On Stage, Off Script: Critical Performance Studies

Stephanie Anderson

De Anza College

Social Sciences

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Detailed Licensing

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Accessibility

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About the Book

About the Book

This textbook offers a deeper understanding of how performance shapes everyday life and how oral interpretation brings literature to life through voice, body, and connection with an audience. Oral interpretation blends everyday conversation and theatrical elements, focusing on meaningful engagement rather than imitation. Beyond its expressive dimensions, oral interpretation functions as a critical practice. The study of performance invites reflection on whose voices are validated in public spaces, which narratives are elevated or marginalized, and how interpretive choices can illuminate or challenge cultural norms and power structures. As an academic discipline, performance studies situates oral interpretation as both an art form and a means of cultural inquiry, encouraging students to consider how performed literature can contribute to understanding identity, social dynamics, and the potential for social change. At its core, this book encourages curiosity, empathy, and intentional expression to amplify the power of language and storytelling.

How I Found Performance

When I decided to major in Communication Studies, I was completely unaware of the world of performance studies and oral interpretation. I originally chose to major in Communication Studies because I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and I figured communication was important in every career. Like many Communication Studies majors, my journey in the discipline began with courses in public speaking. I learned how to organize and deliver speeches, and although I made progress in overcoming some of my speaking anxiety, I still felt incredibly apprehensive in front of an audience. My heart would race, my hands would shake, and my face would turn red. I also noticed these physiological responses when speaking in small groups. The reality was that I had social anxiety, and even though I enjoyed learning about communication, I still struggled to feel comfortable speaking in front of others.

When I transferred from my community college to a university, I was required to attend a welcome orientation. The person leading the orientation was a Communication Studies instructor. During the session, he mentioned that he would be teaching a performance studies course and invited all of us to register. The thought of performing brought up many of the same anxious feelings I had about delivering speeches, perhaps even more intense ones. Still, the instructor seemed kind, so, reluctantly, I signed up for the class.

At the time, I had no idea that the course would completely open my eyes to a world that would change the trajectory of my life. I learned techniques to overcome my social anxiety within that class, and the idea of performing began to feel less intimidating. Now, I have the privilege of being the instructor who introduces a new generation of students to the world of performance and oral interpretation. I look forward to seeing what we create together.

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About the Author

About the Author

Stephanie Anderson began her academic journey at De Anza College as a student, where she attended from 2003 to 2006 and earned an Associate of Arts degree in Communication Studies. She then transferred to San José State University, where she completed a double major, earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance and a Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies. Continuing her dedication to scholarship and performance, she went on to earn a Master's degree in Communication Studies with an emphasis in Performance Studies. Her graduate thesis, *A Dancing Paradox: Oral Histories of Dance Pedagogy*, explored the intersection of performance, movement, oral histories, and pedagogy, and she was honored as the Outstanding Graduate Student in 2013.

After graduating from San José State University, she began teaching lower-division performance studies courses at the university. She also served as a coach for the university's Forensics (speech and debate) team, further developing her passion for performance, public speaking, and oral interpretation. During her time at San José State, she led a faculty-led study abroad program to Finland, where students engaged in immersive international learning and cultural exchange as part of the university's global education offerings.

In addition to her academic accomplishments, she has been a dedicated dance educator for over 25 years, teaching students of all ages and backgrounds. Her long-standing commitment to dance education has deeply influenced her teaching philosophy and her understanding of performance as both an artistic and communicative practice.

In 2015, she returned to De Anza College as an adjunct professor, bringing her enthusiasm for communication and performance into the classroom. In 2017, she was hired as a full-time faculty member, and in 2021 she was granted tenure in recognition of her commitment to teaching excellence and student success. From 2023 to 2026, she served as Chair of the Communication Studies Department at De Anza College, providing leadership in curriculum development, faculty collaboration, and student-centered initiatives.

At De Anza College, she actively contributes to campus life through service on the Technology Committee and through her work teaching courses for the Pride Learning Community and the Social Justice Certificate. She is particularly passionate about creating inclusive, dynamic learning environments that empower students to explore identity, voice, and community through communication.

Driven by her dedication to performance and pedagogy, she enthusiastically developed a Performance Studies course at De Anza College, which was first offered to students in Winter 2026. Her academic and professional work centers on performance studies, dance, and critical communication studies. These perspectives deeply inform the ideas, approaches, and commitments reflected throughout this book.

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1: AN INTRODUCTION TO PERFORMING LITERATURE

Overview

This chapter explores how performance shapes everyday life and enhances the interpretation of literature. It emphasizes that oral interpretation is more than acting; it's about using voice, body, and audience connection to bring texts to life. Drawing on thinkers like Erving Goffman, Judith Butler, Richard Schechner, and Victor Turner, the chapter shows how performance influences identity, culture, and communication. Students will examine global storytelling traditions, such as Kamishibai (Japan), Pingshu (China), griots (West Africa), and Katha (India), to understand the cultural and historical roots of oral interpretation. Ultimately, the chapter encourages students to engage literature with curiosity, empathy, and intentional expression.

1.1: Welcome to the World of Performance!

1.2: What is Performance?

1.3: What is Oral Interpretation of Literature?

1.4: References

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1.1: Welcome to the World of Performance!

Overview

Most people associate performance with the stage, spotlights, costumes, lines, and applause, but performance extends far beyond the theater. From the moment we enter social life, we begin to perform. We learn how to speak, act, dress, and respond in ways that are shaped by cultural norms and expectations. Whether you're raising your hand in class, greeting a friend, or showing respect to an elder, you're engaging in performance, but what exactly does it mean to perform? And how does that differ from acting on stage?

In performance studies, "performance" functions as an analytical lens through which communication, identity, culture, and power can be understood.

Oral interpretation is the practice of bringing literature from the page into embodied, vocal, and spatial expression. It does not rely on costumes, props, or full theatrical staging, nor is it limited to skilled reading. Instead, it occupies a space between everyday conversation and theatrical presentation, drawing on aspects of both while remaining a distinct form of communicative art.

Through this process, you will explore how language conveys meaning, how vocal and physical choices shape emotional impact, and how performance can clarify or enhance the thematic elements of a literary work. Interpretation is not concerned with imitation or impersonation; rather, it is grounded in thoughtful engagement, curiosity, and intentionality.

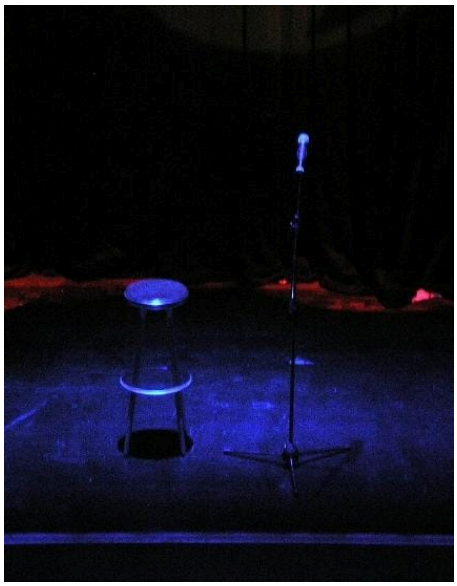


Figure 1.1.3: One type of stage. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Carlos Delgado - Stand-up comedy - Stage - crop)

Learning Objectives

1. Distinguish oral interpretation from acting.
2. Explore performance as a form of social inquiry and change.
3. Build confidence in public expression.

You've Enrolled in a Performance Class. What Does That Actually Mean?

At first glance, enrolling in a performance class might suggest you'll be memorizing lines, stepping on stage, or learning how to project your voice to the back row of a theater. While those elements might be familiar in some performance-based courses, the meaning of "performance" in this context extends far beyond the theatrical stage.

In this class, performance is not just about acting. It is a lens through which we explore communication, identity, culture, and power. You will investigate how performance operates in everyday life and how interpreting literature aloud can deepen understanding, evoke emotion, and provoke critical thought. This course challenges you to think of performance not only as entertainment, but as a meaningful, transformative act.

In this class, you will learn how to bring literature off the page and into the body, voice, and space. Oral interpretation is not about acting out a scene with costumes and props, nor is it simply about "reading well." It exists in a unique space between everyday conversation and theatrical performance, drawing from both, yet becoming something distinct.

At its core, oral interpretation is about *connection*: to the text, to the audience, and to your own voice. It asks you to explore how language communicates meaning, how structure and sound shape emotion, and how performance can amplify the message of a poem, story, or speech. Interpretation is not about imitation or impersonation; it's about engagement. It's about stepping into the world of a text with curiosity, empathy, and intention, and inviting your audience to come with you.

Oral interpretation is also more than a performance skill. It is a critical practice. Throughout this course, we will approach interpretation not only as an expressive art but also as a tool for reflection, analysis, and social change. Whose voices are heard in public spaces? Whose stories are told, and how are they performed? We will examine how performance both reflects and shapes cultural norms, power dynamics, and personal identity.

Exercise 1.1.1

Activity 1: What Does Performance Mean to You?

Objective: To explore students' initial perceptions of performance and compare them to broader definitions.
Instructions:

1. Write down the first three words or images that come to mind when you hear the word "performance."
2. Share your responses in small groups and discuss similarities and differences.
3. As a group, create a combined list that expands the idea of performance beyond just acting on stage.
4. Reflect individually in a short journal entry: How do your initial ideas about performance compare to the expanded definitions introduced in the chapter?

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1.2: What is Performance?

Overview

This section explores the concept of performance in both everyday life and theatrical contexts. Specifically, we will examine Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Richard Schechner's Performance Theory, and Victor Turner's Social Drama.

We then will spend some time distinguishing between everyday performance (spontaneous, habitual, and often unconscious) and theatrical performance (rehearsed, stylized, and presented to an external audience). While both forms of performance share common elements, theatrical performance introduces higher stakes, greater self-awareness, and often, increased anxiety.

Finally, we explore oral interpretation. Oral interpretation is performance practice that exists between everyday and theatrical modes. Neither casual conversation nor full character acting, oral interpretation uses voice, expression, and movement to bring literature to life in a way that is both authentic and intentional.

By the end of this chapter, you will understand how performance operates in multiple spheres of life, how context influences our actions, and how interpretation and embodiment work together to convey meaning in everyday interactions or in the performance of literature.



Figure 1.2.3: Everyday performances can also be performed on stage. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Mostafameraji - LEFTOVER)

Learning Objectives

1. Understand performance as a social practice.
2. Analyze theories of social and cultural performance.
3. Examine the relationship between performance and power.
4. Differentiate between everyday and theatrical performance.

Are You a Performer?

When you hear the word "performance," what comes to mind? I asked my kids that question, and they said they think of a stage, costumes, and, of course, an audience. Even though my kids are only 3 and 7, their responses were fairly accurate. When we break down those responses a bit more, things get complex.

As humans, we have been performing our entire lives. From a young age, we learn how to perform in different social and cultural contexts. For example, at some point while living in the United States, you learned that students move into a classroom, sit behind a table, and raise their hand if they would like to speak. In contrast, a professor moves to the front of the class, stays standing, and does not need to raise their hand if they would like to speak. These performances constitute specific power dynamics within the classroom, and people in the United States have passed these performances down for generations.

In the previously described scenario, the stage is the classroom, the costumes are articles of clothing that you choose to represent your identity, and the audience is the people within that space. You engage in this performance regularly without question. It is mundane and familiar, yet deeply structured by social expectations and roles. This aligns with Erving Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory, which suggests that social life is like a theatrical performance where individuals manage their presentation of self in front of an audience (Goffman, 1959).

Further deepening this concept, Judith Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes that identity (particularly gender) is not a fixed attribute we simply possess, but rather something we continuously enact through repeated social performances. Unlike Goffman's view of performance as managing impressions, Butler argues that these repeated acts don't just express identity. They actively constitute it, creating the appearance of a stable, coherent self within social norms and regulatory frameworks (Butler, 1990). This means that the way we behave in familiar settings like classrooms not only reflects social roles but also shapes how we and others understand who we are. For example, we are not performing as a student, rather we become a student by engaging in those performances.

But what happens if we never learn the social cues or are unable to perform them according to societal expectations? Impression management occurs when individuals deliberately adjust how they present themselves in order to influence how others perceive them. When a dominant culture sets the standards for what is considered "normal," "professional," or "appropriate," people often engage in impression management by modeling their own performances (speech, dress, behavior, emotional expression) on the expectations of that dominant group. We engage in impression management based on the performances of a dominant culture because dominant norms establish the expectations by which behavior is judged. People adapt their performance (consciously or unconsciously) to navigate power structures, seek acceptance, avoid harm, or gain social advantages. These performances reveal how culture, identity, and power interact in everyday life.

