



Working with Deaf Students and Poetry Out Loud

Poetry Out Loud presents an important opportunity to showcase your state's accessibility program. Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing have successfully participated in Poetry Out Loud at the school, state, and national level. The 2009 Poetry Out Loud National Finals marked the first time that a deaf student competed in Poetry Out Loud at the national level—a student at the Oregon School for the Deaf was the state champion from Oregon. Since 2009, we've had many Deaf and hard of hearing students participate in Poetry Out Loud nationwide. In 2013, Iowa's state champion represented the Iowa School for the Deaf at the National Finals.

At the Classroom Level

Students who are Deaf or hard of hearing may choose to recite their poems in ASL. All students select poems to perform from the official print or online Poetry Out Loud anthologies. After selecting a poem, a Deaf student would translate the English text into ASL in order to interpret the work in a visual format.

Since poems composed in ASL are not currently included in the Poetry Out Loud anthology, students are encouraged to choose poems they can successfully translate to ASL. Translations must pay attention to mood, context, register, and handshape repetition. Students are responsible for creating a complementary interpretation that considers appropriate literary devices, such as length and scope of the poem, subject matter, theme, tone, and structure. The translation should be the student's own work. To guide students in poem selection and ASL translation, we recommend providing support through an appropriate teacher or visiting artist.

Students reciting in ASL should work with their teacher in order to identify the best environment for rehearsing their recitations. This may be at home with a parent, after school with a mentor, or in class with an appropriate partner.

Participating schools with students reciting in ASL should not hold a separate competition for these students. They must be able to participate in all levels of official classroom and school competition.

During classroom competitions, as a student is reciting in ASL, the English text of their poem should be made visible to other students. This will enable students not fluent in ASL to easily follow along. The poem could be projected or copied on the blackboard, out of view of the reciter. (Handing out a hard copy of the text will likely distract students, making it difficult for them to give the performance their complete attention.) Recitations performed in ASL will be evaluated under the same judging criteria as verbal performances. Please consult the [ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide](#) for further information on judging ASL recitations.

Within the context of POL, teachers may have the opportunity to introduce ASL recitation to their classes. Many students and parents will be unfamiliar with ASL recitation. It's helpful to remind

everyone that there are more similarities than differences between a spoken poem and a signed poem. Rhyming, alliteration, voice, and articulation can all be represented in a visual context. A visual recitation will reflect the same desirable (or undesirable) traits as a verbal performance.

At the State Finals

You must ensure that a school champion who is Deaf or hard of hearing is able to participate fully in all activities related to your state final. If your event includes workshops, lunches, and other activities, work with your [504/ADA coordinator](#) to be sure that a student's accessibility needs are met. Accommodations may include interpreters to accompany the student to events to provide translation for casual conversations and official directions.

Any Deaf competitors should have someone with them backstage (or wherever the students gather) at the competition who will act as their personal stage manager, making sure they know when it is their turn to recite and translating any other instructions. It is essential that they have a walk through before the competition so they can orient themselves (as should all students).

At the student's turn, he or she should go to the same place on stage as all other reciters. A spotlight will presumably be set for that area; the microphone should be moved if it would block the audience's view of the performance. The student should sign the poet and poem's title in the same format that other students would be speaking it. A voice offstage should simultaneously read the poet and title so the audience knows when the recitation itself begins.

At this point, there are some choices to be made. An ASL performance is greatly enhanced by having a simultaneous translation available to the audience so they can follow along (in the same way that a spoken performance would be simultaneously signed by an ASL interpreter). One option is to have the poem projected onto a screen on stage. Another option is to have a professional interpreter (who has rehearsed with the student) reading the poem aloud at the same time that the student is performing their ASL interpretation. This works best when the interpreter has experience with theater interpretation. It should not be a "dramatic" interpretation, but should be clearly read and paced to flow with the student's performance.

