

Interpretations and Readings: Prose and Poetry

Interpret: from Latin interpretari, meaning “explain, expound, understand.” The Latin prefix inter- means “among, between, betwixt, in the midst of.”

Thus, we come to see that Interpretation means to explain or understand something by getting in the middle of it, existing *in* it, becoming a part of it. Reading interpretation events center around recreating stories and the characters in those stories and making them seem living and real to the audience without physically acting out the part. No props or costumes are used and physical actions are used with restraint.

Oral interpretation is similar in some ways to acting - it should involve your voice, expressions, gestures, body tension, stance, and emotion - but it is not about presenting a costumed character. It should carry the intensity that the author intended the piece to have without relying on sets, effects, lighting, or even physicality to help create the mood. Readings have much less movement than other interps - the importance is on the literature and the story, not the “acting.”

Choosing a piece:

The most important element of an oral interp is the feeling of a “story worth telling.” Especially with poetry, your audience (and, more importantly, your judge) is looking for a series of poems that *give insight and tell stories*, not just a series of poems that are good. You want the message of your piece to be as compelling as the story. Just because you like the plot or the language doesn’t mean it’s going to make a good reading for competition. Take this into consideration when you are looking for a good prose or poetry set.

Where to look for a good interp?

The library, the bookstore, and the internet are good places to look for poems and prose. Think about literature that you have read that you were impressed by, ask parents/teachers/other people you know that read a lot.

Remember to look for GOOD literature. Use good taste as you select and cut your material (eliminate offensive words, etc, and make it shorter to fit the time limit without losing the storyline). Choose a selection with an emotional climax that you are drawn to and that appeals to you directly.

Poetry Resources:

- Anthologies of modern poetry, high school text books, contemporary poetry journals and reviews (although make sure they are legitimate publications!) are all good places to look for poems.
- <http://www.poets.org/> is a website maintained by the Academy of American Poets and has a wide range of poems and poets.

Prose Resources:

- Short story anthologies (often grouped by nationality, region, or genre) are great places to begin to look for selections for a prose. Many high school textbooks contain short story units.

- Longer books and novels may be used, but remember that you have to cut the piece down to 8 minutes. The longer the original source, the more creative you have to be with your cutting.

Once you have chosen a piece for prose or a theme for poetry, sit down with the material and figure out the story that you want to tell. What is important for the audience to learn, understand, and think about as they hear your piece? Your cuts and selections should center around the message you are trying to get across - always keep that message in mind as you work on crafting your selection. Remember that 8 minutes is not a long time. The more you focus on your message as you cut, the more effective and coherent your piece will be.

Interpreting your selection:

The thing you hear the most about English classes is that “there is no wrong answer.” While that’s not strictly true, it is a fact that there can be many different possible interpretations of a piece of literature - and some are better than others. Be sure you know the meaning and pronunciation of every single word in any selection you choose. Have a clear idea in your mind of the idea you hope to get across with your interpretation, and make sure you are actively pursuing that idea - - not just keeping it in your head and hoping it somehow comes across to the audience. **Be active in your interpretation, not passive.**

Another thing that interps share with acting is the background work that needs to be done in order to make a piece effective. Researching the author(s) of a piece and the setting and time period of the piece itself and of the author’s life can be very helpful to help you create a rich picture of the selection you are trying to recreate. Consider the facts and details that are given in the piece - even in parts of the piece that you had to cut out for time. Use your imagination to fill in other details and create back stories for your narrators and characters. **The more complete your image of the world you are interpreting, the more convincing and real you can be.**

Tone of voice, facial expressions, slight gestures, and even the tension or relaxation of your body can make the difference between a good piece and a great piece. Making good use of all of these tools is a good way to make clear the relationships between characters in your piece, as well as their emotions, mood changes, character shifts, and motivations.

As you work on your interpretation of your selection, remember that it is much, much more than simply reading out loud. Find a story that is worthwhile, cut it so that it is coherent, complete, and meaningful, and then put in the time to figure out who your characters are, what they want, and what their world looks like. The more you put into an oral interp, the more you get out of it in the end.