Marginalized communities have long challenged dominant norms by refusing or being unable to perform the status quo, instead creating alternative ways of being, speaking, and relating. These everyday and interpretive performances become acts of resistance that imagine and enact new social possibilities. In this class, we will draw on that legacy by using performance to question how things are and actively participate in building more just and inclusive realities. In the practice of oral interpretation, we will move beyond simply repeating performances that uphold the status quo. Instead, we will actively challenge, disrupt, and re-imagine social performances to reveal and resist systems of injustice. Within our oral interpretation performances, we won't just copy how things are usually done. We'll use performance to question, break, and rebuild social norms to help us better understand and challenge injustice. By doing so, we recognize that performance is not just a reflection of reality. It is a tool for reshaping it. Through our everyday and interpretive performances, we can question how things are and actively participate in creating new, more just social realities.

Exercise 1.2.1

Activity 1: Everyday Performance Observation

Objective: To identify and analyze examples of performance in everyday life, highlighting communication, identity, and culture.
Instructions:

1. Spend one day observing your own social interactions in different settings (e.g., classroom, home, social media, work).
2. Take notes on at least three different "performances" you engage in—describe the context, the "role" you played, and any social rules you followed.
3. Write a brief analysis explaining how these performances shape your identity or reflect cultural expectations.
4. Share your findings in a class discussion, comparing everyday performance with theatrical performance.

Everyday Performance vs Theatrical Performance

We have established that you are, in fact, a performer. Each day, you engage in a variety of social and cultural performances such as greeting others, navigating classroom dynamics, participating in rituals, and more. These actions, while often unconscious, are

shaped by societal expectations and learned behaviors.

Although Goffman believed that social life is a form of theatrical performance, his theory does not fully account for the emotional and psychological differences between performing in everyday life and performing on an theatrical stage. For instance, while you might effortlessly perform your role as a student in a classroom, you may experience significant anxiety when asked to perform in a local theater production of *High School Musical*. This heightened anxiety suggests that theatrical performance involves different stakes, expectations, and levels of self-consciousness. These are elements that Goffman's dramaturgical framework does not fully explain.

The answer lies in the difference between *everyday performance* and *theatrical performance*. In everyday life, performances are typically spontaneous, context-driven, and tied to your authentic social identity. You are performing as yourself within familiar settings, often without an external audience evaluating your behavior.

In contrast, theatrical performance occurs in a heightened, constructed environment where the performer is asked to adopt a different identity, memorize lines, follow direction, and present that identity convincingly to an audience of observers. People can develop performance anxiety when they are aware they are being watched, judged, or evaluate. They may also feel anxiety about trying to get the performance "right." This anxiety is not a contradiction of your role as a performer in everyday life; rather, it highlights how different contexts create different stakes and expectations for performance.

Exercise 1.2.2

Activity 2: Everyday Performance vs Theatrical Performance Venn Diagram

Type: Analysis
Objective: Distinguish between everyday performance and theatrical acting.

Instructions:

1. Create a Venn diagram with two overlapping circles:
   - Label one Performer (Everyday Life)
   - Label the other Actor (Theater Setting)
2. In each circle, list characteristics unique to that role.
3. In the overlap, list similarities (e.g., body language, role-playing, audience awareness).
4. As a class, discuss:
   - What makes acting different from everyday performance?
   - How does “mimesis” change the performer’s intent?

Performing in Everyday Life

Let’s begin by examining some of the ways we might perform in everyday life. In the United States, close friends often greet each other with a hug, while in professional settings, a handshake is more common. In France, close friends may greet each other with a kiss on both cheeks. In Japan, bowing is the standard greeting. In India, it is common to show respect to elders by touching their feet. You may engage in one of these performances daily without necessarily thinking of it as a performance. Regardless, participating in these social customs makes you a performer.

Performance theorist Richard Schechner emphasizes that performance exists on a wide continuum ranging from everyday actions and rituals to theater and ceremonial events. According to Schechner (2006), the distinction between "acting" and "being" is not always clear-cut. He suggests that all performances are "restored behaviors," meaning that we often enact patterns of behavior that are culturally learned and repeated. These behaviors can be authentic, stylized, or even symbolic, depending on the context.

Similarly, Victor Turner’s theory of Social Drama and Cultural Performance provides insight into how performances function within societies to manage conflict, affirm cultural values, and express identity. Turner (1982) outlines how real-life conflicts unfold in a dramatic structure. Conflicts move through breach, crisis, action, and reintegration or schism. This highlights how ritual and symbolic performance help communities navigate disruption. These ideas help us understand how everyday and theatrical performances alike serve as mechanisms for expressing and resolving social tensions.

Exercise 1.2.3

Activity 3: Performance Scenario Swap

Type: Creative Thinking + Application
Objective: Understand how context changes the meaning of performance.

Instructions:

1. Choose a familiar performance setting (e.g., a classroom).
2. Choose a contrasting setting (e.g., a concert, family dinner, job interview).
3. Imagine transferring your classroom behaviors into that new setting.
4. Write a short reflection or comic strip showing:
    - What actions feel strange or out of place?
    - How does the audience's reaction change?
    - What does this reveal about how performance is shaped by context?

Theatrical Performances

Even though you perform regularly in everyday life, those same performances might feel very different in a different setting. For example, you might not consciously think about performing as a student in a classroom, but you might feel anxious performing as a student in a theater production. Even if the physical actions are identical—raising your hand, speaking, listening to the teacher—the context in which they occur alters their meaning.

In a classroom setting, your peers and teacher serve as both audience members and active participants. They are also performing their roles in real life, and you are authentically performing as a student within that space. In contrast, within a traditional Western theater setting, the audience consists of outside observers who are not active participants in the performance. They understand that the actors are not in a real classroom. Although the actors may replicate everyday performances common in the culture, they do so within a constructed reality, separate from the context where such performances typically occur.

In theater, actors aim to make this constructed reality feel as authentic as possible for an external audience. They strive to convince the audience that they are the character they are portraying. To achieve this, actors often imitate or mimic the behavior of the person they are trying to represent. This performance technique is called mimesis, a concept rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, particularly in the work of Aristotle, who described it as the imitation of action in drama (Aristotle, trans. 1996). Mimesis occurs when actors replicate real-life behaviors in their performance, often drawing from observed social cues and emotional expressions to create believable characters (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Actors may also use costume and makeup choices to further immerse themselves in the role, reinforcing the illusion of reality within the fictional world of the play.

This raises an important question: What kind of performance techniques are used in oral interpretation? Are they more closely aligned with everyday performances or theatrical performances?

Oral interpretation exists in a unique space between the two. Like everyday performances, it draws on natural vocal expression, body language, and emotional authenticity. However, similar to theatrical performance, it involves deliberate choices in voice, gesture, and pacing to engage an audience and bring a text to life. Performers are not playing fully developed characters in a fictional world, as actors do in a play, but they are also not simply reading aloud.

Instead, oral interpretation blends the spontaneity and relatability of everyday interaction with the intentionality and structure of theatrical performance. This hybrid form allows the performer to both *inhabit* and *present* the text, making it accessible, meaningful, and impactful for an audience.

In the next section, we will explore the history of oral interpretation, its cultural variations, and how we will approach performing oral interpretations of literature in this class.

Exercise 1.2.4

Activity 4: Think-Pair-Share – Performance in Daily Life

Type: Reflective + Discussion
Objective: Identify examples of everyday performance and reflect on their meaning.

Instructions:

1. Think: On your own, list at least three social situations in your life where you perform a role (e.g., student, friend, employee).
2. Pair: With a partner, share one of your examples. Discuss:
   - What makes this situation a “performance”?
   - What behaviors or actions are expected in that role?
3. Share: With the class or in small groups, discuss how these performances vary across different contexts (e.g., home vs. school).

Extension: Compare your behaviors across two different settings. How do your “costume,” “stage,” and “audience” change?

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1.3: What is Oral Interpretation of Literature?

Overview

Oral interpretation has been practiced by cultures around the world for centuries. In *A History of Oral Interpretation* (1970), Eugene and Margaret Bahn trace this tradition through Western history, from classical Greece to the 20th century. But oral interpretation is global: Japan's *Kamishibai*, China's *Pingshu*, West African *griots*, Middle Eastern *Hakawati*, Indigenous oral traditions, and India's *Katha* and *Kathakalakshepam* all reflect how people use storytelling to share knowledge, preserve history, and express cultural values.

Oral interpretation is a universal human practice. It helps communities understand their world, connect across generations, and reflect on their beliefs and identities.

In this course, we also explore oral interpretation through the lens of forensics (not crime scene investigation), but the art of argumentative and performative speech. In the U.S., thousands of students participate in speech and debate tournaments that include events like Persuasive Speaking, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, and oral interpretation categories such as Poetry, Prose, and Dramatic Interpretation.

While this class borrows some techniques from competitive speech forensics, the focus is not on competition. Instead, you'll explore how your performances create meaning for both you and your audience.



Figure 1.3.1: Two Yoruba storytellers on stage performing. (CC BY 4.0; Yemi festus - Yoruba Storytelling 2025)

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the global and historical roots of oral interpretation.
2. Recognize oral interpretation as a universal human tradition.
3. Examine the cultural significance of storytelling traditions.
4. Differentiate between forensic science and forensic speech.

The History of Oral Interpretation of Literature

In their 1970 book *A History of Oral Interpretation*, Eugene Bahn and Margaret Bahn provide an overview of how different cultures have historically engaged in the oral interpretation of literature. They examine this tradition in classical Greece, ancient Rome, the

medieval period, the Renaissance, the 17th century, the 18th century, the 19th century, and the 20th century. Although their book primarily focuses on Western cultures, the reality is that people around the world have practiced oral interpretation throughout history.

In Japan, Kamishibai is a form of picture-card storytelling that dates back to the twelfth century, originally used in temples to explain Buddhist deities and temple histories. In China, people engaged in Pingshu (also known as Pinghua), a traditional form of storytelling without music. Popular on radio and in teahouses, it draws from history, literature, and folklore. In West Africa, griots are professional oral historians, storytellers, poets, and musicians. In the Middle East, the Hakawati, or traditional storyteller, captivates audiences with tales, myths, and moral lessons. Indigenous peoples around the world perform creation stories, trickster tales, folktales, and legends. In India, Katha are religious storytelling performances in which professional storytellers recite and interpret Hindu scriptures such as the Puranas and the Ramayana. Kathakalakshepam is a related form that blends storytelling with music, dance, and digressions, often centered on mythological themes.

Oral interpretation is a fundamental part of the human experience across time and cultures. It has been a vital way for humans make sense of the world and pass down knowledge. Through oral interpretation, communities express, reinforce, and sometimes challenge their cultural norms and values.

Forensics, Speech and Debate

When you hear the word “forensics,” what comes to mind? Many people in the United States associate forensics with crime scenes. In true crime documentaries, we often see forensic scientists analyzing DNA through forensic testing. While that is one definition of forensics, it is not the one we will use in this textbook.

According to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (2025), forensic is the art or study of argumentative discourse. In the United States, thousands of middle school, high school, and college students participate in forensic tournaments each year. Many schools have competitive forensic teams that travel to various locations to compete. These tournaments include categories such as Persuasive Speaking, Impromptu Speaking, Informative Speaking, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, Parliamentary Debate, and many other divisions. Forensic tournaments also feature events focused on oral interpretation. Some of these categories include Prose Interpretation, Poetry Interpretation, Dramatic Interpretation, Duo Interpretation, Program Oral Interpretation, and Storytelling.

Although the rules may vary slightly between tournaments, they generally follow similar guidelines. Oral interpretation performances are typically 10 minutes long, with a 30-second grace period. Each performance also includes a brief introduction in which the speaker provides an overview of the author(s) and title(s) of the work they will present. A judge typically evaluates the performance based on message delivery, vocal and physical interpretation, character development, and overall impact.

It is important to note that while we will apply some of the techniques used in forensic tournaments, your teacher will not be judging you as if you were competing against your classmates. The goal of this class is not simply to create polished performances, but to explore the realities your performances create and highlight for both you and your audience.

Exercise 1.3.1

Activity 1: Cultural Storytelling Showcase

Objective: Understand how oral interpretation appears across different world cultures.

Instructions:

1. Choose one cultural storytelling tradition from the reading (e.g., Kamishibai, Pingshu, Griots, Hakawati, Katha, etc.).
2. Conduct brief research (1–2 sources) to learn more about the style, purpose, and typical themes of this tradition.
3. In small groups or as individuals, prepare a 2-minute performance *inspired by* that tradition. You may:
    - Retell a myth or folktale using the traditional format.
    - Create a modern story using the traditional style.
4. After performing, write a short reflection (5–7 sentences) on what the tradition reveals about that culture’s values and way of communicating.

