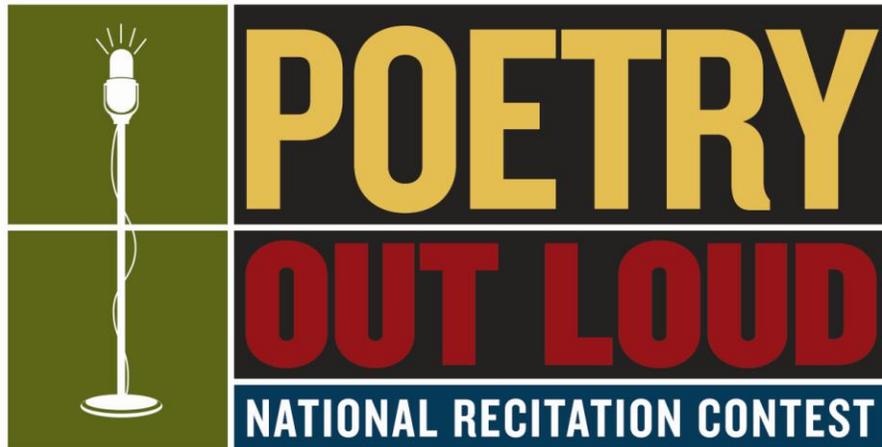


NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS  
*and*  
POETRY FOUNDATION  
*present*



# Poetry Out Loud Judge's Guide

2011-2012

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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## 4—JUDGING POETRY OUT LOUD

### 1. Overview

In 2005, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the Poetry Foundation 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. After a successful one-year 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 nearly 365,000 students participating last year.

Poetry Out Loud begins in the classroom as students select poems to recite from the Poetry Out Loud anthology of more than 650 classic and contemporary poems. The program follows a pyramid structure. After a classroom contest, champions will advance to a school-wide competition, then to a regional and/or state competition, and ultimately to the National Finals.

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

**National awards:** A total of \$50,000 in awards and school stipends will be given out 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 ninth-place finalists will each receive \$1,000. Their schools will receive \$500 for the purchase of poetry books. There will be one runner-up in each semifinal competition. That student will not advance to the finals, but will receive a \$1,000 cash award and the \$500 school stipend.

#### **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 contest rests on the work of judges at each and every level of competition.

Poets, educators, actors, 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.

Judges will find themselves weighing very different recitations, and will need to measure accurately the strengths and weaknesses of each according to the established Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria. The judging process will happen very quickly; judges will have no more than a minute between recitations to mark their scores. Familiarity with the evaluation criteria is essential.

## 2. Preparation

The contest organizer will provide you with a variety of materials in advance of the competition to help you prepare for your role as judge. Review all materials and become comfortable with the judging process before you arrive at the event. If there is a conference call or judges' orientation, please put this on your calendar and take part.

To best prepare for judging a Poetry Out Loud recitation contest, here are a few things you can do:

- 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 contest organizer if anything seems unclear to you.
- Watch the Learning Recitation videos on the Poetry Out Loud website (or on the DVD if you received a copy). The featured recitations are ones that scored highly at the National Finals, and provide a good model of what an excellent recitation looks like. Read the text that accompanies the videos, as it will provide you with some insight about the strengths of each performance.
- Practice scoring. The scoring process is quick during an actual competition. You will have less than a minute after each recitation to make your decisions and mark scores. Use copies of the contest evaluation sheet and score the recitations as they are happening in the Learning Recitation video. Don't allow yourself more than 45 seconds or so to mark your ballot.
- Read the poems the students will recite. You will receive a list and/or a notebook of the students' selected poems in the weeks before the competition. Look them over and think about how each poem might score in terms of difficulty. If two or more students recite the same poem, you must be consistent in scoring difficulty, so make a few notes in these instances. If you have read the poems ahead of time, you will have a much better standpoint from which to judge recitations and ensure consistency in the "level of difficulty" category. Some judges find it helpful to read the students' selected poems aloud beforehand.
- Participate in any scheduled orientation.

### 3. Day of Competition

When you arrive at the contest, find the event coordinator and check in. Judges will be seated together in a designated area separated from the contestants and audience members. 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 host a reception following the contest where judges will have an opportunity to meet competitors and congratulate them.

Once you are settled in, you will receive a stack of contest evaluation sheets already personalized with the competitors' names and poems, in the order of recitation. Get your pencil ready!

When the contest 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. At the school level, there will be two rounds; at the state and national level, there will be three.

