



Poetry, Prose and POI: Structure, Transitions and Introductions.

For students entering the reading-based interpretation events and their parents. Learn how to structure each event, link selections with transitions, and write a strong introduction.

Three events, one skill

Poetry, Prose and Program Oral Interpretation (POI) all reward the same skill: making written words come alive through phrasing, pace, pauses and honest feeling. Rules differ by league, especially on **time limits, manuscript use and the number of selections**, so read your league's current rules first.

EVENT	MATERIAL	TYPICAL STRUCTURE
Poetry	Published poetry, no plays	One whole poem, a cutting of a longer poem, or several poems from one or more sources arranged in a program
Prose	Published fiction or nonfiction prose, no plays	One cutting with a clear arc
Program Oral Interpretation	Prose, poetry and/or drama, at least two of the three, tied by a theme	Selections linked by transitions and a message; several sources allowed

Under NSDA rules all three are performed from a manuscript (a folder or binder holding the full text), and reading from a book or magazine is not permitted. Time limits are 5 minutes for Poetry and Prose (7 minutes at the NSDA Middle School National Tournament) and 10 minutes for POI, each with a 30 second grace period. Other leagues differ, so confirm yours.

Structure that works

- 1 Pick a theme in one sentence.** For example: 'Small acts of kindness change a day.' Every selection must support it.
- 2 Choose selections that contrast.** Pair a quiet piece with an energetic one, or a serious poem with a lighter story.
- 3 Order for energy.** Open strong, build, include a calm middle, and finish with the most memorable image.
- 4 Write transitions.** One or two lines (or a physical pause) that bridge ideas.
- 5 Time the whole program.** Include the introduction and transitions in your total.

Using the manuscript

Treat the binder as part of the performance. Hold it steadily, turn pages smoothly, and look up often. The audience should see your face more than the page. NSDA rules treat intentionally displaying words from the manuscript as a visual aid, which is not allowed.

Transitions that connect

TYPE	HOW IT SOUNDS OR LOOKS	USE WHEN
Physical	A change of posture, a step, a page turn	Moving between selections quickly
Vocal	Shift pitch, pace or volume	A new voice or mood begins

TYPE	HOW IT SOUNDS OR LOOKS	USE WHEN
Verbal bridge	A short phrase echoing the last idea and leading to the next (under NSDA rules, added transition words must be clearly marked in ink on your manuscript)	Two selections share an image
Silence	A breath before moving on	A strong moment needs space

Invented example. A program about starting over might end a poem on the image of a closed door, pause, and begin the next selection with a character opening a window. The shared image of doors and windows does the linking.

Writing the introduction

A strong introduction is short; the NSDA interpretation textbook describes about 30 to 45 seconds. In POI, NSDA requires the title or author of every selection to be said aloud in the introduction or transitions. It does three things: hooks, names the pieces, and frames the theme.

PART	JOB	INVENTED EXAMPLE
Hook	A question or short image	'What if the smallest moment is the one you remember?'
Title and author	Credit the sources	'In Selection Title by Author Name ...'
Theme	Say why the pieces belong together	'Each shows how ordinary kindness can be quietly powerful.'
Handoff	Move into the performance	Pause, look up, begin

- ☐ Every title and author is stated clearly.
- ☐ The introduction is under 45 seconds.
- ☐ It does not give away the ending.
- ☐ It sounds natural when spoken aloud, not read.
- ☐ I can say it while looking at the audience.

Rehearsal tips

- ♦ Read the piece aloud ten times, each time with a different goal: pace, pauses, emphasis, emotion.
- ♦ Mark your manuscript with slashes for pauses and underlines for stressed words.
- ♦ Record yourself and listen for places where the voice goes flat.
- ♦ Practice page turns in advance so they never interrupt a moment.
- ♦ Run the full program for one listener each week and ask, 'What was the main message?'

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.

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