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1.4: References

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2: ETHICS OF PERFORMANCE

Overview

This chapter delves into Dwight Conquergood's (1985) influential framework presented in *Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance*. This framework encourages performers to prioritize dialogical performance—an open, ongoing exchange of voices and perspectives. Conquergood suggests that performance, when done ethically, can be a powerful space for mutual understanding and collaboration across cultural boundaries. However, even well-meaning artists can unintentionally cause harm if they fail to critically examine their intentions, methods, and the power dynamics at play.

To help performers navigate these challenges, Conquergood identifies four common ethical pitfalls: the *Custodian's Rip-Off*, where artists appropriate cultural materials for personal gain without understanding or honoring their origins; the *Enthusiast's Infatuation*, in which performers romanticize or oversimplify a culture they admire without engaging deeply or responsibly; the *Curator's Exhibitionism*, where cultures are presented from an outsider's perspective without consent, reducing rich traditions to aesthetic displays; and the *Skeptic's Cop-Out*, where fear of doing harm leads to total disengagement, cutting off opportunities for growth, learning, and respectful collaboration.

By understanding and reflecting on these four stances, students and performers can better recognize the ethical complexities of representing cultures not their own. Ultimately, this section encourages thoughtful, informed, and dialogical approaches to performance that honor the voices and experiences of others.

2.1: Dialogical Performance

2.2: The Custodian's Rip-Off

2.3: The Enthusiast's Infatuation

2.4: The Curator's Exhibitionism

2.5: The Skeptic's Cop-Out

2.6: References

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2.1: Dialogical Performance

Overview

This chapter introduces the ethical challenges performers face when engaging with cultures different from their own. It emphasizes the importance of creating performances that foster respectful dialogue rather than misrepresentation or appropriation. Using Dwight Conquergood's (1985) framework, the chapter outlines four common ethical pitfalls and presents dialogical performance as a guiding approach for navigating cross-cultural storytelling with care, responsibility, and openness.



Figure 2.1.1: It is difficult to find balance while practicing dialogical performance. (CC BY 2.0; kevint3141 - Wonderland Walker 2)

Learning Objectives

1. Recognize the ethical responsibilities involved in performing stories from cultures other than your own, including the risks of misrepresentation, appropriation, and objectification.
2. Explore Dwight Conquergood's framework of ethical performance, including the concept of Dialogical Performance and the four common pitfalls: The Custodian's Rip-Off, The Enthusiast's Infatuation, The Curator's Exhibitionism, and The Skeptic's Cop-Out.

Ethics of Performance

As discussed in the previous chapter, various cultures all over the world have engaged in oral interpretation performances throughout history. As you begin creating your own performances, especially those that draw from cultures different from your own, it's essential to consider the ethical responsibilities that come with that creative process. Even with the best intentions, performers can unintentionally misrepresent, objectify, or appropriate elements of another culture. Understandably, this can lead to hesitation or fear. These feelings are rooted in compassion and a desire to do no harm.

However, while this apprehension is valid, it can also be limiting. Avoiding cross-cultural performance altogether may feel like the safest option, but doing so can shut down opportunities for meaningful connection, shared understanding, and artistic growth. Rather than retreating from the challenge, performers must instead commit to learning how to engage ethically by using performance as a space for dialogue rather than dominance. Through thoughtful, responsible practices, artists can create performances that not only respect cultural boundaries but also foster mutual understanding and collaboration.

To navigate these complexities, we turn to Dwight Conquergood's (1985) influential framework from *Performing as a Moral Act:*

Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance. In his work, Conquergood argues for a model of *Dialogical Performance*, a mode of performance that brings together diverse voices, worldviews, and belief systems in an open, ongoing exchange. He writes, “This performative stance struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another… It is the kind of performance that resists conclusions, it is intensely committed to keeping the dialogue between performer and text open and ongoing” (p. 9).

To help performers recognize and avoid ethical missteps, Conquergood outlines four common pitfalls people may encounter while performing cultures that are not their own: The Custodian’s Rip-Off, The Enthusiast’s Infatuation, The Curator’s Exhibitionism, and The Skeptic’s Cop-Out. Each represents a different way that ethical intentions can go awry, often despite a performer’s best efforts. In the sections that follow, we will examine what they look like in practice, why they’re problematic, and how performers can move toward more ethical, dialogical approaches.

After you critically engage with these concepts, you will be better equipped to create performances that honor the complexity of others’ experiences while fostering deeper, more respectful intercultural dialogue.

Exercise 2.1.1

Activity 1: Reflective Writing Prompt — Navigating Ethical Hesitation

Objective: To reflect on personal feelings around performing material from other cultures.

Instructions:
In a one-page journal entry, respond to the following prompts:

- If you were to include a story, character, or element from a different culture in your creative work, what fears or ethical concerns come up for you?
- How might you move from fear to curiosity, and from hesitation to ethical engagement?

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2.2: The Custodian's Rip-Off

Overview

This section explores the concept of the Custodian's Rip-Off and draws on Conquergood's (1985) critique that performers must approach cultural expressions with respect and responsibility, avoiding appropriation or exploitation. Ultimately, it calls for performance choices that reflect ethical awareness, humility, and cultural sensitivity.



Figure 2.2.1: Earning your first pair of pointe shoes is a rite of passage for ballet dancers. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Lambtron - Pointe Shoe Wear)

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the concept of the Custodian's Rip-Off.
2. Analyze the ethical responsibilities of performers
3. Develop a critical framework for performance selection

What is The Custodian's Rip-Off?

I grew up my whole life as a dancer. I started dancing at the age of two, and after ten years of consistent training, I finally earned my first pair of pointe shoes. Pointe shoes are not something a dancer randomly decides to buy one day. They are something that dancers earn after hours of tireless training. In ballet, they are a sign of discipline, maturity, and dedication to the art form.

I spent hours each day building the necessary muscles to safely rise onto the box of my pointe shoes. In the ballet world, the tradition of earning your very first pair of pointe shoes is a pivotal moment in every dancer's life. People outside of ballet culture might not recognize the effort, time, and care that go into this tradition.

There are times when celebrities advertise certain products, and although they have no ballet training, they are seen awkwardly attempting to rise on pointe shoes. This may seem like a harmless performance, but to ballet dancers, it de-legitimizes the tradition of earning your pointe shoes. Beyond that, the celebrity and the company selling the product directly monetize the tradition.

This is an example of a performer engaging in the Custodian's Rip-Off. Conquergood (1985) states, "Potential performers of ethnographic materials should not enter the field with the overriding motive of 'finding some good performance material'" (p. 6). The Custodian's Rip-Off happens when a performer steals or mishandles a cultural performance for personal gain, without

honoring the people or the tradition it came from. While choosing which text to perform, it is important to consider if your performance decisions are being fueled by selfish aspirations. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are you stealing traditions from a different culture and using them for your own benefit?
- Will the performance make you look good while simultaneously hurting a specific group of people?
- Are you treating the culture as raw material for your own artistic goals?
- Is there little to no regard for the original context, meaning, or purpose of the performance tradition?
- Can the performance result in misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, or exploitation?
- Will you monetize or gain praise from traditions that are sacred or significant to a specific group?

These are questions for you to consider before creating a performance.

Exercise 2.2.1

Activity 1: Performance Proposal Check

Objective: Practice ethical decision-making in performance planning.

Instructions:
Before your next performance assignment, complete the following checklist and attach it to your proposal:

- What is the cultural origin of the piece?
- What significance does it hold within its community?
- Do you have a personal connection to this culture or story?
- Could your performance unintentionally cause harm or offense?
- What steps are you taking to ensure respectful engagement?

Discuss your responses with a peer or instructor before finalizing your performance plan.

Many performers unintentionally engage in the Custodian's Rip-Off within their performances. They might perform a text that is traditionally only performed by someone who holds a specific rank in the culture. They might also perform traditional text that are only reserved for specific events. For example, if you were to perform a text that is commonly only performed at a funeral by the highest ranking elders of the culture, it would be an example of the Custodian's Rip-Off.

Understanding the Custodian's Rip-Off challenges us to approach performance with greater respect, responsibility, and cultural awareness. As performers, we must recognize that not all stories are ours to tell, and not all traditions are ours to represent. It is essential for performers to honor the context, history, and meaning behind a performance practice. This helps performers avoid causing harm to the communities whose cultural expressions we might be borrowing from. As you move forward in this course, let your performance choices reflect not only creativity, but also integrity, humility, and a commitment to ethical engagement.

Exercise 2.2.2

Activity 2: Case Study Analysis – Ethical or Exploitative?

Objective: Analyze real-world examples through the lens of the Custodial Rip-Off.

Instructions:
In small groups, review two media examples (assigned or chosen with instructor approval) that depict cultural practices—such as a commercial, film scene, or music video.

- Identify whether the example demonstrates respectful representation or a Custodial Rip-Off.
- Use Conquergood's questions and quote to guide your analysis.
- Present your findings in class or write a 1-page group response.

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2.3: The Enthusiast's Infatuation

Overview

This section explores a related but subtler ethical dilemma known as the Enthusiast's Infatuation, which involves well-meaning performers who, driven by fascination, engage with cultural materials in a superficial and inaccurate way. For example, a non-Japanese performer inspired by *Memoirs of a Geisha* might imitate Geisha traditions without fully understanding their cultural significance, thereby reducing a complex and meaningful practice to mere aesthetics. This approach risks misrepresentation, cultural flattening, and exoticization by relying on stereotypes rather than authentic knowledge. To avoid these pitfalls, ethical performance demands humility, thorough research, and a deep respect for the culture's context and voices. Only by honoring the true meaning behind cultural traditions can performers engage responsibly and avoid causing harm.



Figure 2.3.1: Gotipua performance (a traditional dance from Odisha, India). (CC BY-SA 4.0; TAPAS KUMAR HALDER - Gotipua Performance)

Learning Objectives

1. Understand the concept of the Enthusiast's Infatuation.
2. Recognize the risks of misrepresentation, cultural flattening, and exoticization.

What is The Enthusiast's Infatuation?

As we previously discussed, the Custodial's Rip-Off refers to a practice in which individuals outside a culture appropriate its stories, traditions, or performance practices without proper understanding, respect, or consent. Performers engage in this practice for personal gain, recognition, or entertainment. This act not only diminishes the cultural significance of the material but can also cause real harm to the communities from which it originates.

While this approach is overtly exploitative, Conquergood (1985) also warns against a more subtle but equally problematic stance: The Enthusiast's Infatuation. This occurs when well-meaning performers, driven by fascination or admiration, attempt to engage with cultural materials without fully appreciating their context or distinctiveness. As Conquergood explains, this "quick-fix" approach leads performers to gloss over cultural differences with sweeping generalizations, often under the assumption that "all people are really just alike." This belief ultimately trivializes and flattens cultural complexity (p. 6).

For instance, consider a non-Japanese performer who becomes captivated by Geisha culture after watching *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Motivated by admiration and a romanticized view of the tradition, the performer begins to imitate Geisha mannerisms in theatrical

or cosplay contexts. The choose to wear a kimono, mimic gestures, and attempt to replicate an aesthetic of elegance. However, these performances are carried out without a grounded understanding of the cultural, historical, and social significance of Geisha traditions. As a result, the portrayal is not only superficial but often inaccurate, reducing a complex and deeply rooted cultural role to a visual spectacle.

Exercise 2.3.1

Activity 1: Identifying Enthusiast's Infatuation

Instructions:
Read the following brief descriptions of performances or cultural engagements. Identify which examples illustrate Enthusiast's Infatuation and explain why.

Examples:

1. A dancer practices traditional Flamenco moves after attending an in-depth workshop taught by Spanish Flamenco masters.
2. A student watches a popular film about Native American culture and then performs a tribal dance without learning about its cultural or spiritual significance.
3. A theater group collaborates with a local Indigenous community to create a play based on traditional stories, involving community members as consultants.

Discussion:
What distinguishes respectful cultural engagement from Enthusiast's Infatuation? How does context and understanding affect the ethical considerations?

Within the Enthusiast's Infatuation, the intent may be appreciation, but the outcome often results in misrepresentation, cultural flattening, and exoticization. The performer strips the tradition of its depth and meaning by relying on media portrayals or stereotypes rather than engaging with authentic sources or community voices. As Conquergood cautions, even well-meaning fascination can become harmful when it turns lived cultural practices into fantasy or aesthetic performance, ignoring the very people and histories behind them. Ethical performance, therefore, demands not only admiration, but also humility, research, and a commitment to honoring cultural context and agency.

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2.4: The Curator's Exhibitionism

Overview

The Curator's Exhibitionism, the third quadrant in Conquergood's (1985) ethical framework, critiques the stance of performers or scholars who speak *about* a culture without engaging *with* its members. This approach treats cultural practices as objects for display, often lacking consent, collaboration, or accountability to the communities represented. While often masked as neutral or academic, this stance reinforces hierarchical and colonial dynamics by privileging external authority over lived experience, emphasizing the need for ethical engagement rooted in humility, dialogue, and respect.



