



Dramatic Interpretation: Arc, Character and Emotional Range.

For students performing Dramatic Interpretation (DI) and the parents supporting them. Build an emotional arc, make characters distinct, and follow a four-week rehearsal plan.

What DI really is

Dramatic Interpretation is a memorized performance of a published piece of serious literature. At NSDA tournaments the limit is 10 minutes with a 30 second grace period, and no props, costumes or sets are allowed (other leagues may differ, so check yours). Despite the name, DI is not nonstop sadness: the best pieces include warmth and even humor, which makes the serious moments hit harder.

Judges are looking for believable characters, a clear story, emotional truth and skillful control of voice and body. NSDA rules also require the cutting to come from a single published work and ask you to name the author and the book or magazine during the performance.

Build the emotional arc

Think of the piece as a staircase. Each step should feel a little higher or deeper than the last. If you start at maximum intensity, you have nowhere to go.

PART	SUGGESTED TIME	GOAL	SAMPLE FEELING
Introduction	30 to 45 sec	Frame the theme and invite the audience	Calm, curious
Opening scene	1 to 2 min	Establish who, where and what is wrong	Light or uneasy
Rising action	3 to 4 min	Raise the stakes	Tension, hope, doubt
Climax	1 to 2 min	Peak moment, a choice or a loss	Strongest emotion
Resolution	1 min	Land the ending	Quiet, changed

Rule of contrast

Place a lighter or quieter beat just before your biggest moment. Contrast makes the climax feel bigger than volume ever could.

Character work

Give each character three things: a voice, a way of standing, and a want. A want is what the character is trying to get in the scene. Actors who know the want play the scene, not just the words.

TOOL	HOW TO USE IT
Pitch and pace	A nervous child speaks higher and faster, a tired parent lower and slower
Posture	Shift weight, tilt the head, drop a shoulder
Focal point	Each character looks at a fixed spot in the room, so the audience sees who is speaking to whom

TOOL	HOW TO USE IT
Gesture	One signature movement per character, small and repeatable
Breath	Let characters breathe differently: shallow, held, deep

Teasing out the want. Fill in: 'My character wants ___ from ___, but ___ is in the way.' If the sentence is hard to complete, reread the scene.

Four-week rehearsal plan

WEEK	FOCUS	DAILY 30 TO 45 MINUTES
1	Memorize and understand	Read the cutting aloud, learn it in chunks, write the want for each character
2	Voices and blocking	Assign voice and posture, mark where each character stands, run each scene on its own
3	Arc and emotion	Run full piece, mark the staircase, record on a phone and listen
4	Polish and perform	Run for an audience twice, time every run, cut 'dead' moments

- ☐ I can say the piece from memory without freezing.
- ☐ Each character is clear with the audience's eyes closed (voice only).
- ☐ Each character is clear with the sound off (body only).
- ☐ My climax is not my loudest moment by accident.
- ☐ I run the whole thing within the time limit at least three times in a row.

Common mistakes and fixes

MISTAKE	FIX
Yelling to show anger	Try quiet, controlled intensity, which often reads as stronger
Crying for the sake of it	Aim for truth, not tears. Judges care about control
Characters sound alike	Exaggerate pitch and posture in rehearsal, then dial back
Rushing the silence	Count to two in your head at a key moment
Staying emotionally 'big' throughout	Climb the staircase one step at a time

Support at home

Be an audience for a run each week, then give one specific compliment and one question. 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 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 →