

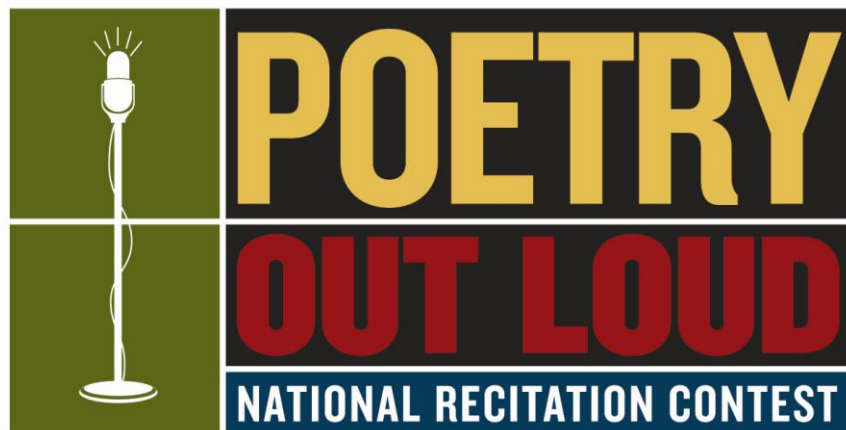
A Guide for Poetry Out Loud Judges

NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

and

POETRY FOUNDATION

present



I read a lot of the poems... [but] when I heard them spoken it was completely different so it really brought home to me how important it is for students to really get to hear poetry as well as say it.

—2006 National Finals Judge Caroline Kennedy

My whole outlook on it was...this is not about me, it's about the poet and the audience and it's me taking those words more than my character or my inflection...it's taking those words and making [or, rather] letting the audience understand them.

—2006 POL National Champion & 2007 National Finals Judge Jackson Hille

From POL Documentary
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I'm in Washington today for the Poetry Out Loud program, run by the National Endowment for the Arts. Your tax dollars spent to bring 53 high school kids (out of 300,000 who competed for the honor) to recite poetry (Shakespeare, Donne, Eliot, Billy Collins), the winner to get a \$20,000 scholarship. It's a beautiful event. Special Olympics for English majors. I would forgo the pleasures of tormenting a few malefactors for the rightness of hearing a kid from Newark stand up and give an impassioned recitation of "When in Disgrace With Fortune and Men's Eyes."

—2007-09 National Finals Judge Garrison Keillor in an April 29, 2009 *Salon* column.

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1. Overview and History of the Program

The inspiration for this competition is to promote the art of poetry in both the classroom and the community. This program provides an entry point for many students to learn to love poetry and discover their favorite poems for a lifetime.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Poetry Foundation have joined together to create Poetry Out Loud, a program that encourages the nation's youth to learn about great poetry through exploration, memorization and performance. In 2005, after a successful pilot program in Washington, DC, and Chicago, Poetry Out Loud was launched in high schools across the country. State arts agencies of the United States bring Poetry Out Loud to each state, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia, with more than 300,000 students participating annually.

Program Structure

Poetry Out Loud uses a pyramid structure that begins at the classroom level. Winners advance to a school-wide competition, then to a regional and/or state competition, and ultimately to the National Finals.

Prizes

State prizes: Each winner at the state level will receive \$200 and an all-expenses-paid trip to Washington, DC, to compete at the National Finals. The state winner's school will receive a \$500 stipend for the purchase of poetry books. One runner-up in each state will receive \$100, and his or her school will receive \$200 for the purchase of poetry books.

National prizes: A total of \$50,000 in awards and school stipends will be awarded at the Poetry Out Loud National Finals, with a \$20,000 award for the National Champion. The second-place winner will receive a \$10,000 award; the third-place winner will receive \$5,000; and the fourth-to-twelfth place winners will each receive \$1,000. The schools of the top twelve finalists will receive \$500 for the purchase of poetry books.

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.

2. A Judge's Role in Poetry Out Loud

Judging recitations is one of the most important, but difficult roles in Poetry Out Loud. Judges often find themselves weighing very different recitations, each displaying an impressive level of excellence. Judges must decide how well students represent poems that may lend themselves to more than one interpretation. Judges must work quickly and score many performances of a wide variety of poems. The winner of the national competition not only holds the title but also wins a substantial amount of money. Teachers, parents, state arts agency staff, volunteers—not to mention the students themselves—have dedicated many hours to coaching, practicing, promotion, and the details of competitions. The integrity of the contest rests on the work of judges at each and every level of competition whether it be school, district, regional, state, or national.