Figure 2.4.1: Archeological artifacts found in Biala. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Silar - 02023 0136 Archaeological Artifacts Found in Biała)

Learning Objectives

1. Analyze the ethical implications of The Curator's Exhibitionism by identifying how authority without collaboration can result in cultural objectification and misrepresentation.
2. Evaluate real-world scenarios in which individuals or institutions speak about a culture without engaging with its members, and assess the power dynamics and potential harms involved.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of ethical cultural representation by proposing strategies for collaboration, reciprocity, and respectful engagement with communities being portrayed or studied.

What is The Curator's Exhibitionism?

By this point, we have examined two of the four ethical stances outlined in Conquergood's (1985) influential essay, *Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance*. The Custodian's Rip-Off involves the appropriation of cultural elements for personal gain, often stripping them of their original context and significance. The Enthusiast's Infatuation, though typically well-intentioned, leads to the romanticization and misrepresentation of cultures through stereotypes and superficial portrayals. Conquergood then introduces a third problematic stance: The Curator's Exhibitionism. This quadrant highlights the ethical concerns that arise when individuals position themselves as objective authorities who display or interpret another culture without direct participation, collaboration, or accountability to the people whose stories they present.

Within The Curator's Exhibitionism, the performer adopts the role of an external observer who speaks *about* a culture rather than *with* or *from within* it. This stance positions the performer as a detached authority, making assumptions or interpretations without possessing a full or nuanced understanding of the cultural context. In doing so, cultural practices and people are often presented

as artifacts for display, observation, or consumption rather than as dynamic, lived experiences. This objectifying approach typically lacks meaningful collaboration, consent, or reciprocity with members of the represented community. As a result, the performer reinforces hierarchical dynamics, often rooted in colonial or ethnocentric frameworks, by assuming the power to define and explain cultures that are not their own.

Imagine a male professor giving a lecture on feminist theory to a room that includes women scholars and students. The women attending the lecture have lived experiences that directly inform the subject. As the professor speaks, he positions himself as the sole authority on the topic instead of facilitating dialogue or referencing the work of women theorists with care. He explains basic feminist concepts to women as if they were unfamiliar or incapable of understanding them, often interrupting or disregarding their contributions.

This behavior reflects The Curator's Exhibitionism because the man is speaking *about* women's experiences without engaging *with* those who live them. He objectifies the topic of feminism as something to be displayed and interpreted through his lens, rather than recognizing and valuing the voices and expertise of those within the culture or movement. The performance becomes a form of intellectual display rather than an ethical, collaborative engagement.

Exercise 2.4.1

Activity 1: Case Study Analysis – Who Gets to Speak?

Objective: Analyze real-world scenarios for ethical concerns related to The Curator's Exhibitionism.

Instructions:
Read the following brief case studies and, in small groups, discuss the following questions for each:

1. Who is doing the "speaking" or representing?
2. Whose voices are centered, and whose are left out?
3. Does this example demonstrate Curator's Exhibitionism? Why or why not?
4. What changes would create a more ethical, collaborative engagement?

Example Case Study Topics:

- A museum exhibit on Indigenous culture curated without consultation with Indigenous communities.
- A travel influencer posting videos interpreting spiritual rituals from a foreign country.
- A non-disabled speaker giving a keynote on disability rights to an audience of disabled activists.

This third quadrant serves as a powerful reminder that even scholarly or seemingly objective approaches to cultural performance can perpetuate harm when they lack collaboration, humility, and accountability. The Curator's Exhibitionism highlights the ethical pitfalls of positioning oneself as an expert on others' lived experiences without their involvement or consent. As we continue our exploration of performance as a moral act, it becomes increasingly clear that ethical engagement requires more than good intentions or academic authority. It demands active listening, reciprocal dialogue, and a deep respect for the voices, agency, and knowledge of the communities being represented.

Exercise 2.4.2

Activity 2: Rewrite the Narrative

Objective: Practice shifting from exhibitionism to ethical representation.

Instructions:
Choose a paragraph or scene from a fictional or real account where an outsider interprets another culture without collaboration (you may also use the male professor example provided in the reading).
Then, rewrite the scene so that it reflects:

- Dialogue or collaboration with cultural insiders
- Acknowledgment of limitations or outsider status
- Respect for cultural context and agency

Reflective Question (to follow writing):
What did you change, and why? How did those changes alter the power dynamics?

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2.5: The Skeptic's Cop-Out

Overview

The Skeptic's Cop-Out, the final quadrant in Conquergood's (1985) ethical framework, refers to the decision to disengage from cross-cultural performance altogether out of fear of causing harm. While this stance may stem from compassion or a desire to be respectful, it can ultimately limit opportunities for meaningful dialogue, collaboration, and growth. By avoiding participation, performers may miss the chance to build bridges, share important stories, and contribute to ethical and relational cultural exchange.



Figure 2.5.1: A restaurant used barricade tape to block assess to tables and seats during the Coronavirus global pandemic. (CC BY 2.0; Ivan Radic - Barricade tape in a restaurant preventing customers from using seats during the Coronavirus global pandemic)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and explain Conquergood's concept of *The Skeptic's Cop-Out* and how it functions as an ethical dilemma in performance practice.
2. Evaluate the potential consequences of disengaging from cross-cultural performance due to fear of causing harm, including missed opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and ethical representation.
3. Reflect on personal attitudes and assumptions that may lead to avoidance and develop strategies for engaging ethically and respectfully with cultures beyond one's own through performance.

What is the Skeptic's Cop-Out?

By now, after learning about the first three ethical dilemmas performers can face, you might be feeling a little hesitant. Maybe you're thinking, "*What if I mess up? What if I accidentally misrepresent someone's culture?*" That kind of apprehension is completely valid. It often comes from a place of care and a desire to do the right thing, but if we're not careful, that fear can hold us back from engaging in the kind of meaningful, cross-cultural dialogue that performance makes possible.

One natural reaction might be to play it safe and stick strictly to creating performances based only on your own cultural background. That way, there's no risk of appropriating or misrepresenting someone else's experience, right? While that might seem like the most respectful route, it can also become limiting. For instance, if an artist refuses to collaborate with refugee communities for fear of "getting it wrong," they may miss the chance to help elevate important stories through shared performance. Or if a student avoids incorporating any material from other cultures in their project, they might end up reinforcing

cultural silos rather than building bridges.

This kind of avoidance is what Conquergood (1985) calls *The Skeptic's Cop-Out*, the fourth and final quadrant in his framework from *Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance*. The Skeptic's Cop-Out is when someone chooses not to engage with cultures beyond their own at all. Performers make this choice in an effort to avoid doing harm, but in taking themselves out of the conversation entirely, they also miss out on the chance to listen, learn, and contribute in ethical, respectful ways.

Exercise 2.5.1

Activity 1: Self-Reflection Journal – Fear vs. Opportunity

Objective: Reflect on your own apprehensions and explore the ethical potential of engaging across cultures.

Instructions:
In a short journal entry (1–2 pages), respond to the following prompts:

- Have you ever hesitated to engage with a culture that isn't your own for fear of "getting it wrong"? Describe the situation.
- What were you afraid might happen, and why?
- How might that fear have prevented a meaningful opportunity for learning, connection, or collaboration?
- How can you balance ethical sensitivity with a willingness to engage?

Think of it like someone declining to attend a cultural celebration because they're afraid of offending anyone. Their intent might be good, but the result is a missed opportunity for connection, mutual understanding, and growth. In short, The Skeptic's Cop-Out avoids doing harm by avoiding engagement altogether. In doing so, it also gives up the chance to do good through thoughtful, collaborative, and dialogical performance.

Exercise 2.5.2

Activity 2: Case Study Discussion – To Engage or Not to Engage?

Objective: Analyze a hypothetical scenario using Conquergood's ethical quadrants, focusing on The Skeptic's Cop-Out.

Instructions:
Read the following scenario and discuss in small groups:

A student is assigned to create a performance on global human rights issues. They consider focusing on women's education in Afghanistan but decide against it, saying, "I don't want to speak for people I don't represent. I'll just do a project about my own high school experience instead."

Discussion Questions:

- What are the student's intentions, and how do they reflect The Skeptic's Cop-Out?
- What opportunities for ethical collaboration might be missed here?
- How could the student approach this topic ethically without appropriating or speaking over others?
- What does Conquergood mean by "ethical, relational performance" in this context?

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2.6: References

Conquergood, D. (1985). Performing as a moral act: Ethical dimensions of the ethnography of performance. *Literature in Performance*, *5*(2), 1.

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3: WHAT IS LITERATURE?

Overview

Oral interpretation involves choosing and performing literature in ways that highlight its meaning, emotion, and relevance. Performers analyze texts more effectively when they understand different genres. Strong performance pieces balance universal themes with originality and significance. Rather than imitating familiar works, performers should bring fresh perspectives. The goal is to select meaningful literature and present it in a way that offers audiences a unique and engaging experience.

3.1: Genres of Literature to Perform

3.2: Selecting Literature

3.3: References

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3.1: Genres of Literature to Perform

Overview

This section explains how literature is categorized by genre such as fiction or non-fiction, and poetry, prose, or drama, and by forms like novels, essays, or short stories. It highlights the importance of understanding these genres because each requires a different approach when preparing for oral interpretation or audience engagement. Recognizing a work's genre helps performers interpret meaning, develop characters, and make informed performance choices that resonate with their audience. Focusing on the primary genres of poetry, prose, and drama, this overview sets the stage for exploring the unique demands and techniques involved in performing each type of literature.



Figure 3.1.1: There are various genres of literature you can choose from while creating oral interpretation performances. (CC0 1.0; Poemusa - Vanessa Marín)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and classify literature according to major generals and forms.
2. Understand the importance of recognizing a literary work's genre.
3. Explain how genre awareness enhances both performance and audience engagement.

Genres

Categorically, literature can be classified according to whether it is fiction or non-fiction.

Below is an overview of the various forms of literature that people commonly used to create oral interpretation performances:

- Fiction - A literary genre that consists of imagined or invented stories rather than factual accounts; it includes narratives created from the author's imagination.
  - Poetry - A form of writing that uses rhythm, sound, imagery, and condensed language to evoke emotion, convey ideas, or create aesthetic experiences; often structured in lines and stanzas.
  - Prose - Ordinary written or spoken language that follows natural speech patterns rather than metrical structure; most novels, essays, and short stories are written in prose.
  - Drama - A genre of literature intended for performance on a stage or screen, featuring characters in action through dialogue and conflict.

    - Novel - A long work of fiction, typically written in prose, that develops characters, plots, and themes in extended and complex ways.
    - Short Story - A brief fictional narrative, usually focused on a single event, character, or theme, meant to be read in one sitting.
    - Fairy Tale / Fable / Folklore **-** Traditional stories passed through generations, often involving magic, morality, or cultural lessons.
- Non-fiction - Writing based on real events, people, and factual information. Its purpose is to inform, explain, describe, or persuade using truth-based content rather than imagined stories.
    - Essay - A short work of non-fiction that presents the author's ideas, reflections, or arguments about a specific topic. Essays may be analytical, persuasive, personal, or descriptive.
    - Oral Histories - Recorded or transcribed accounts of people's personal experiences and memories, collected through interviews. Oral histories preserve firsthand perspectives on historical events, cultural practices, or community life.
    - Non-fiction Short Story - A brief narrative based on real events or personal experiences, told using the techniques of storytelling (such as character, setting, and plot) while remaining factually accurate.
    - Non-fiction Drama - A dramatic work (intended for performance) based on real events, people, or historical circumstances. It uses dialogue and staged action to portray factual stories.
    - Biography - A detailed, factual narrative of a person's life written by someone else. It typically explores the person's experiences, contributions, and significance.
    - Memoir - A type of non-fiction in which an author writes about specific personal experiences or periods of their life, emphasizing memory, emotion, and personal perspective rather than a full life story.

When performing literature from different genres, there is different preparatory "work" that must go into the analysis of the literature. As you know, picking up a book of fiction is different than opening a book of nonfiction essays. When we do so, there is an ever-so-slight, yet important and different preparation. Think about it. Although both nonfiction and fiction share similar writing tropes, how would you feel if someone told you that the nonfiction book you are reading—the one that brought you to tears—is not nonfiction, but fiction? Most people would become upset, feeling as though they had been duped. To put it another way, think about how differently you prepare to engage as an audience member at a live performance depending on its genre. How do you set yourself up differently for a stand-up comic as opposed to an opera? Not only are the effects of the performance different, but the way we emotionally prepare ourselves to receive them is also different.

An oral interpretation performer should understand to what genre a work belongs before performing it. That will help the performer determine how to best gauge its meaning, understand its characters, and make performance choices. Literature studies courses often describe several genres, however for the sake of oral interpretation, we will focus on three primary ones: poetry, prose, and drama.

