



Storytelling and Original Spoken Word: Structure, Voice and Originality.

For students trying the two shortest interp events, and their parents. See how each is built, find your voice, keep your work original, and self-score with a simple rubric.

Two short events, two different jobs

FEATURE	STORYTELLING	ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD
Material	A single published story, tale, myth or legend	Your own poetry written for performance
Time	Five minutes, 30 second grace period (NSDA)	Five minutes, 30 second grace period (NSDA)
Notes or props	No notes, script or props; a chair is allowed if its legs stay still and you do not stand or kneel on it	No book or script; delivered from memory
Introduction	Not addressed in NSDA rules; check your league	Allowed, not required (NSDA)
Key skill	Warm, vivid retelling	Rhythm, imagery and honest voice

These details come from the NSDA Unified Manual and event pages. Local leagues and tournaments sometimes differ, for instance on chairs, how quotations are handled, and what counts as a published source. Check your own rules.

Storytelling: build the retelling

In Storytelling you are not reciting. You are **telling** a story the way a gifted relative would at a family gathering: directly, with eye contact, and with room to play.

- 1 Pick a story with a clear shape.** Folktales, myths and legends often work well because they have strong turning points. NSDA asks for story selections suitable for young audiences.
- 2 Outline the beats.** Write 8 to 10 short bullet points for what happens, in order.
- 3 Stay true to the original.** NSDA rules say the retelling must be true to the original tale: do not add original material or materially change the story. It is told, not read.
- 4 Give each character a voice and a movement.** Small and clear, like flicking a switch.
- 5 Use movement with restraint.** NSDA allows gestures, pantomime and characterization with restraint, and the focus must stay on the narrative.

Check the rule

Leagues differ on how closely the retelling must follow the source text. Confirm with your coach and keep a copy of the published source.

Original Spoken Word: structure and voice

Spoken word poetry is written to be heard, so sound matters as much as meaning. A reliable structure is **hook, build, turn, landing**.

PART	WHAT HAPPENS	INVENTED LINE
Hook	A striking opening image or claim	'My grandmother kept time in a jar of buttons.'
Build	Details that deepen the idea	Each button a memory, each memory a lesson
Turn	A surprise or shift in meaning	The speaker realizes the buttons were holding things together
Landing	A final image that echoes the hook	'And I carry the jar now.'

- ♦ Use repetition, rhythm and rhyme on purpose, not by accident.
- ♦ Write about something you know. Specific detail beats general emotion.
- ♦ Read your poem aloud while writing. Trim words that stumble.
- ♦ Mark the breaths. Where you pause is part of the poem.
- ♦ If you quote others, follow the league's limit (NSDA allows up to 150 words of direct quotation, which must be identified in a printed copy).

Originality check

- ☐ Every line of my poem is my own or properly credited.
- ☐ I have not copied a famous poet's structure line for line.
- ☐ My topic is something I can speak about truthfully.
- ☐ The language suits a school audience.
- ☐ I have a printed copy ready if the tournament asks.

Self-scoring rubric (1 to 5 each)

CATEGORY	1 MEANS	5 MEANS
Opening	Starts without a hook	Grabs attention in 15 seconds
Structure	Hard to follow	Clear beginning, turn and end
Voice	Flat or rushed	Varied pace, pitch and pauses
Body	Distracting or still	Purposeful, small, repeatable
Connection	Looks at the floor	Eye contact, honest delivery
Time	Over or very short	Within the limit, strong finish

Score yourself after each run, then ask a listener to score you independently. Compare, and pick one category to improve this week.

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). 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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