Poets, educators, forensic coaches, poetry lovers and public officials, among others, serve as judges. Each type of judge brings unique perspective and experience to the process. The best panels have a balance of perspectives, reflecting the universal appeal of good poetry.

Feel free to ask questions of the event organizer who invited you to judge. We hope this guide will aid your work and theirs and will make the process an enjoyable, effective, and rewarding experience.

3. Process of Judging and Rules

Poetry Out Loud judges independently evaluate student recitations using a pre-set evaluation sheet (see section 6 of this guide).

Preparation

Students chose their poems for competition from the Poetry Out Loud anthology. You should receive a binder in advance of the competition with the selected poems in it, so you can consider difficulty scores (see section 4 of this guide) and familiarize yourself with the poems. If you have read the poems ahead of time, you have much better standpoint from which to judge recitations.

At the Competition

When you arrive at the contest you will receive a stack of contest evaluation sheets (see section 6) already personalized with the competitor's name and the name of the poem. After the emcee introduces judges, students will take turns reciting poems, typically in three rounds; see section 9 of this guide for an idea of a typical competition structure.

To avoid the potential appearance of a conflict of interest, do not socialize with students, teachers, or parents prior to or during the competition. Many organizers have a reception following the contest where judges will have an opportunity to meet competitors and congratulate them.

Score independently, exclusively based on merit. No other considerations should influence your decision.

Only the accuracy judge is responsible for the accuracy of the recitation and will read along as the student recites. Other judges need to be able to observe the student to evaluate such criteria as “physical presence” and “evidence of understanding.”

You will have one minute or less to score each recitation.

This contest is not designed so that you may convene or discuss scores with other judges once the competition has started. Nor can you revisit scores. Once you pass them in, the scores stand.

You do not need to tally scores yourself. As soon as you have circled the scores from 1-6 (or 2-12 for overall performance), a staff member will take your sheet to the tabulators. Tabulators will add in the accuracy score, as determined by the accuracy judge.

Other things you should know:

Students will have a prompter directly in front of center stage, in case they forget a line.

Students will begin each recitation with the title of the poem and the name of the poet. Recitations should include epigraphs if included in the Poetry Out Loud anthology, but a student's own editorial comments before or after the poem are not allowed. Author dedications and footnoted translations included with the original poem are optional, and their inclusion or exclusion should not weigh in the score.

Students may not use props or wear a costume for the recitation.

In the event of a tie, the tied contestant with the highest Overall Performance score should win; if that also results in a tie, then the highest Accuracy score would determine the winner.

Scores are cumulative—students do not “start over” with each round.

4. Evaluation Criteria and Tips

Teachers, coaches, volunteers, and guest artists train students in the art of recitation. The judging categories mirror the tips for contestants and the advice given in the teacher’s guide. It may be helpful to peruse the following for insight into how students are trained to excel at recitation:

- The teacher’s guide, available at www.poetryoutloud.org/guide/ and downloadable in PDF;
- “Best Performances” DVD and companion guide. (Ask your organizer for a copy or view at www.poetryoutloud.org.)

Judging a Poetry Out Loud contest differs in several important ways from judging a poetry slam. Poetry Out Loud relies on the specific criteria outlined below. Poetry Out Loud contestants recite poems written by others, so it is important that they convey a tone and mood appropriate to the selected work. The elements of dramatic monologue and stand-up comedy that sometimes make for great slams often detract from Poetry Out Loud recitations. And despite the title of the program, loudness is not always a virtue.

The following provides background on the evaluation criteria used for scoring recitations. Strong recitations will reflect excellence in each area. The scoring rubric in section 7 is meant as a “cheat sheet” to supplement this section.

PHYSICAL PRESENCE

The first category, “physical presence,” can only be judged by looking at the reciter. The student should be poised—but not artificially so—projecting ease and confidence by his or her physical presence. This is an important category, but also one of the easiest to rate. A weaker performance may be one in which the student has nervous gestures, appears stiff, or loses eye contact with the audience.

VOICE AND ARTICULATION

“Voice and articulation” is also one of the easier categories to rate, although equally essential. In this category the auditory nature of the recitation is evaluated. Consider the student’s volume, speed, pace, inflection, and proper pronunciation. At the National Finals, contestants use a microphone and they may also use one in the school and state competitions when it is appropriate for the venue.

