote equal access to the arts in every community



Mid Atlantic Arts supports artists, presenters, and organizations through unique programming, grant support, partnerships, and information sharing. Created in 1979, Mid Atlantic Arts is aligned with the region's state arts councils and the National Endowment for the Arts. We combine state and federal funding with private support from corporations, foundations, and individuals to nurture diverse artistic expression while connecting people to meaningful arts experiences within our region and beyond.