



Choosing and Cutting **Your Piece.**

For performers and parents starting a new piece. Learn how to pick a script that fits you, check it is school-appropriate and legal to use, and cut it to time with a repeatable method.

Step 1: Choose a piece that fits you

A great cutting begins with a great source. Read widely before you commit. Spend a week reading plays, short stories, novels and collections, and mark anything that makes you feel something strongly.

- ☐ I could happily spend three months with these characters.
- ☐ The piece has a clear **beginning, turning point and ending**.
- ☐ It has at least two or three distinct characters I can tell apart (solo events).
- ☐ The age and voice are believable for me, or I can suggest them without a costume.
- ☐ The language is school-appropriate and suits my tournament's rules.
- ☐ It has a message that matters to me, not just funny or sad moments.

Parent tip

Read the full source with your student. If you would not be comfortable hearing it performed in a school auditorium, choose another. Judges and tournaments can also object to certain content.

Step 2: Check source and rights

- ♦ **Use a published source.** NSDA rules require printed, published material, and Dramatic, Humorous and Duo cuttings must come from a single work (one short story, play or novel), with an exception for poetry. Keep the title, author and publisher handy.
- ♦ **Keep the original source** (the physical book or e-book; NSDA does not accept photocopies as the original) in case a tournament asks to see it.
- ♦ **Performing in a competition is not the same as publishing or filming.** If you plan to post a video online or perform for an audience that pays, check the rights holder's permissions.
- ♦ **Do not rewrite the author's words.** Under NSDA rules you may cut, but changes are limited to transitions or removing profanity, and they must be clearly marked. You also cannot change the voice of the script, for example turning 'she' into 'I'.
- ♦ **Use fresh material.** NSDA does not allow a cutting from a work you used in district or national competition in an earlier year, and the same selection cannot be used in two events.

Copyright and permission rules vary by league and by use. When in doubt, ask your coach or league office before the season starts.

Step 3: The 10-minute cutting method

There is no fixed word count for a time limit, because pace, pauses and movement all change it. Cut a draft, then **read it aloud with a timer** and adjust until it fits, counting your introduction in the total.

- 1 **Copy the section you love.** Select 3 to 6 pages that contain the heart of the story. Paste them into a document.
- 2 **Mark the spine.** Underline the lines that carry the plot or emotion from start to end. These stay.
- 3 **Cut description first.** Remove narration that repeats what your body can show.
- 4 **Cut repetition.** If two lines say the same thing, keep the stronger.
- 5 **Check the arc.** Mark the beginning, rising action, climax and ending. A piece without a turning point feels flat.
- 6 **Time it aloud.** Read it with feeling, add pauses for movement, and trim until you land safely under the limit, with your introduction included in the total.
- 7 **Get a second read.** Ask a coach or friend who has not seen the source if the story makes sense.

Cutting checklist

- ☐ The first 30 seconds hook the audience.
- ☐ Every character who appears can be told apart by voice or posture.
- ☐ No section drags: each page raises, changes or deepens something.
- ☐ The ending lands with a clear final image or line.
- ☐ The time, including the introduction, fits the limit with a margin.
- ☐ Every cut keeps the original wording of the lines that remain.
- ☐ A printed, numbered script is saved, with the source cited.

A tiny invented example

Original: 'The old bus rattled down the road, shaking its passengers as it went. Mina held her bag tightly. She was nervous.' Cut: 'The old bus rattled down the road. Mina held her bag tightly.' Why: the body can show nervous, so the line adds nothing.

Common mistakes

MISTAKE	FIX
Too many characters	Cut to the two to five that matter
All talking, no change	Add a moment of silence, stillness or physical shift
Cutting is just the first pages	Choose the strongest scenes, even from different chapters, if your rules allow
Ending trails off	Rework so the last line resolves the main question
Piece is too long to finish	Time every draft; cut, do not rush

Need help finding and cutting a piece?

Book a free consultation at the link below and we will help build a plan around your performer.

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

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

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