A recitation that is mumbling, inaudible, monotone, or too quiet will obscure a poem’s meaning for the audience. The student should be clear and loud enough to catch the attention of all the audience. Some students mistake projection for yelling or communicate passion by shouting. (See the next category for “appropriateness of dramatization.”) Rises in tone should be appropriate to the subject matter and used sparingly. Students should proceed at an appropriate and natural pace, not speaking too quickly or slowly from nervousness. Students should correctly pronounce each word in the poem. With rhymed poems, or with poems with a regular rhythm, students should be careful to not fall into a singsong meter. Decide if the pauses come in appropriate places for the poem.

APPROPRIATENESS OF DRAMATIZATION

A poet succinctly expressed the essence of judging this category with the following quote:

In reciting a poem aloud, you are not like an actor, coming to understand, and then to feel yourself in a dramatic part, a fictional person. It's rather that you come to understand, and then to be, the voice of the poem itself. – from “Committed to Memory” by John Hollander [www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/17111]

Above all, recitation is about conveying a poem’s sense with one’s voice. It is not theatrical enactment. Subtle dramatization must enhance the audience’s understanding of the poem; it should never overshadow the poem’s language.

Good dramatization subtly highlights the meaning of the poem without becoming the focal point of the performance. The recitation is more about oral, rather than theatrical, interpretation. A low score in this category should result from recitations that have an affected pitch, character voices, singing, inappropriate tone, distracting or excessive gestures, or unnecessary emoting.

Movement or accents should not detract from the author’s voice as represented by the student. Students should have confidence that the poem is strong enough to communicate its sounds and messages without a physical illustration. In other words, they should let the words of the poem do the work. Depending on the poem, occasional gestures should be appropriate, but the line between appropriate and overdone is a thin one.

A note on singing: We have seen in recent years the occasional student who wishes to sing part of their poem. In some cases, it may seem somehow interesting for a few lines to be sung, and the audience can be easily wowed by a great singing voice. Fellow competitors are left distressed, and the perception is that judging may be skewed by the showmanship of the singer. Since this is not a vocal competition in quite that way, we are this year including singing on the list of things that should result in a low dramatization score. Please score students accordingly.

LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY

This category is to evaluate the comparative difficulty of the poem, which is the result of several factors. A poem with difficult content conveys complex, sophisticated ideas, which the student will be challenged to grasp and express. A poem with difficult language will have complexity of diction and syntax, meter, rhyme scheme, and shifts in tone or mood. Poem length is also a factor in difficulty, but a long poem does not always equate with a high difficulty score. A long poem, though challenging to memorize, may be easy to interpret because of a straight-forward narrative; similarly, a short poem may prove difficult to interpret for the audience because it is built around a complex metaphor. A poem that is long but has relatively simple content and language should receive an “average” score at maximum. Elements that make a poem more difficult to interpret may, but may not necessarily, also include: vernacular, an unusual form or style, abstraction, complex nuances, a sensibility from another time, etc. Every poem is a different combination of content, language, and length and you should score accordingly. The assessment is yours; the key is to be consistent in judging this category.

Before the contest, review the portfolio of poems chosen by the contestants so you can think about the level of difficulty for the poems. Looking at the contest evaluation sheet (section 6), consider a difficulty score for each

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poem. When scoring the competition keep these scores in mind; upon hearing a recitation you may realize a poem may seem more challenging—or less challenging—to interpret orally than it initially appeared on the page. Ensure that difficulty scores are consistent: two students reciting the same poem should receive the exact same difficulty score from one judge. (Judges are not required to agree on difficulty scores.)

We do not assign difficulty scores to the anthologized poems—students will be better served by choosing poems they love and that speak to them rather than gearing their choices to scoring.

EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING

“Evidence of understanding” is vital to assess a student’s mastery of a poem. How well does the student interpret the poem for the audience? Does the student discover something new or 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 voice it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem using different inflection, emphasis, tone, speed of delivery, etc. Students should demonstrate that they know the meaning of every line and every word of the poem.

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

OVERALL PERFORMANCE

“Overall performance” is the most heavily weighted category, with points doubled. This is the judge’s chance to take into consideration all of the elements and the performance as a whole. How did the performance affect you? Was it thought-provoking? Did it lead you to see the poem in a new way? Did the recitation do justice to the poem? Was the performance powerful or weak? Was the student looking to the prompter for line cues or leaving silent gaps trying to remember phrases? This is a catchall category, giving you an opportunity to promote a student who really wowed you with their performance or to demote a recitation that was less compelling.