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

You do not need to tally scores yourself. As soon as you have finished scoring, a staff member will take your sheet to the tabulators, who will add in the accuracy judge's score to each contest evaluation sheet. You will not be able to 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. Scoring is cumulative; the scores from each round will be totaled to determine the winner.

#### **Other details judges should know:**

There will be a prompter directly in front of center stage, in case a student forgets a line. Use of the prompter will primarily affect the student's accuracy score, but their struggle to remember their poem might also influence their overall performance score.

Students may not use props or wear costumes during their recitation.

In the event of a tie, the tied contestant with the highest overall performance score will win; if that also results in a tie, then the highest accuracy score would determine the winner. In very rare instances, students may still be deadlocked. In this case, the contest organizer may ask both students to recite one of their poems again. The scores received on that recitation would determine the winner.

## 4. Evaluation Criteria and Tips

Judging a Poetry Out Loud contest differs in several important ways from judging a poetry slam or original poetry contest. Students are trained in the art of recitation according to specific Poetry Out Loud evaluation 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 explains the evaluation criteria used for scoring recitations. Strong recitations will reflect excellence in each area. The scoring rubric in section 6 will help you understand exactly how this information applies to your score.

### **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**

With “voice and articulation,” the auditory nature of the recitation is evaluated. Consider the student’s volume, pace, intonation, rhythm, and proper pronunciation.

The student should be clear and loud enough to capture the audience’s attention, but watch out for students who mistake projection for yelling or communicate passion by shouting. (See the next category for “dramatic appropriateness.”) Any changes in tone should be appropriate to the subject matter. Students should proceed at a fitting and natural pace, not speaking too quickly or slowly from nervousness. Students should correctly pronounce every word in the poem. With rhymed poems, or with poems with a regular meter, students should be careful to not fall into a singsong rhythm. Decide if the pauses come in suitable places for the poem. A recitation that is mumbling, inaudible or monotone will obscure a poem’s meaning for the audience.

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.

### **DRAMATIC APPROPRIATENESS**

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

## 8—JUDGING POETRY OUT LOUD

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](http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/17111)]

Recitation is about conveying a poem's sense primarily with one's voice. In this way, recitation is closer to the art of oral interpretation than theatrical performance. (Think storyteller or narrator rather than actor.) Students may find it challenging to convey the meaning of a poem without acting it out, but a strong performance will rely on a powerful internalization of the poem rather than distracting dramatic gestures.

The reciter represents the poem's voice during the course of a recitation, not a character's. The videos of National Finals recitations on the Learning Recitation DVD will help illustrate this point. Appropriate dramatization subtly enhances the audience's understanding and enjoyment of the poem without overshadowing the poem's language.

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

A note on singing: We have seen in recent years the occasional student who wishes to sing part of their poem. Since this is not a vocal competition in quite that way, we now include singing on the list of things that should result in a low score for this category. 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 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 with yourself in judging this category.

Before the contest, review the portfolio of poems chosen by the contestants so you can consider a difficulty score for each poem. When judging the competition, keep these scores in mind; upon hearing a recitation you may realize a poem seems 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 be given the exact same difficulty score. (Judges are not required to agree with each other on difficulty scores.)

## EVIDENCE OF UNDERSTANDING

“Evidence of understanding” measures a student’s comprehension and mastery of a poem. How well does the student interpret the poem for the audience? Does the student make difficult lines clearer? Does the student communicate the correct tone of the poem—angst, dry humor, ambivalence? The poet’s words should take precedence, and the student who understands the poem best will be able to voice it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem better. To do this, a student must effectively use intonation, emphasis, tone, style of delivery, etc. Students should demonstrate that they know the meaning of every line and every word of the poem.

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

## OVERALL PERFORMANCE

“Overall performance” is worth a bit more than other categories, with the value up to nine points. This category is to evaluate the total success of the performance, the degree to which the recitation has become more than the sum of its parts. Has the student captivated their audience with the language of the poem? Did the student bring the audience to a better understanding of the poem? Did the physical presence, voice and articulation, and dramatic appropriateness all seem on target and unified to breathe life into the poem? Does the student understand and show mastery of the art of recitation? Use this score to measure how impressed you were by the recitation, and whether the recitation has honored the poem. You may also consider the diversity of a student’s recitations with this score. If a student seems to be stuck using the same style of delivery with each of their poems, that may be evidence that they’ve not taken the time to consider each poem individually. A low score should be awarded for recitations that are poorly presented, ineffective in conveying the meaning of the poem, or conveyed in a manner inappropriate to the poem.

## TIPS

- 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 early 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 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!