In conclusion, performers and audiences must recognize a literary work's genre because it shapes how they approach, understand, and experience the material. Oral interpreters can make informed choices that honor the text's intent and engage their audience effectively by appreciating the unique qualities of poetry, prose, and drama. This awareness strengthens the performance and deepens the connection between the literature and its listeners. In the next few chapters, we will explore the differences between performing poetry, prose, and drama.

Exercise 3.1.1

Activity 1: Genre Classification Exercise

Objective:

Identify and classify literary works according to genre (fiction/non-fiction, poetry, prose, drama) and form (novel, essay, short story) by analyzing key textual features.

Activity:
The instructor will provide you with a variety of different works. Classify each excerpt by genre and form, and justify your choices based on characteristics such as language, structure, and content.

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3.2: Selecting Literature

Overview

Choosing literature for oral interpretation involves much more than picking a piece you enjoy. It's about selecting a text that resonates with both you and your audience. A strong piece for performance should be personally meaningful, suitable for oral delivery, and appropriate for the intended audience and occasion. According to Gura and Lee's (2004) framework, quality literature should meet three essential criteria: universality (themes that are widely relatable), individuality (unique or fresh in presentation), and significance (the power to provoke thought and emotional connection). When these qualities are present, a piece of literature becomes more than just words. It becomes an engaging and impactful performance.



Figure 3.2.1: Old books with warped pages. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Tom Murphy VII - Old book bindings)

Learning Objectives

- Identify and apply the three literary selection criteria—universality, individuality, and significance—when evaluating texts for oral interpretation.
- Analyze various types of literature (e.g., poems, song lyrics, letters, monologues) for their suitability in oral performance, considering audience, clarity, structure, and emotional impact.
- Select and justify a literary piece for performance, demonstrating a personal connection to the text and an understanding of how it aligns with the needs and expectations of a specific audience and occasion.

Selecting Literature to Perform

The label of "literature" can be placed on many different forms of the written word. While the term often conjures vision of Shakespearian plays or Homer's *Odyssey*, those works are only examples of more specific categories of literature. For the purposes of oral interpretation, one might perform works such as those but may also choose to perform song lyrics, letters written by soldiers in World War II, or even text message exchanges between lovers. So, with so many possibilities, how does one go about choosing literature that would be good for performance?

When selecting a piece for oral interpretation, it's essential to begin with personal connection and interest. Choose a text that you genuinely enjoy and feel confident interpreting. Your passion for the material will naturally come through in your performance and help you form a meaningful connection with the audience.

Next, consider the suitability of the text for oral performance. Ask yourself whether the audience will be able to connect with the material in just one hearing. Look for clear language that creates vivid imagery. Texts with dialogue are especially useful, as they allow for expressive reading and character portrayal. Additionally, avoid works with overly complex sentence structures that may hinder comprehension during performance.

Audience and occasion are also key factors. The content and tone of your chosen piece should align with the age, interests, and emotional state of your specific audience. Likewise, consider the setting and purpose of the performance—what might feel appropriate and impactful in one context could be out of place in another.

In terms of literary merit and meaning, opt for texts that carry lasting value and speak to universal human experiences. A strong, clear theme will help the audience connect with the piece. Stories that include some form of conflict or tension often create more engaging interpretations.

Finally, don't overlook practical considerations. If you choose a short passage, make sure it can stand alone and still represent the broader work effectively. For longer texts, you may need to edit or cut them strategically—maintaining the narrative flow and core message. Also, think about whether you can convincingly portray multiple characters if the piece calls for it.

In summary, a strong text for oral interpretation should be meaningful, exciting, and suitable for the audience and occasion. It should provide opportunities for expressive vocal and physical delivery, while being clear and accessible in both content and structure. Not all literature is a good fit for oral performance. Texts that make the best fit are those are of literary merit and that the criteria to determine that merit are as follows (Gura and Lee 2004).

Universality

If a value or idea is "universal," this means that it is tangible to a wide audience. For a work of literature to have universality, it must have messages or themes to which many people can relate.

As a performer considers a piece of literature for performance, they should think about their audience and the sorts of topics that can be significant to them. For example, I might really love the poem, *Richard Cory*, by Edwin Arlington Robinson. However, this poem deals with the theme of suicide, which might not make it a good choice if I was performing for a younger audience or perhaps at a happy, celebratory event. However, perhaps Waddy Piper's children's book, *The Little Engine That Could*, about a little train engine who repeats the mantra, "I think I can, I think I can" to conquer a trek over a tall mountain could inspire a group of college students to continue their education. When evaluating literature for performance, look for themes you know you can connect to your audience.

Individuality

While you want to find universal themes for your audience so they can relate to the literature, you also want to ensure you aren't simply selecting works that might be overworked or overdone. Audiences love relating to pieces, but they also appreciate novelty. The literature you choose to perform should be unique in some way. This can be through language/style, or perhaps through the characters in the piece, or maybe in the way the author tells a story, etc.

This is not to say that performers should steer clear of classic or popular literature known by many. However, if you do choose to perform a work with which your audience is very familiar, ensure that you infuse it with uniqueness that can make it appeal to your audience. If you choose to perform a scene from a recent popular movie, for example, do not feel you have to imitate the characters as they appeared in the film. This approach, unless you are a gifted impressionist, can be disconcerting to an audience. Analyze the literature, discover what it speaks to you, think about the attitude and feelings of the characters, independent from any previous conceptions you had about the work. Allow yourself to view it through a different lens before making performance choices.

An example of a popular story that was transformed into something new is Lin-Manuel Miranda's Hamilton. In the United States, students constantly hear the Founding Fathers narratives in school. Historical biographies of early American figures have been performed, retold, and adapted for centuries. The traditional performance style (white actors, classical music, conventional staging) had become predictable and culturally narrow. Miranda's interpretation was unique in the following ways:

- Casting: Using actors of color to play historical white figures.
- Music: Replacing traditional Broadway styles with hip-hop, rap, R&B, and pop.
- Structure: Blending modern language with historical content.

- Tone: Mixing humor, grit, vulnerability, and contemporary commentary.
- Perspective: Making a forgotten founding father the center of a high-energy, modern narrative.

This is a textbook example of taking well-known material and transforming it in a way that audiences had "never seen before." Like a great oral interpretation piece, it starts with familiar source material, analyzes and reimagines the characters from a new angle, refuses to imitate older performance traditions, speaks both to universal themes (ambition, identity, legacy), and brings novelty through voice, style, and storytelling. Even those who knew Hamilton from textbooks found themselves experiencing it completely differently.

Although it can be the "easy choice" to search for literature with which you are already familiar for an oral interpretation performance, it is also important to spend some time looking for work that is new to you and to your audience. Performing literature is a wonderful way to expose ourselves and our audience to material we might not otherwise encounter. Take advantage of this opportunity.

Essentially, when performing oral interpretation, aim to present your audience with literature and/or an approach to it that they've never seen before.

Significance

Perhaps the most important of Gura and Lee's touchstones is that of significance. Literature with significance has impact beyond its own existence. It makes the reader, performer, and audience think and make connections to their own lives and/or the world. Have you ever seen a movie that you could not stop talking about for weeks? Ever had an amazingly easy time writing an essay about a poem in an English class because you had so much to say about it? Then, you have encountered literary significance.

I once had a student who chose to perform a series of silly poems from a children's book about going back to school. He performed them very morosely, darkly, highlighting themes adults could connect to as they identify the drudgery of tasks they do every day. I loved the way it made me reconsider the sorts of daily chores I find boring that I remember being enamored with as a child. It gave me an appreciation for the fact that I can do them at all, and this wasn't something the student pointed out directly. I found this connection through watching the performance and comparing it to my own experiences.

If you choose works that speak to your audience, you make their experience watching you perform more meaningful. It is also easier to choose universal themes and ideas to highlight for your audience through your performance when you choose literature with significance.

Many students in an oral interpretation course are authors in their own rights. You may have some poems you have written as a hobby, or maybe you wrote an interesting essay or creative non-fiction story in previous course. You can and should absolutely consider using your own work. Be sure to take a fresh look at it and measure it against the touchstones described above to help you decide whether you would like to use it.

Exercise 3.2.1

Activity 1: What Counts as Literature?

Objective: Critically analyze and expand the definition of literature using diverse examples.

Instructions:

- As a class, brainstorm different types of texts (e.g., novels, plays, poems, song lyrics, text messages, social media posts, speeches).
- In pairs, choose one unconventional text type (e.g., a tweet thread, a letter, or a rap verse).
- Write a short argument (1–2 paragraphs) defending why your chosen text should be considered literature. Use ideas from the reading to support your case.
- Share your argument with another pair and discuss: Is your text literary? Why or why not?

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4: PERFORMING POETRY

Overview

Poetry is a compressed, rhythmic form of language that uses sound, imagery, and figurative devices to create emotional impact. Because poems rely on both meaning and the way that meaning is expressed, performers must read them closely and repeatedly. In oral interpretation, understanding the poem's speaker, tone, diction, and figurative language is essential. Performers should consider how the poem feels, what it suggests, and how its rhythms influence pacing and delivery. The challenge is to make poetic language (especially rhyme or strict form) sound natural rather than sing-song. Whether a poem uses a structured form or free verse, the performer's job is to blend analysis with expressive delivery, bringing the poem's emotional and intellectual layers to life for an audience.

4.1: Defining Poetry

4.2: Analyzing Poetry

4.3: Performance of Poetry

4.4: References

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4.1: Defining Poetry

Overview

Poetry is a unique literary form that uses rhythm, structure, and language to convey meaning beyond the literal. Unlike prose, which follows sentence-based structure and straightforward syntax, poetry is written in lines and often relies on meter, visual form, and figurative language to evoke emotion and deeper significance. While some poems follow strict patterns (closed form), others are more free-form (open or free verse), but all benefit from close analysis of elements like word choice, imagery, and rhythm—especially when preparing for oral interpretation.

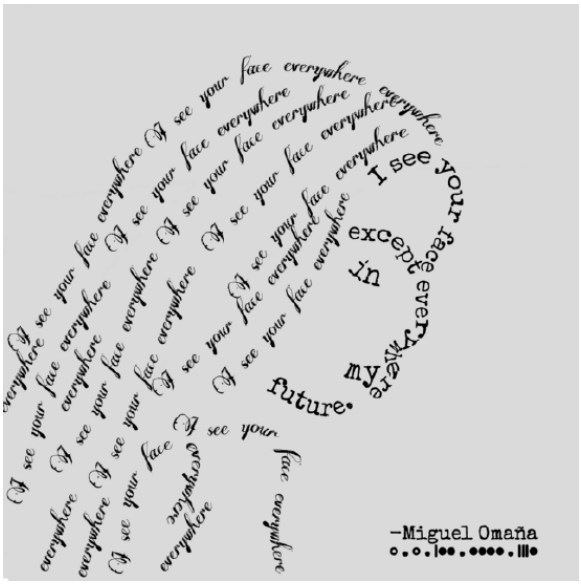


Figure 4.1.1: The performer's voice, timing, and physicality bring the poem into being, creating a reality the audience inhabits. (CC BY 4.0; Miguel Angel Omaña Rojas - Figure poem forming a woman)

Learning Objectives

1. Differentiate poetry from prose.
2. Recognize key poetic devices and forms.

Definition

Poetry is a form of literary art that uses aesthetic and rhythmic qualities of language to evoke meanings in addition to, or in place of, prosaic ostensible meaning (non-poetic ordinary intended meaning). Before we fully examine poetry, it is important to define a few key terms:

- Verse - "Speech or writing distinguished from ordinary language by its distinctive patterning of sounds and especially by its rhythm **:** metrical language" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2025).
- Syntax - "The way in which linguistic elements (such as words) are put together to form phrases, clauses, or sentences" (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2025).
- Meter - "Meter is a regular pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables that defines the rhythm of some poetry" (LitCharts, 2025).

Poetry has traditionally been distinguished from prose by its being set in verse. Additionally, prose is cast in sentences while poetry is in lines. The syntax of prose is dictated by meaning. Poetry is held across meter or the visual aspects of the poem.

While poetry sometimes rhymes, it does not always. It is the rhythmic pattern of words that sets it apart from the natural speech of the other genres. However, poems also place particular emphasis on figurative language, symbolism, and abstractions. This is often the characteristic that either draws fans to poetry or deters those from wanting to study it. Meaning is often indirect in a poem, putting much responsibility on the reader to analyze and decipher the various nuances of feeling and meaning with it.

One way to better understand poetry is by analyzing the elements that make up a good poem. Poems are written in either closed or open form. Closed form poems are written in specific patterns, using meter, line length, and line groupings called stanzas. Open form poems, often still referred to as "free verse" poems, do not use regular rhythmic patterns, are usually unrhymed, have varying line lengths, and have no set line groupings. As you analyze a poem for an oral interpretation performance, remember that you are looking for relationships between the formal devices of poetry, like word choice, metric pattern, metaphor, and the poem's subject. A thorough investigation of the elements of a poem helps you to better understand the poem.

