



Humorous Interpretation: Timing, Characters and Drills.

For students performing Humorous Interpretation (HI) and parents who want to help. Learn how comedy timing works, how to separate characters, and how to run a set of daily drills.

How comedy works on stage

HI is a memorized performance of a published humorous piece. At NSDA tournaments the limit is 10 minutes with a 30 second grace period, with no props, costumes or sets (confirm with your league). The jokes are in the text, but the **laughs are made by timing, commitment and clarity**. A character who believes totally in a silly situation is funnier than a performer who winks at the audience.

- ♦ **Setup, pause, punchline.** Give the audience the information, wait a beat, then deliver the twist.
- ♦ **Commit.** Perform the funniest moment as if it were completely serious to the character.
- ♦ **Be specific.** A vivid detail is funnier than a general one.
- ♦ **Vary the rhythm.** A joke that comes after three quiet lines lands harder.

Timing toolkit

TOOL	WHAT IT DOES	TRY THIS
The pause	Lets the audience anticipate	Hold for a count of two before the punchline
The 'take'	A visible reaction to what was just said	Look at the imaginary person for one beat, then respond
The rule of three	Two normal items, then a surprise third	Make the third item shorter and sharper
Speeding up	Builds panic or excitement	Accelerate a list, then stop on a crisp last word
Freeze	Highlights a moment	Stay still for one beat after a big laugh line

Wait for the laugh

When the audience laughs, hold your pose and let it finish before continuing. Talking over a laugh wastes the joke. Practice with a friend so you learn how long to wait.

Character differentiation

A funny piece may have four to six characters. If they blur together, the humor is lost. Build each one on three levers:

LEVER	EXAMPLE (INVENTED)
Voice	A worried principal speaks fast and high; the sleepy janitor speaks slow and low
Body	The principal stands on tiptoe, wringing hands; the janitor slumps, one shoulder low
Focus	The principal looks up and left; the janitor looks down and right

Pick a **pop**, a quick sharp movement that snaps you from one character to another. Pops keep scene changes fast and clear, usually under one second.

Daily drill list (20 minutes)

- 1 **Warm up (3 min).** Tongue twisters, lip trills, shoulder rolls.
 - 2 **Pop drill (3 min).** Switch between two characters ten times in a row at full speed. Fix any that look the same.
 - 3 **Pause drill (3 min).** Say your five biggest punchlines with a two-second pause before each.
 - 4 **Silent run (3 min).** Perform one scene with no sound. Is it still clear who is who?
 - 5 **Half-speed, double-size (3 min).** Run a scene slowly with huge movements, then at normal size.
 - 6 **Full piece (5 min or full run twice a week).** Time it. Cut or speed up if you are over.
- ☐ Every punchline has a setup and a pause.
 - ☐ Each character has a unique voice, body and focus.
 - ☐ I stay in character during laughs.
 - ☐ My opening gets a reaction within 30 seconds.
 - ☐ I have one quiet, true moment so the humor has contrast.

Common mistakes

MISTAKE	FIX
Laughing at your own jokes	Stay straight-faced; the character does not know it is funny
Rushing	Slow down by ten percent, and breathe before punchlines
Too much shouting	Use contrast: quiet lines often land better
Characters mixed up	Drill the pop and the focus points
Humor that is unkind	Choose material that laughs with, not at, groups of people

Parent tip

Be the audience. A real laugh tells your student more than any note. 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 →