We do not recommend distributing a printed copy of the poem to audience members, as the rustling of the paper would be distracting, and people might choose to look down to read rather than watch the performance; or a voice reading the poem either directly before or directly after the performance, as it disconnects the audience from the performance. We strongly recommend consulting with your student on their preference, as there may be circumstances you have not considered. For example, a synchronous voice-over may pose a challenge for students with residual hearing.

Judging

The best way to ensure that the competition remains fair to all competitors is to prepare your judges well. At the 2009 and 2013 national finals, we had two ASL-fluent (but hearing) judges for the semifinal round that included a Deaf competitor. One served only as an accuracy judge for the performance, while the other served on our panel of judges and

scored all performances. We recommend recruiting two well-qualified judges with additional expertise in ASL. These judges will provide support and guidance for other judges who may be less familiar with ASL. You may want to consider including a Deaf judge on your panel.

Before reviewing and scoring an ASL recitation, all judges must be briefed on how to translate the criteria and the scoring rubric to a visual performance. Please refer to our [ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide](#) for specifics on how an ASL performance can be evaluated according to the Poetry Out Loud criteria.

As you will see in the ASL Supplement to the Judge's Guide, the biggest difference in scoring comes with the evaluation of accuracy in an ASL performance, since ASL is not a direct translation of the English. A week or two before the competition, students reciting in ASL should submit a “perfect record” of their recitation via DVD, Dropbox, or thumb drive. This translation and performance will be the standard by which a student’s recitations are judged on the day of the competition. At the national finals, we use a small video camera (actually, two, so we have a backup in case one fails), and film the student performance from the front row of the audience. After the performance, the video is downloaded to a laptop backstage, where the ASL accuracy judge views the student’s live recitation side-by-side with the “perfect” recitation on a second laptop to note any differences in performance. The accuracy judge assigned to this task should be ASL fluent, and should not be the same accuracy judge who is scoring the other competitors, as they will need to be backstage during competition reviewing the videos.

Although they should be made aware of the rules that will be in effect at the state finals, schools for the deaf may use some discretion in applying the evaluation criteria to their school finals. Of particular interest and importance at the school level may be the students’ success in translating their poems to ASL. Since the entire judging panel would be ASL fluent, they might measure accuracy as how accurately the student translated the poem to ASL. Evidence of understanding could also include evaluation of how effectively the ASL translation reflects the intent of the original poem.

Briefing Other Competitors and the Audience

When you include Deaf students in your state final, you will need to prepare the audience and the other students for a recitation in ASL. It is most important that participants who are unfamiliar with ASL be briefed prior to the program. At the national finals, we give each student a packet of materials as they arrive in DC. (At the state level, you may consider giving them this information in the week before, as they may not have time to read through it on the day of the competition.) In our packet of materials, we include a document titled “what to expect at the competition” that details the process of the event. If a Deaf state champion is participating, the document also explains that a competitor is Deaf and that we take an inclusive approach to Poetry Out Loud. Here is the language we developed:

A state champion competing in semifinal three is Deaf and will be reciting their poems in American Sign Language (ASL). The judging panel includes a judge who is fluent in ASL and all judges have been trained in evaluating an ASL performance according to Poetry Out Loud criteria. The poems will be read simultaneously by an offstage narrator as he/she recites in ASL so that hearing audience members can

also follow the performance. The narration will not be considered by judges when scoring.

During the competition, we provide minimal explanation for the audience, but add language to the script, to be read as the student walks onstage for the first time:

[This student] will be reciting his/her poem in American Sign Language. A narrator will simultaneously read his/her poem aloud during the performance.

Access for Audience Members

Registered sign language interpreters should be provided during the entire program for audience members. Have your ASL interpreter in a visible, well-lit spot for your audience. Events of more than 1.5 hours may require two interpreters, who will switch off throughout the event. You will also want to send the poems to the sign language interpreters beforehand so they have a chance to read them over. Send them the same notebook that you prepare for your accuracy judge. The poems should be in the order of performance and in large font.