Exercise 4.1.1

Activity 1: Compare Prose and Poetry (10 minutes)

Instructions:
Read the following two passages—one is prose, the other is poetry. Identify at least 3 key differences in their structure, language, and rhythm.

Prose Sample:
"The sun was setting behind the hills, casting a golden glow across the quiet town. Children played on the sidewalks, and the sound of laughter drifted on the breeze."

Poetry Sample:
The sun dips low, a golden breath,
Over rooftops, whispers death.
Children's laughter, caught in flight,
Bends and shatters in the light.

Discussion Prompt:
What are the structural and stylistic differences you notice? How do those differences affect the tone or mood?

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4.2: Analyzing Poetry

Overview

This section emphasizes the importance of fully engaging with a poem in order to truly understand and perform it. Drawing on Muriel Rukeyser's idea of giving a poem a "total response," it encourages readers to approach poetry with emotional openness and focused attention. Poems are more than words on a page. They are emotional experiences shaped by rhythm, sound, tone, and form. Reading poetry out loud and analyzing its elements helps performers internalize a poem's meaning and deliver it with authenticity. By asking thoughtful questions about voice, tone, structure, and emotional effect, readers can uncover a poem's deeper truths and share them powerfully with an audience.

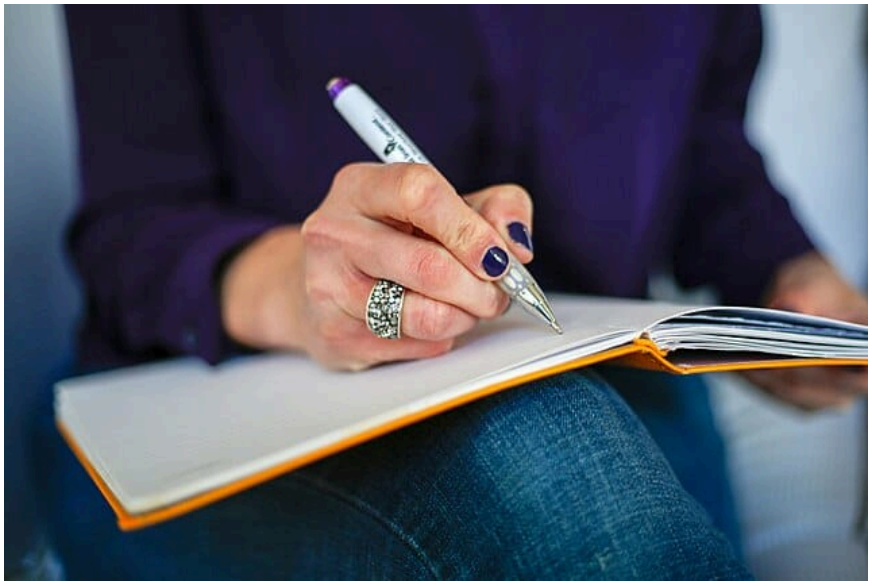


Figure 4.2.1: Your interpretation of a poem is shaped by your life experiences. (CC0 1.0; Kristin Hardwick - Woman writing on a notebook with a pen)

Learning Objectives

1. Engage with poetry through focused, repeated readings that emphasize emotional awareness, tone, diction, and rhythm, in order to experience the poem as the author intended.
2. Analyze various literary and structural elements of a poem—such as speaker, audience, tone, form, and figurative language—to interpret meaning and make informed performance decisions.

Analyzing Poetry

Muriel Rukeyser says in *The Life of Poetry* that to successfully read a poem, we must give a poem "a total response." This means giving it all our attention, taking it in slowly, reading it several times. It means listening to the poem openly, without judgment, and without projecting our own assumed meanings onto it. Instead, Rukeyser writes, it means coming "to the emotional meanings at every moment." As she explains, "That is one reason for the high concentration of music, in poetry."

To come to emotional meanings at every moment means to adjust and react to the way a poem takes shape with every word, every line, every sentence, every stanza. Each poem creates its own universe as it moves from line to line. It is a universe that Rukeyser describes as the "universe of emotional truth." So how exactly does one listen with their emotions?

Reading creates an indirect, yet intimate, connection between reader and author. As readers, we take the author's words—their breath—into ourselves. We shape the words with our own bodies and, too, give them life with our own breath. Reading poetry,

we breathe in what a poet breathes out. We share breath. The words and their meanings become part of our body as they move through our mind, triggering sensations in our bodies that lead to thoughts. And through this process, we have experiences that are new and that change us as much as any other experience can.

Poetry is a condensed art form that produces an experience in a reader through words. And though words may appear visually as symbols on the page, the experience that poems produce in us is much more physical and direct. The elements of poetry permit a poet to control many aspects of language—tone, pace, rhythm, sound—as well as language's effects: images, ideas, sensations. These elements give power to the poet to shape a reader's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual experience of the poem. Because form and function are so closely intertwined, it is impossible to paraphrase a poem. This is why we must read poems with full concentration and focus more than once. It is why we must read them out loud. It is why we must be attentive to every aspect of the poem on both ends: as a writer, and as a reader.

Readers come to the page with different backgrounds and a range of different experiences with poetry, but it is how we read a poem that determines our experience of it. "Reading" or even "analyzing" a poem may not be the best description of this process. Instead, one who plans to perform a poem must go through the actual process of "coming to" the poem, ingesting its lines, and responding emotionally.

Consider the following poem by Emily Dickinson:

'Im Nobody! Who are you?
Are you – Nobody – too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise – you know!

How dreary – to be – Somebody!
How public – like a Frog –
To tell one's name – the livelong June –
To an admiring Bog!

Upon first read of this poem, one might conclude the speaker is thankful she is not popular and well known by others. However, after further analysis, it is possible that this speaker truly does wish to be part of the in-crowd. Perhaps she is trying to impress or identify with the person to whom she is speaking by saying these things while she secretly wishes to be one of the popular people. You can see how the interpretation one chooses for this poem would affect the way one would say the words, use pauses, and select appropriate facial expressions.

Questions to Ask Yourself While Analyzing Poetry

You may find the following considerations helpful as they provide characteristics to look for when analyzing poetry. You can use the answers to these prompts to help you make decisions on how to choose themes/messages to highlight in a performance. They will also help you make performance choices on how to use your voice and body to perform a poem for your audience:

- Determine the Subject of the Poem
  - Paraphrase/summarize the poem: what is it about?
  - Does the poem address a social, psychological, historical, or mythical phenomenon?
- Identify the Poem's Narrator
  - Who is speaking? Consider age, gender, occupation, and more.
  - To whom?
  - Under what circumstances? Identify the setting.
- Identify the Narrator's Audience
  - To whom is the narrator speaking?
  - Is the narrator speaking to themselves? If not, is that audience in the same physical space as the narrator? Is the audience a single person, multiple people?
- Note the Diction (Word Choice) of the Poet
  - Be sure to look up all unfamiliar words in a dictionary.
  - What are the words' denotations (defined meaning) and connotations (abstract meaning shaped by emotions and experiences)?
  - Are the words concrete or abstract?
- Determine the Tone of the Poem

    - Is the poem serious? Ironic? Satiric? Contemplative? Ambiguous?
    - Identify words that set the tone.
    - Determine whether the tone changes within the poem.
- Determine the Rhythmical Devices Used by the Poet
    - What is the basic metrical pattern? Line length?
    - What is the length of the stanza?
    - What is the rhyme scheme? End rhyme? Internal rhyme?
    - Does the poet employ any other metrical devices?
    - What form does the poem take? Open or closed?
- Note Your Emotional Response to the Poem
    - How does the poem make you feel?
    - How might you convey those emotions and feelings to an audience using your voice and body language?
- Note the Use of Other Literary Devices
    - What allusions (indirect references) does the poem contain?
    - Listen to the sounds in the poem. Make note of characteristics such as assonance, alliteration, and onomatopoeia.
    - Is there any figurative language:
        - Metaphor – A figure of speech that directly compares one thing to another without using “like” or “as,” suggesting they are the same in a meaningful way.
        - Simile – A comparison between two unlike things using “like” or “as.”
        - Symbolism – The use of an object, character, or action to represent a deeper meaning or abstract idea.
        - Imagery – Descriptive language that appeals to the senses (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) to create vivid mental pictures.
        - Irony – A contrast between expectation and reality, often highlighting an unexpected or opposite outcome or meaning.
        - Personification – Giving human qualities or actions to non-human things, animals, or abstract ideas.
        - Antithesis – The placement of two opposite or contrasting ideas side by side to emphasize their difference.
        - Hyperbole – An intentional and dramatic exaggeration used for emphasis or effect.
        - Metonymy – A figure of speech in which something is referred to by the name of something closely associated with it (e.g., “The White House” for the U.S. government).
        - Synecdoche – A figure of speech in which a part represents the whole or the whole represents a part (e.g., “hands” for workers).
        - Allegory – A story in which characters, events, and settings symbolize deeper moral, political, or philosophical meanings.
        - Paradox – A statement that seems contradictory or impossible but reveals a deeper truth.
        - Understatement – Presenting something as less important or intense than it actually is, often for subtle humor or effect.
        - Overstatement – Stating something in exaggerated or amplified terms; similar to hyperbole but not always as extreme.
    - Note the use or absence of punctuation.
    - Titles are important in poetry. What does the title say about the work?
- Determine the Values of the Poem
    - Does the poet succeed in recreating his experiences within the reader? How?
    - Is the experience intensely felt by the reader?

By thoughtfully considering these questions, you can deepen your understanding of a poem’s layers and make more intentional, impactful performance choices. This kind of analysis not only enriches your interpretation but also helps you connect more meaningfully with your audience—bringing the poem to life through your unique voice, perspective, and emotional expression.

Exercise 4.2.1

Activity 1: Total Response Practice

Objective: Practice “total response” reading and build emotional awareness when engaging with a poem.

Instructions:

1. Choose a short poem (10–20 lines) of your choice.
2. Read the poem aloud three times, slowly and with focus.

3. After each reading, jot down your emotional reactions. What images or phrases stood out? How did the tone affect you?
4. Reflect: How did your interpretation or feelings change with each read?
5. In 5–6 sentences, summarize the emotional “universe” the poem creates and how it affected you personally.

Extension Activity: Share your reading aloud in pairs or small groups and discuss how different readers experienced the same poem emotionally.

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4.3: Performance of Poetry

Overview

Performing poetry requires a deep understanding of its meaning, tone, and emotional nuance to deliver it authentically and effectively. Because poetic meaning is often abstract and indirect, performers must analyze elements such as the narrator's intent, audience, and emotional context to inform their vocal delivery, posture, and facial expressions. One of the main challenges, especially with rhymed poetry, is avoiding a mechanical or sing-songy rhythm that distracts from meaning. To overcome this, performers can restructure the poem on the page—without changing the words—to better reflect natural phrasing and speech rhythms. This technique helps preserve the poem's emotional truth while enhancing clarity and audience engagement.



Figure 4.3.1: Oral interpretation performers commonly use a black notebook or binder during their performances. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Efrat Mishori - Efrat Mishori reading poetry photo Esra Levi)

Learning Objectives

1. Practice making poetry performance sound natural rather than mechanical by avoiding overemphasis on rhyme.
2. Learn to restructure or rewrite the poem's formatting to reflect natural speech pauses and phrasing for effective delivery.

Performing Poetry

Since poetry can vary in its levels of abstraction, some find it frustrating to read since meaning is often connotative and indirect. This can make it difficult to decide how to perform it and adequately assign meaning to its words with our delivery. However, an oral interpreter of poetry must thoroughly understand a poem to honor it properly and convey each nuance of its meaning and feeling. For example, a performer could not decide where the narrator should gaze if they haven't thought about to whom the narrator is speaking. If a performer has not considered the emotions or motivations behind the narrator's words in a poem, they will not be able to use appropriate facial expressions, posture, or vocal inflection.

Perhaps the most challenging part of performing poetry, particularly those poems that rhyme, is making it sound natural. When a performer gets caught up in overly emphasizing the rhyme of a piece, it can sound unnatural, mechanical, and it tends to detract from the meaning. To prevent this from happening, you might consider physically rewriting the poem, reflecting the natural pausing spots you would like to take during performance. For example, take a look at a monologue delivered by King Henry V from William Shakespeare's play, *Henry V*:

Henry V, Act III, Scene I, by William Shakespeare

(Appearing here as typed in the original Shakespearian work)

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more,

Or close the wall up with our English dead!

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man

As modest stillness and humility,

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,

Then imitate the action of the tiger:

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage,

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide,

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit

To his full height. On, on, you noblest English,

Dishonor not your mothers. Now attest

That those whom you called fathers did beget you.

