



2006 National Shakespeare Competition

Student Guidelines

The English-Speaking Union of the United States

The Rules of the Competition

The purpose of the Shakespeare Competition is to help you develop your understanding of Shakespeare and your ability to communicate that understanding. You are therefore encouraged to bring Shakespeare to life in your own way and to express his words with feeling, clarity, and a full sense of their meaning and intent.

- You will memorize, interpret, and perform a monologue, and if required, a sonnet.
- You should identify your selection before you begin your presentation. You may perform your pieces in any order you prefer.
- You will not be allowed costumes or props of any kind; including chairs, hair and hair clips, jewelry, hats, shoes or any other articles of clothing. You should select clothing that allows you to move freely. Some styles of heavy contemporary footwear can be distracting and can limit your movement.
- Prompting, if necessary, is allowed.
- You should speak naturally. We urge you to use your own voice rather than affect a British accent.
- You must reside permanently in the U.S. and be enrolled in the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade.
- You should not act for pay in television, the stage, or in film during the 2005-2006 school year in which the competition takes place.

Getting Started

The first step in the Shakespeare Competition is choosing a monologue to memorize and perform. Be sure to check whether or not you are required to select one from a list provided by The English-Speaking Union. Choosing the character and the part you will play is important; you need to be an actor and a casting director at the same time. For example, do you think you would be a more convincing Juliet or Miranda, Hermia or Helena, Richard III or Henry V? Also remember that actors research their roles; it would be a rare thing to perform a monologue convincingly without knowing the character inside and out. That means knowing the entire play well.

Your chosen monologue must not exceed 20 lines (verse and prose) according to *The Nameless Shakespeare*: <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/shakespeare>. The English-Speaking Union will adhere strictly to this rule, and the presentation of a monologue exceeding these limits will result in disqualification. If you are searching outside the suggested list, aim for consecutive material with a beginning, middle, and end. While it may occasionally be appropriate to cut the lines of another character in a shared dialogue, try to avoid cutting within speeches. The winner of the school contest will also memorize a sonnet to add to his or her performance at the Branch competition. Ideally, your sonnet will complement your monologue and help demonstrate your interpretive range.

Suit the Action to the Word, the Word to the Action

Every great actor is praised for being “natural.” However, what actors do is master the tools of vocal and physical expression so completely that they *seem* natural. This should be your goal, too. Explore the range of expressive possibilities of voice and movement. You might experiment with emphasis, phrasing, volume vs. economy of gesture, and facial expression. As you do, you will begin making decisions about which means of expression best fit the tone and character of your pieces. Allow your work to grow and change. Elizabethan actors were “players.” You too should bring playfulness to this process.

The Selections:

The Monologue

A monologue is a speech by a single character set within the context of a play. In selecting yours, remember that some action (whether implied, reported, or presented) has preceded and/or will proceed from this speech. The words spoken by your character will generally fit within the larger framework of the play in one or more of these ways:

- They may reveal something about the character’s personality or goals.
- They may be used by the character to incite others into action and move the plot forward.
- They may set the scene or close the action, as in prologues and epilogues.

Once you select a monologue, read the whole play and place yourself in the circumstances faced by your character. Pay particular attention to what happens immediately before the monologue begins. Then begin to explore the words—the character’s thoughts and feelings—with your voice and body. Remember, your goal is to make the character your own, and, in doing so, to convince the audience to accept you as that character and to believe in the message you are delivering. Avoid the temptation to “blow the audience away” with an excess of emotion. In acting, more is often less. An actor who “protests too much” rarely convinces.

As you work on the monologue, ask yourself:

- Who is my character?
- In what situation do I, the character, find myself?
- What decisions and discoveries am I making?
- What do I want to happen as a result of this speech?
- Given my past and my personality, how will I act to bring about the desired effect?
- What is my mood at the beginning of the speech?
- Has it changed by the end? If so, how?

The Sonnet

Shakespeare wrote 154 sonnets, all of which were published together as a sequence. The first thing you will notice about these sonnets is their rigid form. They are generally fourteen-line poems written in iambic pentameter, and they are made up of three quatrains and a couplet. A quatrain is four lines of verse. The couplet is the final two lines of verse. Their rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

As you read over these sonnets to make your selection, you should notice that Shakespeare touches on the themes of love, death, art, beauty, and the passage of time. You may find it helpful to think of the sonnet as a short scene or story. It explores and resolves a thought or an experience, and frequently contains a “turn” or change of thought. Lines 1-12 often develop an argument or give accumulating examples. The couplet (lines 13-14) draws a conclusion (sometimes witty), or acts as a zinger, ironically pointing out a paradox or contradicting the preceding twelve lines.

As you study your sonnet, try to be aware of its pattern and bring your understanding of it to your performance. In preparing your sonnet, try to clarify this understanding by summarizing your sonnet in the shortest sentence possible. Then work on achieving the same clarity in delivering Shakespeare’s words.

As you work on your sonnet, ask yourself:

- What is the central idea of the sonnet?
- How do the lines break down into an introduction, development of the theme, and conclusion?
- Is there a turning point in the sonnet?
- How do the meaning and delivery of these words differ from my monologue’s?
- Can I strengthen the contrast?

In past years, movement during the sonnet had been discouraged. The rules of the National Shakespeare Competition have changed to allow competitors to use movement and gesture if they feel it will enhance the delivery of the sonnet.