As we experienced at the national finals, a participant who is Deaf may spark the interest of the Deaf community in your Poetry Out Loud competition. Be sure you advertise your event as being ASL accessible.

Media and Other Inquiries

Poetry Out Loud can be an exciting event covered by the media. Be sure to go over event logistics with all staff involved and prepare talking points to address questions about the participation of Deaf students in the competition. Designate spokespeople to handle such inquiries and provide clear and accurate information about the competition. Please feel free to call the national POL staff to talk about how we prepare for these inquiries at the national finals. We also encourage you to communicate with the Deaf community, expert educators, and accessibility professionals in your state. A local [VSA affiliate](#) may assist you with issues related to arts and accessibility.

Acknowledgements

For assistance in developing and updating this guidance, we would like to thank the NEA Accessibility Office, Oregon POL coordinator, Deb Vaughn; and Tim McCarty, president of Quest: arts for everyone.



Poetry out Loud and American Sign Language: Guidance for Teachers

In the Classroom

Students who are deaf or hard of hearing may choose to recite their poems in American Sign Language (ASL). All students select poems to perform from the official print or online Poetry Out Loud anthologies. After selection, a deaf student would translate the English text into ASL in order to interpret the work in a visual format.

Since poems composed exclusively in ASL are not currently included in the Poetry Out Loud anthology, students are encouraged to choose poems they can successfully translate to ASL. Translations must pay attention to mood, context, register, and handshape repetition. Students are responsible for creating a complementary interpretation that takes into account appropriate literary devices, such as length and scope of the poem, subject matter, underlying theme, tone, and intent of the poet. The translation should be the student's own work. To guide students in poem selection and ASL translation, we recommend providing support through an appropriate teacher or visiting artist.

Students reciting in ASL should work with their teacher to identify the best environment for rehearsing their recitations. This may be at home with a parent, after school with a mentor, or in class with an appropriate partner.

In Competition

Participating schools with students reciting in ASL should not hold a separate competition for these students. They must be able to participate fully in all levels of official classroom and school competition.

During classroom competitions, as a student is reciting in ASL, the English text of their poem should be made visible to other students so that students not fluent in ASL may easily follow along. The poem could be projected or copied on the blackboard, out of view of the reciter. (Handing out a hard copy of the text will likely distract students, making it difficult for them to give the performance their complete attention.) Recitations performed in ASL will be evaluated under the same judging criteria as verbal performances. Please consult the [Poetry Out Loud Judge's Guide](#) and the [Judge's Guide ASL Addendum](#) for further information on judging ASL recitations.

Within the context of Poetry Out Loud, teachers may have the opportunity to introduce ASL recitation to their classes. Many students and parents will be unfamiliar with ASL recitation. It's helpful to remind everyone that there are more similarities than differences between a spoken poem and a signed poem. Rhyming, alliteration, voice, and articulation can all be represented in a visual context. A visual recitation will reflect the same desirable (or undesirable) traits as a verbal performance.

Questions

For additional information on Poetry Out Loud and ASL, please contact your [state coordinator](#) or the national program at poetryoutloud@arts.gov.



Poetry Out Loud and American Sign Language: Guidance for Judges

Deaf or hard of hearing students reciting in American Sign Language (ASL) will be judged under the same evaluation criteria used for all Poetry Out Loud competitors. Created in consultation with the NEA Accessibility Office and ASL experts, this ASL addendum to the Judge's Guide provides guidance on evaluating an ASL recitation in terms of the Poetry Out Loud judging rubric. The criteria for judging a verbal recitation relates directly to judging a visual one. For instance, an oral recitation conveys articulation by tone and inflection of the voice, whereas a visual recitation conveys this through the clarity and nuance of handshapes and palm orientation. Furthermore, a poem translated into ASL and performed in a visual format can reflect the same desirable (or undesirable) traits as a verbal performance.