TIPS

For each of the evaluation criteria, a solid performance scores a 4 (or 8 for overall performance); please keep this in mind as you make sure that your scoring of early recitations leaves room for a higher score for outstanding recitations, or lower score for weak recitations, that may follow.

A score of 12 for overall performance is generally very rare. If not used sparingly, the highest score in this double-counted category may skew results. A very high overall performance score can be used in later rounds (when you will have a better sense of the level of skill among participants) as a measure to promote a student you feel has a superlative performance and you want to ensure they receive a score to match.

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Be sure you score each category separately and carefully—you should not find yourself circling all 4's, for instance.

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

Please note: All evaluation criteria can be adjusted to accommodate students with disabilities. Your event organizer can provide guidance on this.

5. Role of Accuracy Judge and Tips for Scoring Accuracy

Each panel of judges has only one accuracy judge—other judges need not concern themselves with this category as it is very difficult to judge accuracy and other evaluation criteria simultaneously. 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 works independently, following text along with the reciter to monitor the exactness or accuracy of the recitation. It is essential that the poem be recited for the audience as written, word for word.

The accuracy judge will receive a binder with all poems in the order they will be recited. (Students will use the version of poems in the Poetry Out Loud anthology at www.poetryoutloud.org.) The accuracy score will be added to those of the other judges for each recitation. It is important that you decide on a method of scoring ahead of time and apply it consistently.

Some tips:

If a student makes no mistakes and does not need help from the prompter, the accuracy addition should be the full 8 points. In competition it should not be unusual to have the poem perfectly memorized thereby earning a perfect accuracy score of 8. A reciter who strays far from the text will get a very low accuracy score.

If he or she makes a couple of minor mistakes (i.e., “a” instead of “the”) or transposes a pair of words, the accuracy addition should be 7 of the full 8 points. If the student drops words, lines or stanzas, reverses the order of stanzas in the poem, etc., add fewer points for accuracy, depending on the severity of the errors. A student’s score should be deducted 3 points for each use of the prompter.

One way for an accuracy judge to track the performance is to mark up the poem in their binder next to missed words, transposed words, dropped lines, etc. After the recitation is finished, quickly look over the number of marks and deduct points according to your record. You may come up with a system such as an “X” for a dropped word, a “P” for help from the prompter, “XX” for a dropped line, “T” for transposing words, etc.—whatever works for you.

6. Contest Evaluation Sheet

Name of Student:

Title of Poem:

 Very Weak	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding	
Physical Presence	1	2	3	4	5	6
Voice and Articulation	1	2	3	4	5	6
Appropriateness of Dramatization	1	2	3	4	5	6
Level of Difficulty	1	2	3	4	5	6
Evidence of Understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6
Overall Performance	2	4	6	8	10	12

TOTAL: _____ (MAXIMUM of 42 points)

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

FINAL SCORE: _____ **(MAXIMUM OF 50 POINTS)**

7. Scoring Rubric

The scoring rubric is provided as a framework for judges' evaluation of student recitations. It is not meant 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. You may want to practice before the contest by scoring a few online recitations with the rubric in hand. Judges should rely on their own expertise and discretion when evaluating recitation. The rubric, judge's guide, and model recitations are tools to use before judging the contest. Judges need only to work with the contest evaluation sheet while judging.

Please refer to the next page for the scoring rubric.