Be copy now to men of grosser blood,

And teach them how to war. And you, good yeoman,

Whose limbs were made in England, show us here

The mettle of your pasture. Let us swear

That you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not,

For there is none of you so mean and base

That hath not noble luster in your eyes.

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips,

Straining upon the start. The game's afoot.

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge

Cry "God for Harry, England, and Saint George!"

The above is written in a rhythm known as iambic pentameter (a poetic rhythm where each line has ten syllables, arranged in five pairs called iambs). A review of the poem reveals that the natural stopping point for some of the sentences/phrases don't always land at the ends of the poems "lines." For example, in the line "Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit To his full height," the line ends visually after "spirit," but the essence of the sentence's meaning only shines when the phrasing is continued through the word "height." So, a performer would likely want to take care not to pause between the words "spirit" and "To" but rather after the word "height."

Therefore, when performing poetry, a performer might consider rewriting the poem structurally (without changing the words) to better reflect how it might look if the character spoke the words as natural speech:

Henry V, Act III, Scene I, by William Shakespeare

(Appearing here in a re-typed/re-formatted version that reflects more natural phrasing)

Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more -- or close the wall up with our English dead!

In peace there's nothing so becomes a man as modest stillness and humility.

But when the blast of war blows in our ears, then imitate the action of the tiger:

Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood,

Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage,

Now set the teeth and stretch the nostril wide.

Hold hard the breath and bend up every spirit to his full height.

On, on, you noblest English,

Dishonor not your mothers. Now attest that those whom you called fathers did beget you.

Be copy now to men of grosser blood, and teach them how to war.

And you, good yeoman, whose limbs were made in England,

Show us here the mettle of your pasture.

Let us swear that you are worth your breeding, which I doubt not, for there is none of you so mean and base that hath not noble luster in your eyes.

I see you stand like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start.

The game's afoot.

Follow your spirit, and upon this charge cry "God for Harry, England,

....and Saint George!"

Note that the above, though it has the identical wording as the previous version, looks a bit more like a prose piece since the lines no longer seem to reveal an obvious rhythm/pattern. After analyzing a poem, consider rewriting it to reflect the phrasings and meanings more naturally. This may help you avoid falling into a sing-songy, unnatural delivery style and help your audience to understand the meaning of the poem more deeply.

Exercise 4.3.1

Activity 1: Understanding the Speaker and Audience

Objective: Analyze a poem to identify the narrator's perspective and intended audience.

Instructions:

- Read the poem carefully.
- Answer the following questions in writing:
  1. Who is the narrator of the poem?
  2. To whom is the narrator speaking?
  3. What emotions or motivations can you infer from the narrator's words?
  4. How might these factors influence where the performer should direct their gaze, facial expressions, or posture?

> Example: Use the excerpt from Henry V to practice.

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5: PERFORMING PROSE

Overview

Prose is natural, everyday language found in stories, essays, speeches, and more. Performers analyze diction, figurative language, syntax, and style to decide how to express meaning through voice and body. In narrative prose, subtle changes help distinguish different characters. Sometimes performers cut the text to keep the flow and focus.

5.1: Defining Prose

5.2: Performance of Prose

5.3: References

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5.1: Defining Prose

Overview

Prose is written or spoken language in its ordinary form, using natural syntax and sentence structure rather than the rhythmic or line-based form of poetry. While it can contain figurative language and connotative meaning, prose typically presents its message more directly and often through a narrator's perspective. A performer's delivery choices should be guided by a prose piece's style. To determine the style of a prose piece, the performer should analyze the pieces diction, syntax, figurative devices, and genre. The goal is for the performer to match vocal and physical expression to the tone and meaning of the text.

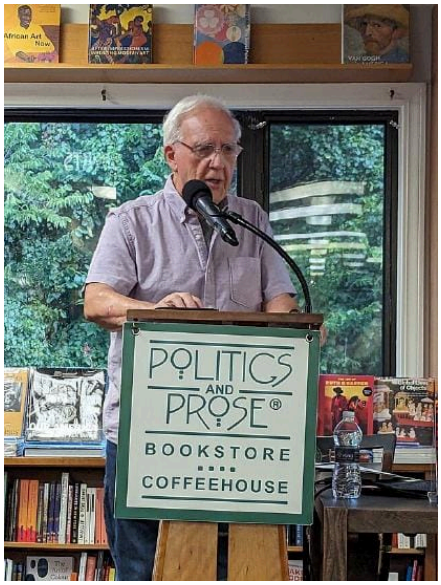


Figure 5.1.1: The delivery of prose transforms text into lived experience for an audience. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Sdkb - John Szwed at Politics and Prose)

Learning Objectives

1. Explain what prose is, how it differs from poetry, and identify common examples (e.g., novels, essays, speeches).
2. Understand how prose uses elements like diction, syntax, figurative language, and genre to convey meaning and tone.
3. Analyze how style, connotation, punctuation, and word sounds should inform delivery choices in performance.

Definition

Prose is a form of language that possesses ordinary syntax and natural speech rather than rhythmic structure; in which regard, along with its measurement in sentences rather than lines, it differs from poetry. Compared to poetry, prose sounds more like natural, every day speech.

While prose can certainly include some figurative language and connotative meanings, the messages are usually more direct. Prose often includes the voice of a primary narrator who either is (first person) or is not (third person) involved directly with the characters and plot of the work and who often explains context, action, and character descriptions to the reader.

Examples of prose include (but are not limited to) novels, short stories, essays, letters, speeches, diary entries, research articles, webpages, textbooks, newspaper stories, etc. What you are reading right now is considered a form of prose. Additionally, works such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, the novel *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy, an article on the Cincinnati Bengals football team in *ESPN* magazine, the letter you may have written to Santa as a kid, and my creative non-fiction essay on apartment life that I wrote in college are also all examples of prose.

Writing Style and Language

You can use the prose author's writing style to help you analyze and understand the work as well as to help you make delivery decisions. Writing style reflects the author's attitudes toward the subject matter, and it should influence your performance. Your goal as a performer is to match the style of performance with the style of writing. The style of prose is determined by things like diction, imagery, figurative language, and syntax. Below are clues to identifying the style of a piece that can help you make decisions on how to convey meaning through your voice and body when you perform prose.

Connotative vs. Denotative Words

Some words contain richer meaning than what one may glean from simply a dictionary definition. For example, a general word such as "home" is more likely to have connotative value conjuring more feeling than specific language such as "house," which describes a type of building. These feelings will also vary among different people depending upon one's culture, past experiences, etc.

Genre of Discourse

Prose performers must decide how words are used that indicate the kind of style the writer is trying to convey. For example, "commit homicide," "blow away," and "murder" all mean to kill someone. They come from legal discourse, vocal slang, and everyday usage. However, "blow away" and "murder" each carry a distinct connotative and emotive value. Also, "happen," "occur," "manifest," and "go down" are similar in meaning but come from distinct genres of discourse: everyday usage (happen), formal usage (occur), philosophical discourse (manifest), and slang (go down). "Happen" and "go down" could be used in everyday speech; "occur" and "manifest," being more formal, would not ordinarily be used in speech. The genre of discourse acts like a roadmap. It tells performers:

- What the piece is trying to accomplish
- How it communicates
- What tone and structure it uses
- How they should embody or express it
- How to connect the text with the audience

Understanding genre ensures that the interpretation is both accurate to the text and engaging to the audience.

Allusions, Similes, and Metaphors

A writer's use of these is an important aspect of literary style. All three can be used to convey connotative meaning.

- Allusions refer to shared experiences many would understand. Example: "I hope tonight won't be another Thanksgiving dinner."
- Similes describe things using a comparison that employs the words "like" or "as." Example: "I feel like a million dollars now!"
- Metaphors draw a comparison by equating two or more things that are generally unrelated as the same. For example, "He has a heart of stone" or "She's a real piece of work."

Together, these devices:

- Enrich emotional tone
- Increase interpretive complexity
- Guide decisions about pacing, emphasis, and vocal quality
- Help create vivid mental imagery for the audience
- Highlight themes and deepen understanding
- Allow the performer to make the literature more expressive and compelling

In essence, allusions, similes, and metaphors help performers transform text into lived experience, making interpretation richer, more dynamic, and more engaging for the audience.

Syntax

This includes punctuation and how words are grouped together demonstrating their relationship and importance. Your discoveries here will dictate your use of vocal elements such as pauses, rate, emphasis, volume, and inflection.

Short, simple sentences indicate a direct approach and suggest immediacy of experience. Long, complicated sentences suggest a more sophisticated and evaluative approach. Examples of punctuation may include:

- Semicolon – marks a turn of thought or definite separation between two aspects of the same thought; and usually requires a slight pause.
- Parentheses and double dash – mark off distinct speech phrases.
- Single dash or colon – often marks the pause that occurs just before a summary and implies a reference to some previous portion.

All of this being said, use punctuation as a guide but not a rule. It is more for the eye than for the ear. A comma in a text does not always demand a pause. Keep in mind that how you perform punctuation might change as you begin practicing a piece for presentation.

Poetic Diction

Poetic language, generally connotative, would stand out in casual conversation, so an author's choice to include it in a prose piece would be very intentional. Unusual connotations also carry with them double meanings. For instance, the word "terrific" can be used for its connotation of terrifying;" the word "taxation" for its connotation of "taxing" or stress-inducing. Consider words such as "escape" vs. "flee," "girl" vs. "maiden," and "invisible" vs. "unseen." In each of these pairings, the first usage is essentially descriptive; the latter more poetic or emotive.

The sounds of words an author has chosen are especially important for the interpreter. The sounds of the words carry meaning as well as the word itself. Pace and vocal quality are influenced by the connotative meaning of words.

Noticing poetic diction helps an oral interpreter make intentional choices about how to sound, how to move, and how to reveal meaning. It elevates the performance from simply "reading aloud" to creating an expressive, emotionally rich, and thoughtfully shaped experience for the audience.

Exercise 5.1.1

Activity 1. Prose Style Performance Practice

Objective: Analyze prose style and practice matching vocal delivery to the text's tone and structure.

Instructions:

- Choose a speech, essay, or short story.
- In small groups or individually:
  - Identify features of syntax, figurative language, and genre of discourse.
  - Annotate punctuation that might influence performance (e.g., pauses, inflection)
  - Rehearse and perform the excerpt, adjusting rate, emphasis, and volume to reflect the writing style.

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5.2: Performance of Prose

Overview

Prose is often the easiest genre for new oral interpretation performers because it resembles natural speech. It generally appears as either expository prose (which explains or argues) or narrative prose (which tells a story). To perform prose effectively, the interpreter must understand the narrator's point of view, personality, and emotional tone.

Narrative prose may include dialogue, so performers should differentiate characters through subtle, consistent changes in voice, expression, or posture. Prose pieces are sometimes shortened through "cutting," selecting excerpts that preserve the story's tone and flow; tag lines like "he said" can be removed if the performer shows them through delivery.

Strong prose performance relies on clear diction, varied intonation, appropriate pacing, eye contact, and purposeful physical expression. With careful analysis and rehearsal, performers bring the text's imagery and emotion to life for an audience.

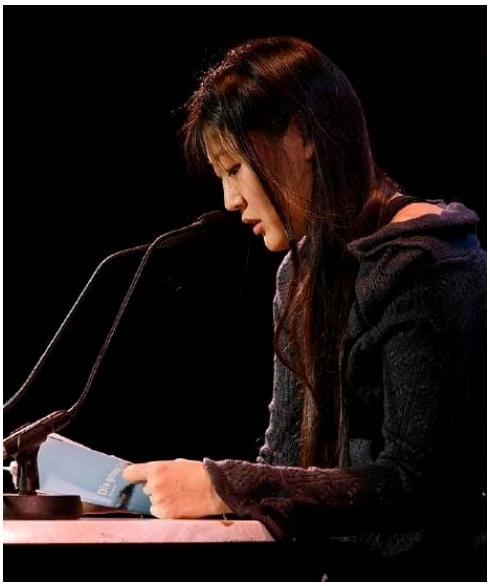


Figure 5.2.1: Anna Kim Wien in performance. (CC BY-SA 3.0; Manfred Werner - Tsui - Anna Kim Wien)

Learning Objectives

1. Analyze the narrative voice and author's intent.
2. Identify effective interpretation and cutting techniques.

Performance of Prose

Since prose is written in a style most like our natural speech, it is often the first genre you may tackle in your adventure through the world of oral interpretation.

Sometimes, a work of prose is more expository in nature rather than narrative (telling a story), focused on providing information or developing an argument as opposed to developing a plot. A narrative prose piece, on the other hand, tells a story from a first- or third-person narrator's point of view. A performer of prose should understand the author's intention behind the style of the work. The performer should thoroughly analyze the narrator or primary voice of the work to choose a performance approach that honors that voice's point of view, personality, biases, feelings, etc.

