



Interpretation Events Side by Side.

For students and parents deciding which performance event to try. Compare what each event asks of you, the usual time limits, and the rules that trip up beginners.

What interpretation means

In an interpretation event ('interp'), you perform published or original literature for a judge. You are not acting in a play with sets and costumes. Instead you use your voice, face, posture and small, controlled movements to bring characters and ideas to life in a classroom-sized space.

Under NSDA rules the main events (Dramatic, Humorous, Duo and Program Oral Interpretation) allow no costumes and no props other than a manuscript where one is required, and Storytelling is told without notes or props. Other leagues can differ. These traditions make interp a fair contest of acting craft and storytelling.

The events at a glance

EVENT	NSDA TIME LIMIT	MATERIAL	MEMORIZED OR MANUSCRIPT?
Dramatic Interpretation	10 min (30 sec grace)	Published serious literature, cut from a single work	Memorized
Humorous Interpretation	10 min (30 sec grace)	Published humorous literature, cut from a single work	Memorized
Duo Interpretation	10 min (30 sec grace)	Published script for two performers	Memorized
Storytelling	5 min (30 sec grace)	One published story, anecdote, tale, myth or legend	No script; told without notes or props
Original Spoken Word	5 min (30 sec grace)	Your own poetry written for performance	Memorized
Poetry	5 min (7 min at the NSDA Middle School National Tournament)	Published poetry, from one or several sources	Manuscript in a folder
Prose	5 min (7 min at the NSDA Middle School National Tournament)	Published fiction or nonfiction prose, no plays	Manuscript in a folder
Program Oral Interpretation (POI)	10 min (30 sec grace)	Prose, poetry and/or drama, at least two of the three, tied by a theme	Manuscript required

Times and requirements above come from the NSDA High School and Middle School Unified Manuals and event pages. State leagues and other tournaments can differ, especially for Poetry, Prose and POI, so read your own league rules or tournament invitation before you commit to a cutting.

How the events feel different

Solo acting events

Dramatic and Humorous Interpretation ask you to play several characters in one cutting, switching with small changes in voice and posture.

Partner event

Duo Interpretation is two performers who share the roles. Under NSDA rules partners perform without direct eye contact or physical contact, so focus is indirect (off to the side or at fixed spots).

Reading and speaking events

Poetry, Prose and POI are performed from a manuscript under NSDA rules, so the challenge is meaning, phrasing and connection with the audience rather than memory.

Storytelling and Original Spoken Word are short (five minutes at NSDA tournaments) and highly personal. Storytelling retells a published tale in your own voice. Spoken Word is your own writing, performed from memory.

Rules that surprise beginners

- ◆ **Time is a hard edge.** NSDA allows a 30 second grace period. If you go past it and all judges in the round agree, you cannot be ranked 1st. Other leagues set their own penalties.
- ◆ **Pieces must be published.** Under NSDA rules, Dramatic, Humorous, Duo and Storytelling use printed, published material, and Dramatic, Humorous and Duo cuttings must come from a single work (with an exception for poetry). Original writing belongs in Original Spoken Word or Original Oratory.
- ◆ **Name your source.** NSDA rules require you to name the author and the book or magazine during the performance. Most performers do this in a short introduction in their own words. An introduction is optional in Original Spoken Word.
- ◆ **Content must suit a school audience.** Many tournaments restrict language and themes. Check your league's guidance.
- ◆ **Cutting is allowed, rewriting is not.** You may shorten a text, but under NSDA rules you may only add or change words for transitions or to remove profanity, and those changes must be clearly marked.

Always verify

Rules for manuscripts, minimum times, number of selections in POI and content limits change from league to league and year to year. Before registering, read the current rules from your state league or the tournament invitation, or ask your coach.

Picking your first event

IF YOU...	TRY
Love comedy and playing big characters	Humorous Interpretation
Want emotional range and a serious story	Dramatic Interpretation
Have a friend you trust and love teamwork	Duo Interpretation
Prefer a short, low-pressure first event	Storytelling
Write poems or lyrics	Original Spoken Word
Like reading aloud and beautiful language	Poetry or Prose
Want to weave several texts into one message	Program Oral Interpretation

Next step

Want a plan built around your performer? Book a free consultation at the link below.

Built from public guidance: NSDA High School Unified Manual (speechanddebate.org) · NSDA Middle School Unified Manual (speechanddebate.org) · NSDA competition event pages (speechanddebate.org) · NSDA Interpretation of Literature textbook (Kiger and Newman). Rules change by league and tournament, so always confirm against your tournament invitation and current league rules.

NOTES

Want a plan built around **your** debater?

Book a free consultation. The short intake takes about a minute and opens right away.

BOOK NOW →