Scoring Rubric

	Very Weak	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
Physical Presence	Poor eye contact; stiff demeanor; nervous	Timid; unsure; poor posture	At times unsure, at times confident	Poised, good eye contact and posture	Confident and relaxed; posture and eye contact show commanding stage presence	Authoritative; posture and eye contact show compelling stage presence
Voice and Articulation	Inaudible; slow; distracting rhythm; singsong; hurried; mispronunciations	Audible, but quiet; too loud; monotone; paced unevenly; affected tone	Clear, sufficient tone, natural pacing	Very clear, appropriate inflection, good pacing	Very clear, crisp, well-paced, appropriate volume	Very clear, mastery of rhythm and pace, appropriate volume
Appropriateness of Dramatization	Significant distracting gestures, inflections or accents; singing; acting out poem; too much movement	Some distracting gestures; distracting vocal inflections & accents	Minimal distracting gestures or distracting voice inflection	Only gestures that enhance interpretation; embodies poem	Embodies the poem well; gestures illuminate poem's meaning	Best embodies poem; gestures deftly reveal poem's meaning
Level of Difficulty	Simple content; language; length	Straight-forward language and content; moderate length	Some challenging content, language, or length	Contains multiple elements of challenging content, language and/or length	Contains multiple elements of very challenging content, language and/or length	Contains multiple elements of extremely challenging content, language and/or length
Evidence of Understanding	Obscures meaning of poem	Doesn't sufficiently communicate meaning of poem	Satisfactorily communicates meaning of poem	Conveys meaning of poem well	Interprets poem very well for audience; nuanced	Masterfully interprets poem for audience
Overall Performance	Very weak performance; does disservice to poem	Weak performance; does disservice to poem	Sufficient performance, nothing notable	Successful, enjoyable performance	Very strong, compelling performance	Captivating performance—whole equals “more than the sum of the parts”

This rubric is meant only as a guide by providing a consistent measure against which to evaluate recitations. All elements need not be present. **Semicolons often represent “or,” especially in the negative categories.** See evaluation criteria for more information.

8. Preparation Checklist

- Consider if you may have a conflict of interest (see section 10)
- Familiarize yourself with the evaluation criteria and scoring rubric
- Review teacher’s guide online to see how students are trained (www.poetryoutloud.org)
- Review video examples of outstanding recitations at www.poetryoutloud.org
- Review poems for competition (should be sent to you by organizer)
- Consider “level of difficulty” scores for poems
- Ask organizer any questions you may have about process
- Attend any orientation the organizer may arrange

9. Sample Schedule

Though the format of school, regional, and state competitions may vary somewhat, Poetry Out Loud is standardized to ensure a fair playing field for students in each state and prepare students to compete nationally. The following schedule represents a typical state competition structure. Your event organizer will provide the schedule for the competition you will be judging.

10:00 AM	Welcoming remarks and introduction
10:05-10:10 AM	Overview of the evaluation criteria for audience
10:15-11:15 AM	Round One of Recitations
11:20-12:20 PM	Round Two of Recitations
12:20 PM	Intermission
12:40 PM	Announcement of Semifinalists
12:45-1:15 PM	Round Three of Recitations
1:15-1:35 PM	Scoring Break
1:35 PM	Announcement of State Champion and First Runner-Up Award Presentation/Closing Remarks/Media Interviews

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 contest and make it fair for all students.

Potential conflicts of interest include:

- Relative of one of the contestants
- Teacher of one of the contestants
- Alumni of represented school (at regional or state level)
- Poet whose work appears in anthology

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

NOTES:

Credits and Acknowledgments

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

Thanks most of all to the judges for their time, expertise, and dedication.

We appreciate your feedback to improve this guide and the judging process. Please send comments to poetryoutloud@arts.gov or Poetry Out Loud, National Endowment for the Arts, 1100 Pennsylvania Ave., #706, Washington, DC 20506.



The National Endowment for the Arts is a public agency dedicated to supporting excellence in the arts—both new and established—bringing the arts to all Americans, and providing leadership in arts education. Established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government, the Endowment is the nation’s largest annual funder of the arts, bringing great art to all 50 states, including rural areas, inner cities, and military bases.

P O E T R Y



F O U N D A T I O N

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine, is an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in our culture. It has embarked on an ambitious plan to bring the best poetry before the largest possible audience.

Poetry Out Loud: National Recitation Contest is a partnership of the National Endowment for the Arts, the Poetry Foundation, and the State and Jurisdictional Arts Agencies of the United States.

For a poem to be recited to a living audience is its big break in show business. A poem in the air is not the same poem as it was on the page—the drama and charm of its unfolding is completely, particularly alive and intimate as it passes from one body into another. And the excitement of hearing a good poem in such a way is like a rollercoaster ride—I can't wait to see what is going to happen next.

TONY HOAGLAND

Most poets recite other poets' poems better than they do their own. It seems that most of us let ourselves into the door and the whole house of another's poem; whereas, with our own, we tend to hold back on the front porch and be a bit shy. Memorization helps us to understand a poem. We have to follow the mind of the poet; we recreate the logic, experience, and feelings that put the poem together. No one can ever know the struggle to make poetry out of experience except the poet who did it; nevertheless, memorizing a poem is as close as another person can get to composing one.

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