

GUIDE FOR ORAL INTERPRETATION

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Although the term *oral interpretation* may be new to you, the experience of interpreting literature is part of everyday life. Lawyers read evidence to a jury. Pastors read prayers. Parents and teachers read to their children.

You may remember how much you enjoyed being read to as a child. In this guide you will learn how to prepare for oral interpretation. You will learn the characteristics of oral interpretation, How to select appropriate, quality material for oral interpretation and how to analyze that material.

I. CHARACTERISTICS OF ORAL INTERPRETATION

Oral Interpretation involves the performing of literature aloud to communicate meaning to an audience. An interpreter analyzes the literature and uses his or her voice to communicate the results of the analysis. The interpreter is the connection between the literature and the audience.

There are major differences between oral interpretation and public speaking or acting:

1. *You are not the author.* You are performing literature written by another person. You are not sharing your own personal thoughts and feelings as you would in public speaking.
2. *You perform the author's words by direct reading.* As an interpreter, you bring to life the exact words of another person.
3. *You interpret a piece of literature.* You are not trying to create a message to persuade or inform your listeners. Instead you are trying to help the listeners "see" the images you are creating orally. Your goal is to share the meaning of the literature as you interpret it.
4. *You remain yourself during the performance.* When you are acting, you take on the role of a character in a play. When you interpret, you use your voice and body to suggest the mood or the characters, but you do not become a character.

II. APPROPRIATE LITERATURE FOR ORAL INTERPRETATION

Here are some of the many kinds of literature you could use for oral interpretation:

- Favorite Authors—you are already emotionally invested in the authors you like
- Literature Collections—for example your English textbook
- Biographies or Autobiographies
- Plays or Screenplays

As you select your performance material, think about these standards: the quality of the literature, its audience appeal, the oral possibilities of the literature and your feelings for the piece,

Quality of the Material Good literature has certain characteristics. It has a theme that connects the reader or listener to common human experiences such as love, anger, joy and pain. It also has conflict, the struggle between two opposing forces. All people have experienced conflict within themselves, with other people or with nature. The literature should help the reader see ordinary ideas in a new way. The material should excite the reader's imagination. (Teachers-read a poem that illustrates this. eg: *Foul Shot* by Edwin Hoey—trying to accomplish a goal under pressure)

Audience Appeal Ask yourself how you listeners will respond to the material you selected. Is it appropriate for the age, concerns and feelings of your audience? Does the piece fit the occasion?

Oral Possibilities Can your listeners grasp the meaning of your piece in just one reading? You don't get a second chance. If the language is too difficult or sentence structure too complex, that literature is not appropriate for reading aloud. Look for words and ideas that can be clearly communicated, as poet Ted Hughes says in his book *Poetry Is*, look for words that "live."

Words that live are those which we hear like "click" or "chuckle." Or which we see, like "freckled" or "veined" or which we taste, like "vinegar" or "sugar" or touch like "prickle" or "oily" or smell like "tar" or "onion". Or words that act and use their muscles, like "flick" or "balance."

Your Feelings You must feel a connection to the material. You cannot expect an audience to get excited over a piece that has no meaning for you. If you don't feel connected to the literature you will have a hard time communicating its meaning to your audience.

Checklist for selecting material for oral interpretation:

1. _____ **Does it connect with common human experiences?**
2. _____ **Is it appropriate to the audience and to the occasion?**
3. _____ **Will listeners be able to grasp the meaning in one reading?**
4. _____ **Do you feel personally connected to the material?**

III. ANALYZING LITERATURE

Did you know that Katherine Paterson wrote *Bridge to Terabithia* as a way to help her son understand the death of his friend? Did you know Anne Frank actually was between twelve and fourteen years old when she wrote in her diary?

As you prepare for a performance you must become very familiar with the literature you have selected. The better you understand a piece, the easier it will be to communicate its meaning to your audience.

There are four keys to analyzing literature. You need to look at the dramatic speaker, the elements of the literature, the language and the author.