## 5. Contest Evaluation Sheet

Name of Student:

Title of Poem:

<small>NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS &amp; POETRY FOUNDATION PRESENT</small> <b>POETRY OUT LOUD</b> <small>NATIONAL RECITATION CONTEST</small>	Very Weak	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
<b>Physical Presence</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Voice and Articulation</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Dramatic Appropriateness</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Level of Difficulty</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Evidence of Understanding</b>	1	2	3	4	5	6
<b>Overall Performance</b>	1	2	3	5	7	9

TOTAL:

(MAXIMUM of 39 points)

ACCURACY JUDGE'S SCORE:

(MAXIMUM of 8 points)

**FINAL SCORE:**

**(MAXIMUM OF 47 POINTS)**

## 6. Scoring Rubric

The scoring rubric is meant to provide a consistent measure against which to evaluate recitations. It is not intended to be comprehensive but serves as a companion to the evaluation criteria. We suggest you review it before the competition to get a sense of what you should look for in individual performances. 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. Note that all elements need not be present. Semicolons often represent “or,” especially in the negative categories.

## Poetry Out Loud Scoring Rubric

	Very Weak	Weak	Average	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
<b>Physical Presence</b>	Stiff or agitated; lacks eye contact with audience; appears uncomfortable	Timid; unsure; eye contact and body language reflects nervousness	Body language and eye contact are at times unsure, at times confident	Comfortable; steady eye contact and confident body language	Poised; body language and eye contact reveal strong stage presence	Authoritative; body language and eye contact show compelling stage presence
<b>Voice and Articulation</b>	Inaudible; slow; distracting rhythm; singsong; hurried; mispronunciations	Audible, but quiet; too loud; monotone; paced unevenly; affected tone	Clear, adequate intonation, even pacing	Clear, appropriate intonation and pacing	Very clear, crisp, effective use of volume, intonation, rhythm, and pacing	Very clear, crisp, mastery of rhythm and pace, skillful use of volume and intonation
<b>Dramatic Appropriateness</b>	Poem is overshadowed by significant distracting gestures, facial expressions, inflections or accents; acting out of poem; singing; over-emoting; inappropriate tone	Poem is secondary to style of delivery; includes instances of distracting gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflections; inappropriate tone	Poem is neither overwhelmed nor enhanced by style of delivery	Poem is enhanced by style of delivery; any gestures, facial expressions, and movement are appropriate to poem	Style of delivery reflects precedence of poem; poem's voice is well conveyed	Style of delivery reflects internalization of poem; all gestures and movements feel essential to poem's success
<b>Level of Difficulty</b>	Simple content, easy language, short length	Straight-forward language and content; moderate length	One element of challenging content, language, or length	Contains two elements of challenging content, language, or length	Contains very challenging content and language; length is appropriate to complexity of poem	Contains extremely challenging content and language; length is challenging for a poem of this complexity
<b>Evidence of Understanding</b>	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, deftly revealing poem's meaning
<b>Overall Performance</b>	Ineffective or inappropriate recitation; does disservice to poem	Inadequate recitation; lackluster; does disservice to poem	Sufficient recitation; lacks meaningful impact on audience	Enjoyable recitation; successfully delivers poem	Inspired performance shows grasp of recitation skills and enhances audience's experience of the poem	Captivating performance—whole equals “more than the sum of the parts”; shows mastery of recitation skills

## 7. Role of Accuracy Judge

Each panel of judges has only one accuracy judge—other judges need not concern themselves with this category as it is very difficult to score 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.

When the accuracy judge arrives at the competition, he or she 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](http://www.poetryoutloud.org).) The accuracy judge will likely have an assigned seat with the other judges; it should be in a spot where he or she can both read the text and hear the recitations.

During the competition, students will begin each recitation with the title of the poem and the name of the poet (both must be accurate). **Recitations must 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. Footnotes included with the poem in the Poetry Out Loud anthology should not be included in the recitation.**

The accuracy judge will work independently, following the text of the poem as the student recites. It is essential that the poem be recited for the audience 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 contest evaluation sheets for each recitation.

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

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

## 8. Accuracy Score Sheet

Name of Student:

Title of Poem:

Maximum Score 8 points

Inaccuracy Deduction (subtract) — \_\_\_\_ points

Prompt Deduction (subtract) — \_\_\_\_ points

**FINAL ACCURACY SCORE** \_\_\_\_ points\*

\*Lowest possible score is 1 point

**Minor inaccuracies**, resulting in a 1 point deduction, include:

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

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

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

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

## 9. 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 or friend of one of the contestants
- Teacher or coach of one of the contestants (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 contest organizer.

## 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](mailto:poetryoutloud@arts.gov)



The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$4 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



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.

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