



Declamation: Choose, Cut and Deliver.

For students who want to perform a published speech with their own voice. Learn how to pick a speech, cut it to time, and add delivery choices that feel natural.

What declamation is

In declamation, a student performs, usually from memory, a speech that someone else already gave. The student is graded on interpretation and delivery, not writing. Think of it as an actor's version of public speaking: you borrow someone's words and make them live for a new audience.

Rules vary by league. At NSDA tournaments Declamation is a 10 minute event with a 30 second grace period, and the speech must be a previously delivered, publicly available one. At the NSDA Middle School National Tournament the speech must have been delivered in public and be available in print, and you open with an introduction that states the title, author and date of the speech. Performers are usually expected to memorize the speech, but the NSDA pages we read did not state a memorization rule, so confirm it with your league. Ask your coach or check your league's event page.

Choosing a speech

A good declamation speech has a clear idea, an emotional shape and sentences that sound good out loud. Look in public archives of historical speeches, graduation addresses and public lectures. Choose content that is neutral and appropriate for your audience.

QUESTION	WHY IT MATTERS
Do I understand every line?	You cannot deliver what you do not understand
Does it have a beginning, middle and end?	Judges follow a shape
Can I sound natural saying it?	Stiff phrasing is hard to perform
Is it fresh?	Overused speeches blur together
Does it meet league rules?	Check source, date and length

The read-aloud test

Read the speech aloud three times. If you still enjoy it by the third read, it may be a good fit.

Cutting to time

Most real speeches are longer than the time limit, so you will cut. Speaking pace varies, so time yourself reading aloud to find out how many words fit your limit.

- 1 Copy the full text.** Keep an uncut version and a cited source.
- 2 Mark the core.** Underline the three to five sentences that carry the main idea.
- 3 Cut repetition and side stories.** Keep the strongest version of each point.

- 4 Keep the speaker's order and meaning.** NSDA says to preserve the original message when you excerpt and edit. Do not reword the text unless your rules allow.
- 5 Check transitions after each cut.** Read aloud to make sure it still flows.
- 6 Time it with pauses.** Aim a little under the limit to leave room for nerves.

Delivery choices

Mark up your script with three symbols: a slash for a pause, an underline for emphasis and an arrow for rising or falling pitch. Then choose where the speech builds, softens and peaks.

TOOL	HOW TO USE IT
Pace	Slow for key ideas, quicker for lists
Pause	Hold one beat before and after the big line
Volume	Drop the voice for intimacy, lift for conviction
Gesture	Pick two or three meaningful movements, not constant motion
Eyes	Speak to different parts of the room, one thought at a time

Respect the original. Do not imitate the speaker's accent or mannerisms in a way that becomes a caricature. Bring your own sincerity to the words.

Practice plan

- ☐ Source speech cited with speaker and date
- ☐ Cut version under the time limit
- ☐ Meaning of every line understood
- ☐ Script marked for pauses and emphasis
- ☐ Memorized in sections, then stitched together
- ☐ Recorded once on video and reviewed
- ☐ Performed for two different audiences
- ☐ Backup line plan if a word slips

Want help choosing and cutting?

Book a free consultation at the link below and bring two or three speech ideas.

Built from public guidance: NSDA competition event pages (speechanddebate.org) · NSDA Middle School Unified Manual (speechanddebate.org). 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 →