1. The Dramatic Speaker

This is the voice that is heard as you perform your piece. This is the person telling the story or describing the scene. It is not the author's voice but a voice created by the author. The voice may belong to a character in the piece or to a narrator who is not part of the action.

Who is the dramatic speaker in the following cuttings?

Cutting A:

What a day, Dicey thought. What a summer for that matter, but especially what a day. She stood alone in the big old barn, in a patch of moonlight; stood looking at the sailboat resting on its sawhorse cradle, a darker patch among shadows. Behind her, the wind blew off the water, bringing the faint smell of salt and the rich, moist smell of the marshes....

Cynthia Voigt from *Dicey's Song*

Cutting B:

Like I've been telling you, I am Leigh Botts. Leigh Marcus Botts. I am just a plain boy. This school doesn't say I am Gifted and Talented, and I don't like soccer very much the way everybody at this school is supposed to. I am not stupid either.

Beverly Cleary from *Dear Mr. Henshaw*

In cutting A it is clear that Dicey is not the dramatic speaker as she would not say, Dicey thought. It is someone who knows the character well. In cutting B, the speaker is a plain boy named Leigh Botts. It certainly is not the adult female author.

The search for the dramatic speaker(s) is your first step because you will want to behave and speak as if you were that speaker. For example, If your speaker is a child, you will not want to sound like an adult. If your speaker is a wise old woman, you will not want to sound like a bored teenager.

2. Elements of Literature

As you analyze your piece, you will need to look at elements such as setting, plot, mood, theme, conflict, characters and culture.

Setting The time and place of the literature creates a setting for the performance. A setting in a roller rink in 1992 would be performed very differently that it is set in an English church in 1820.

Plot The plot or story line must be made clear to your listeners. If you are doing a cutting from a story or book, you must be sure share any main points of the plot with the audience in the introduction.

Mood The interpreter creates the mood, or emotional feeling, of the literature. This is done through nonverbal message such as facial expressions, and pace. For example a humorous piece might be faster paced, with quick movements and have many smiles; where a serious piece might need a slower pace and more serious facial expressions.

Theme Finding the theme or main idea of the piece lets you know what to emphasize in your performance. Some examples are:

Charlotte's web by E.B. White—Friendship can be found in many places.

The Planet of Junior Brown by Virginia Hamilton - Pride in individuality is important.

Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson - Death does not end the influence of someone in your life.

An Oral interpretation performance may contain a number of pieces of literature that have a similar theme.

Conflict Conflict is at the heart of most literature. Without conflict, it would be hard for an audience to get involved in a story. Conflicts can exist internally, within characters or between characters. They can also exist between characters and the environment.

Characters. Interpreters need to understand their characters in order to get a sense of how to portray them in the performance. In order to get a sense of how to portray them in the performance. Our study should include their appearance, words, language, actions, attitudes and what other characters say about them.

Culture Many works of literature are written from a cultural perspective different than your own. You need to study the culture to get a better sense of what your character is about. You also need to be sure you are comfortable using the dialect of the culture and be sure you can pronounce foreign words correctly.

3. Language

As an interpreter you need to study the author's word choice, style and rhythm and rhyme. If you don't understand why something is expressed in a certain way, you can't communicate its meaning to an audience.

Word Choice You need to quote the author exactly as it is written. The words were chosen for a reason and should not be changed.

Style The way a piece was written helps create the mood or feeling for your listeners. Writers use imagery, descriptive and figurative language to appeal to listener's eyes and ears.

Rythm and Rhyme All poems have rhythm. You need to determine what it is. Some poems are rhymed. You must decide how you will read it. For example if you read a rhymed poem in a sing song fashion you will create a different message than if you read the lines naturally and thoughtfully.

4. Author

You can understand a piece of literature better by studying its author. Try and find out at what time in the life of the author the piece was written? What was going on in his/her life? Is there a significance to the time or setting? On what themes does the author generally write?

IV. PREPARING THE MATERIAL

Two important steps in preparing your piece for performance are cutting the literature and creating an introduction.