The following text supplements each evaluation criteria by explaining how it translates to an ASL recitation. Please consult this guidance in addition to the [Poetry Out Loud Judge's Guide](#).

Physical Presence

A student reciting in ASL should strive to reflect the same strong elements for this criterion outlined in the scoring rubric and in the Poetry Out Loud judge's guide. A strong ASL performance should include ease and confidence on stage with no evidence of stiffness in the body, or nervous gestures, such as fidgeting. However, there are instances when a rigid handshape or a glance off stage may be appropriate for the content of an ASL recitation as students are primarily using their body to interpret the work.

Voice and Articulation

An oral recitation is judged on inflection, volume, pace, and proper pronunciation, whereas a student using ASL would be measured on the clarity of their handshapes, visual pacing, and ability to articulate successfully the language of the poem in a manner that can be understood from the audience. An oral recitation that is mumbling, monotone, or too quiet will obscure a poem's meaning for the audience. Students reciting in ASL should project enough to catch the attention of each audience member, while avoiding an overly-dramatic recitation (see the next category for appropriateness of dramatization).

The student's visual pacing should proceed at an appropriate and natural speed, neither too quickly nor too slowly. Decide if the pauses come in appropriate places for the poem—are they abrupt and misleading or fluid and effective?

Dramatic Appropriateness

Although an ASL recitation is performed in a visual format, it's not a theatrical enactment. Similar to a strong oral recitation, a strong visual delivery should employ dramatization to subtly highlight the poem's meaning without becoming the focal point of the performance. Above all, recitation is about conveying a poem's sense with one's voice, whether visually or orally. For ASL recitations, a low score in this category should result when a performance includes excessive movement across the stage, overly exaggerated handshapes, inappropriate tone, or unnecessary emoting.

Evidence of Understanding

“Evidence of understanding” will measure the student’s ability to illuminate the poem for the audience. By proper visual pacing, tone, emphasis, and translation a student reciting in ASL must demonstrate that they know the meaning of every line and every word of the poem. Although the audience may not be fluent in ASL, an outstanding ASL recitation may make the audience see the poem in a new way. Through the visual language of ASL, Deaf or hard of hearing students can powerfully convey the meaning of the poem to both hearing and Deaf audiences. A weak ASL performance would obscure the poem’s meaning by lacking nuance, changes in tone, and appropriate dramatization.

The poet’s words should take precedence and the student who understands the poem best will be able to perform it in a way that helps the audience to understand the poem more fully. The student will offer an interpretation that deepens and enlivens the poem.

Overall Performance

Overall performance is weighted more heavily than other categories, with the value up to nine points. This category is used to evaluate the total success of the performance, the degree to which the recitation has become more than the sum of its parts. Did the student bring the audience to a better understanding of the poem? Did the physical presence, articulation, and dramatic appropriateness all seem on target and unified to breathe life into the poem? Does the student understand and show mastery of the art of recitation? Use this score to measure how impressed you were by the recitation, and whether the recitation honored the poem.

A low score should be awarded for recitations that are poorly presented, ineffective in conveying the meaning of the poem, or conveyed in a manner inappropriate to the poem.

Accuracy

The process of judging accuracy for an ASL recitation will differ from that of an oral recitation. However, the scoring system for this category remains consistent—please see page 11 and 12 of the [Poetry Out Loud Judge’s Guide](#). Since an ASL performance is not a direct translation of the English text, it’s necessary to measure the accuracy of the live performance against the student’s original ASL translation.

A week or two before the competition, students reciting in ASL will submit a “perfect record” of their recitations via DVD, Dropbox, or thumb drive. This translation and performance will be the standard by which a student’s recitations are judged on the day of the event. Recording the student’s live performance with a video camera and then comparing it with the “perfect record” will determine accuracy for ASL recitations. The ASL accuracy judge must be fluent in ASL and should not serve as the accuracy judge for oral recitations.