1. Cutting

Sometimes a piece of literature is too long and it must be cut. Cutting the literature means shortening it by taking out parts without changing its meaning. In shortening a piece you can cut (remove) the following;

- **Unnecessary descriptions**—some descriptions may add interest to the written piece, but not be needed in presenting the main idea or feelings.
- **Descriptions of action or manner of speaking**- Statements like “Madison shot him an angry glance” can be cut because you can create that feeling with voice and facial expression. Any phrases that you can show with facial, voice or gestures, can be removed.
- **Statements of “he said” or “she said”**—since you are creating the characters through your voice and non-verbal actions, you can leave out words that tell who is speaking.
- **Offensive words** – any words that might upset listeners can be substituted (exception to the rule of not changing words) or removed.
- **Unnecessary characters**- sometimes minor characters are in a scene for a short time. You may cut that character’s lines as long as it does not change the meaning of the scene.

2. Creating an Introduction

Generally speaking the interpreter gives a short teaser (or beginning) of the piece and then closes the script to give a memorized introduction.

Effective introductions do the following:

- **Capture the audience’s attention**
- **Tell the Author and Title**
- **Give any necessary background information about the piece or author**
- **Set the scene**
- **If possible, tie the piece to the audience’s experience**

For example:

Everyone has that cantankerous relative. You know-the one that can be sooo irritating, yet wise and endearing. In the following selection we meet 14 year old Will Tweedy and share with him his interactions with his Grandpa Rucker Blakeslee in a small Southern town at the turn of the 20th Century. Through Will's eyes we see his grandfather as both rough and stubborn yet caring; capable of tenderness and love.(pause) Cold Sassy Tree by Olive Ann Burns

V. USING YOUR VOICE AND BODY

To begin, think of yourself as the dramatic speaker. There is a fine line between acting and interpretation. If the Dramatic speaker is an uninvolved narrator or observer, your voice and body should reflect that. If the dramatic speaker is a character in the middle of an argument, your voice and body should show the character's anger.

Remember, however, you are interpreting the material, not acting it out. You are sharing the story with your listeners with your voice and body. In the non-verbal part of your performance you need to consider sense recall, use of voice and use of body.

1. **Sense Recall** Sense recall is remembering physical experiences you have had, which will help to suggest images or sense memories to your audience. Physical experiences you recall include sounds, tastes, smells touch and sights, For example, you could recall biting into a lemon and the sour taste, if you are describing the sour taste of an unripe green apple.

Other examples—

Sound- imagine the sound of a car horn, or chalk scraping across a chalkboard

Taste- imagine eating a chocolate candy bar or bad tasting medicine

Touch- imagine the softness of a baby, or jumping into a pool on a hot day

Smell- imagine the smell of a skunk or your favorite flower

Sight- imagine a severe thunderstorm or your favorite vacation spot

2. **Body Recall** Body recall is when you remember your kinesthetic or bodily responses when you had feelings such as fear, anger, anxiety, or great joy. For example if you are interpreting a piece where the character is afraid of an intruder in her home. You would want to recall a situation where you were very afraid and use that feeling for your character.
3. **Use of Voice** Your voice will sound different depending on the tone of the piece, and who your characters are. Volume can have a great effect on your performance, For example, a shy character would speak more softly than a confident one. An angry character would speak more loudly than a sad one. As a narrator you would speak more softly to describe a peaceful scene than you would to describe a hurricane coming through. Your pitch will vary as you

read male or female, adult or child voices. An excited person has a pitch higher than a depressed one. Suggest the differences with your voice but don't exaggerate it. Your rate of speech will be faster or slower depending on the text. An excited person may speak faster than an older character.

When you are shifting to a new character or changing the mood, you can use pauses to obtain the desired effect. Pauses can also create suspense. Vocal quality can also be used. For instance you might use a raspy tone for an old man or a nasal tone for an annoying character. You may also want to use an accent. But beware, if you can't do it well, it will be distracting. In that case it would be better not to do it at all.

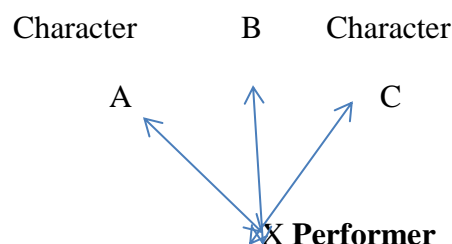
- 4. Use of Body** You bring characters to life by using posture, gestures and facial expression. As an interpreter you will remain with your feet planted in most cases, so you cannot use movements such as walking, falling or touching others. You may use gestures such as shrugging your shoulders, pointing your fingers, or scratching your head. You may throw a punch at the audience to represent a fight, but you won't actually get into a fistfight with another character. You can create a mood with your posture, such as an embarrassed child by rounding your shoulders forward and hanging your head toward your chest.

Your facial expression should quickly communicate the mood of the piece to your audience. A joyous mood can be shown with a smile and a scary mood can be shown by tension in your face. Because you can't use large movements, you may want to exaggerate your facial and eye expressions a little to communicate the meaning.

VI. EYE FOCUS

You usually look at the audience when you are performing, scanning the audience slowly and pausing, holding your gaze, every once in a while before continuing to scan. However if you have more than one character, one way to show the difference between the characters is to have a different, but consistent eye focus for each character. For example, you may look at a spot on the back wall when speaking as the first character and then shift your eyes to a different spot as the second character. The audience should see your head and eyes move slightly as you switch characters. You don't want to swing your head each time a different character speaks. See the sample diagram below. Practice eye focus with a short play script.

Character



VII. PREPARING A PERFORMANCE SCRIPT

To prepare a performance script you must

1. Order the literature pieces in the order you will perform them
2. Mark the pieces to reflect your thinking on how you will perform them
3. Create the overall structure of the performance including transitions between pieces, and insertion of the introduction.

1. **Ordering the pieces** When performing several short pieces such as a poetry program, you need to put them in order to create the right mood and keep the audience interested. This is known as weaving the pieces together to create the whole effect.
2. **Marking the Script** Marking the script involves writing symbols that will help you to remember how to read the script. Any system of symbols will work as long as you know and will remember what they mean. However, here are a few suggestions.

Tips for marking a script

Pauses: use one diagonal line (/) to show a pause two diagonal lines (//) to show a longer pause.

Emphasis: use a solid underlining (_____) to indicate words to be stressed; a wavy line to underline words that need a special tone or special emphasis.

Pronunciation: write the letter x over a syllable that needs stress

Movement: write cue (cue) to show a special movement

Rate: use highlighter colors to show changes in pace.

3. **Creating the Structure** You need to decide where in the piece your introduction will go. Generally it will be after a 30 sec-1 minute performance teaser. All your transitions and markings should be noted in the correct place and your script should be glued onto card stock or construction paper pages and put in a three ring binder. Cut script pages so you are not turning the page in the middle of a paragraph or verse of poetry. The end of the page should be a natural pause in the script.

VIII. REHEARSING ORAL INTERPRETATION

Following are steps to practice the delivery of your oral interpretation.

1. Read your piece silently two or three times. Go Straight through. Don't stop and start over, and don't go back over any section.
2. Repeat step 1, this time aloud.
3. Stand up! Give your piece while looking up at regular intervals. Practice gestures and movement. Work with your script. Follow your markings. Complete the entire piece. This is a rehearsal, so it doesn't matter if you make mistakes. It is important to go through the entire piece without stopping.
4. Continue step 3 until you can give the entire piece with all the planned vocal tones and body movements.

IX. PRACTICING RELAXATION

You will probably be nervous before a performance. You may wish to try some relaxation techniques. Here are some strategies. Use what works for you.

1. Clench your fists tightly for a count of ten. Release and let your whole body go limp.
2. Take a deep breath and hold it for a count of ten. Let it out all at once, letting your body go completely loose and limp.
3. Breathe normally, let your muscles relax more and more as you let out each breath.
4. Let your head hang down so your chin almost touches your chest. Slowly rotate your head in a circle, one way and then the other. Do this two or three times.
5. Imagine yourself on a warm beach, in a hot bath or anywhere that seems relaxing to you. Breathe slowly and deeply.