Particularly in narrative prose, you will sometimes see more than one persona represented in the work. These may exist in the

form of character dialogue throughout the piece. As a prose performer, you must examine these characters and determine how to perform them in a way that makes them distinct from the primary voice (narrator). You can do this using body language and vocal variety. All characters should have some sort of body and/or vocal change that works with the interpretation given to that character. It can be your stance, how you hold your shoulders/head/posture, specific gestures to that character, or an accent or higher vocal tone. Do not go overboard, this should be subtle. Most importantly, be consistent with these choices, doing them each time the character speaks so as not to confuse your audience. Consider the following to add depth to your characterizations:

- Feel free to commit to an emotion that the character experiences.
- Consider adding reaction moments even when characters do not have anything to say. Characters can react whether they speak or not.
- Avoid nervous rocking back and forth or nervous twitches such as wiggling your foot or playing with your pant leg (unless the character is supposed to be portrayed as someone who is nervous).
- Use facial expressions. Your face should be “alive” at all times. Every narrator’s/character's facial expressions should be appropriate for that character. Practicing in front of a mirror can help.
- Use appropriate focal points such as facial expressions, eye contact, posture, and gestures. If you determine through analysis that the narrator or primary voice is speaking to a group of people, engage the audience with eye contact using an audience focal point. Use the layout of classroom to your advantage, scanning and picking individuals to look at for an extended time during specified intense moments add to the performance. Though, if you determine whether the primary voice is speaking to no one in particular, perhaps rather to his or herself, you may need to use the inner-expressed focal point, looking into space as one may do while talking on the phone. When interpreting character dialogue, use different off-stage focal points to indicate characters looking at one another while speaking.
- Use appropriate vocal characteristics for the various personae. Play with tone, rhythm, volume, and all forms of dynamics. The secret with vocals is variation, and this can help make your various personae in a piece more distinct.
- Get to know the personae of the piece beyond the words in the literature. For deeper characterization, consider the possible history, backstories, and the relationships that exist between the characters and voices of the prose. Most of the time, these conclusions will be drawn simply from your own understanding and assumptions. That is fine. You can use those to help you make performance and delivery decisions for characterization.

Exercise 5.2.1

Activity 1: Character Differentiation Practice

Objective:
Develop and apply subtle physical and vocal changes to portray multiple characters within a prose piece.

Instructions:

1. Choose a prose passage that includes at least two characters.
2. Create a character map for each persona, including:
    - Age, background, relationship to the narrator
    - Vocal traits (pitch, pace, accent)
    - Physical traits (posture, gestures, facial expressions)
3. Rehearse reading the dialogue, using distinct vocal and body language cues for each character.
4. Present the piece to a small group, who will identify which cues correspond to which character.
5. Receive feedback on consistency and clarity of differentiation.

Cutting

Often, a prose piece may be too long for you to perform it in its entirety, and you will have to make a “cutting.” This involves selecting a chunk(s) from the entire work that still fit within the theme or message the performer is aiming to convey to the audience to include within a performance. Later, this chapter addresses cutting literature for performance, but in short, it works best to select large chunks for performance rather than piecing small lines and segments together to preserve as much of the rhythm and flow of an author’s words as possible. One key exception to this might be in the cutting of “tag lines,” or the short bits of narration after a line of dialogue. These are phrases such as “he said,” “she shouted angrily,” or “they paused.” Since performers are using character vocalizations to bring literature to life for audiences, they will likely be doing the actions indicated in these tag lines (e.g. shouting angrily or pausing). Including them when performing often seems unnecessary, and many performers choose to omit them in performance.

Any fiction or non-fiction novel, essay, journal, or short story can be selected to be cut for a prose performance. The use of diction, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, intonation, pace and other elements of delivery will offer a rewarding experience for both interpreter and audience. Every delivery choice made for prose should benefit the piece, help tell the story or convey the information, and aid interpretation. Performing prose effectively, particularly a narrative piece with several characters, takes lots of practice, devotion, and creativity. The more work you have done analyzing the work and understanding it, the better you can bring the piece to light for your audience. Strive to convey the crisp mental imagery you had when you read it when you perform for your audience.

Exercise 5.2.2

Activity 2: Cutting for Performance

Objective:
Practice cutting a longer prose work to create a cohesive, performable excerpt that maintains the original meaning and flow.

Instructions:

1. Choose a longer short story or essay (3+ pages).
2. Identify a central theme or emotional arc you want to highlight.
3. Select 1–2 substantial sections that support this theme while maintaining the author's voice and rhythm.
4. Omit tag lines where appropriate, relying on vocal and physical interpretation to convey character actions.
5. Justify your cutting in a brief reflection:
    - Why did you choose this portion?
    - How does it preserve the intent and tone of the original work?
6. Perform your cut piece in class or for peer review.

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6: PERFORMING DRAMA

Overview

Drama is any literature written as a script, including plays, movie scripts, and even transcripts. Characters reveal the story through dialogue and actions in real time. It's organized into acts and scenes, with lines and stage directions guiding the performance. Oral interpretation of drama differs from traditional theater by relying on minimal props and symbolic gestures, often with a single performer portraying multiple characters. Choosing a drama piece requires careful consideration to ensure characters are relatable, distinct, and manageable for the performer. Successful dramatic interpretation depends on analyzing characters deeply and using vocal and physical variations to clearly distinguish them, helping audiences connect with the story and its emotions.

6.1: Defining Drama

6.2: Performance of Drama

6.3: References

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6.1: Defining Drama

Overview

Drama, often misunderstood as solely emotional or theatrical behavior, is actually a distinct literary genre written in script form. Unlike prose or poetry, drama relies on characters' spoken dialogue and actions to tell a story, usually in real time and without a narrator. These scripts may be humorous, tragic, historical, or even modern-day exchanges like text messages or interviews. Drama is characterized by natural, present-tense speech. Ultimately, drama allows audiences to experience a story through performance, offering a unique blend of language, structure, and live interaction that sets it apart from other genres.



Figure 6.1.1: Draama chairs. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Sillerkiil - Eesti Teatri festival DRAAMAl)

Learning Objectives

1. Define drama as a literary genre.
2. Identify and analyze key structural features of dramatic literature

Definition

The first thing people usually think of when hearing the word "drama" is a script of a sad emotional nature. The next thing that comes to mind is something or someone who causes social or emotional tension. However, drama has a much more specific meaning in the arena of literary genres.

Drama is any literature in the form of a script. These scripts can be sad, humorous, satirical, historical, and more (or all the above). This means that while movie/television scripts and plays fall within the drama genre, so can things like text message exchanges and interview or court transcripts.

Like prose, the verbiage in drama is typically that of natural speech. However, unlike prose, there is not typically a narrator. Instead, the characters in the drama speak for themselves and reveal their personalities and the plot of the script through their own words and actions. Additionally, while prose is often written in past tense (though not always), works of drama happen in the present.

Drama literature is written in script form. Instead of being organized in chapters like prose, drama exists in scenes and acts. Instead of sentences being organized into stanzas (like poetry) or paragraphs (like prose), drama exists in the form of lines and

character dialogue. Often, there will be stage directions in brackets throughout the script indicating what characters are supposed to do on stage.

Here is an example of how literature from the drama genre appears (from the screenplay from *Steel Magnolias* by Robert Harling):

Annelle: Sammy Wayne Desoto, what is this in my Frigidaire?

Sammy: Beer.

Annelle: I don't care what you do with your refrigerator, but you will not keep liquor in mine.

[dumps the beer out in the yard]

Sammy: Oh, Annelle, for Christ's sake!

Annelle: Who? Who did you say?

Sammy: Christ, Christ, Christ!

Annelle: Are you speaking of our Lord? Is that whose name you're taking in vain?

Sammy: That's the one.

Annelle: Well, I'm sorry, Sammy. But I am not about to spend the next fifty years of my life with someone I'm not gonna run into in the hereafter.

Sammy: Oh, Annelle, goddammit!

Annelle: I think we should pray.

Sammy: I'd rather eat dirt!

We will further analyze this passage in the next exercise.

Exercise 6.1.1

Exercise 1: Identifying Elements of Drama

Instructions: Read the excerpt from Steel Magnolias again. Then, answer the following questions:

1. What elements in the excerpt show that this is a work of drama?
2. Identify two examples of natural speech in the characters' dialogue.
3. Find one stage direction and explain its purpose in helping readers understand the action.

Drama as a literary genre is far more diverse and structured than its everyday associations suggest. Whether humorous or tragic, contemporary or historical, drama invites performers and audiences alike into a world where characters speak and act in real time, revealing their stories through dialogue and behavior. It is essential for performers to understand its format, language, and unique storytelling style.

It is essential to recognize the distinction between oral interpretation of drama and the performance of a traditional dramatic play. Dramatic plays typically involve the use of costumes, lighting cues, props, and deliberate staging. They also often feature multiple performers, each assuming a distinct character role.

In contrast, oral interpretation of drama relies more heavily on symbolic representation, imagery, and physical gestures to communicate meaning. A single performer may be required to portray multiple characters, and the performance is usually limited to the use of a black binder as the sole prop. Lighting is generally minimal, and costuming is often abstract rather than realistic.

In the chapters that follow, we will explore in greater depth the specific ways in which acting and oral interpretation diverge as performance practices.

Exercise 6.1.2

Activity 2: Compare and Contrast Genres

Instructions: Use the chart below to compare drama, prose, and poetry. Fill in each section with how the genres differ in format, narration, and structure.

Genre	Format	Use of Narrator	Structure (how it's organized)
Drama			
Prose			
Poetry			

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6.2: Performance of Drama

Overview

This section outlines the importance of thoughtfully selecting a dramatic piece for oral interpretation. While popular scripts may seem appealing, they often come with audience expectations that limit creative interpretation. Instead, performers should choose lesser-known works with rich characters, engaging language, emotional depth, and a clear dramatic arc. Since drama lacks a narrator, performers must use vocal and physical expression to define characters and communicate the story. Careful character analysis, consistent nonverbal mannerisms, and distinct focal points are essential to delivering a compelling and clear performance.



Figure 6.2.1: Drama street sign. (CC0 1.0; Janezdrilc - Drama, Šentjernej 42)

Learning Objectives

1. Evaluate and select appropriate dramatic literature for oral interpretation based on originality, emotional impact, and suitability for performance.
2. Analyze dramatic characters and apply vocal and physical techniques to portray them with clarity, consistency, and depth.
3. Demonstrate an understanding of performance strategies such as managing multiple characters, using focal points, and conveying character traits through nonverbal and vocal expression.

Performance of Drama

One of the first challenges to using drama in oral interpretation is selecting a piece. It is tempting to many beginners in oral interpretation to use a script from a popular movie scene or television show because it is familiar to them. However, literature that is popular with the masses may not always be the best fit for oral interpretation because audience members familiar with the work already have expectations in their minds of what the characters should be like. If the performer deviates from those expectations, the audience is often disappointed or thinks the performer is simply imitating something that has already been done. So, challenge yourself to find unique and compelling pieces with which the audience may not already be familiar.

You can use the following standards when selecting a drama piece for an oral interpretation performance:

1. Do you identify with the main character, theme, conflict?
2. Can you envision yourself portraying the main character (voice, face, body)?

3. Will the audience be somehow moved by the main character(s)? Will they care about their conflict?
4. Does the language of the script engage you as a reader?
5. Is there a wide variety of levels with which build to the climax or shape of the performance?
6. Does the ending leave us with a strong resolution?

Since character is so critical in drama, aim to give detail and depth to each character you emulate in a dramatic interpretation. There is no narrator present to describe the setting and reveal character feelings, relationships to others, and backstories, so the words and lines from the characters themselves are critical to the entire piece. A performer must carefully analyze the characters of a drama script and show the depth of those characters through carefully controlled physical mannerisms of the voice and body, and it is crucial that these characters are consistent and distinct throughout the performance so that the audience can discern between them. For example, you may choose to slow down the voice of an old man (rate), while a cheerleader character may speak with a louder-than-usual volume. For a talking pig character, you may bend over significantly at the waist (posture) while a young child character would be constantly moving with excitement. When selecting a work of drama for performance, performers should choose pieces with a manageable number of characters for their skill level. The characters' nonverbal mannerisms should be unique, and focal points should be used to add further distinction to these characterizations. If a work has more than a few characters, it may become too difficult for a performer to communicate the differences between them.

Exercise 6.2.1

Activity 1: Piece Selection Criteria Checklist

Objective: Apply evaluation standards to select a suitable dramatic piece.
Instructions:

1. Choose three short dramatic texts (from books, plays, or original works—not from film or TV scripts).
2. Use the checklist below to rate each piece on a scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree):
   - I identify with the main character, theme, or conflict.
   - I can visualize portraying the main character physically and vocally.
   - The script's language engages me.
   - The piece has emotional or dramatic range.
   - The ending offers a strong resolution.
   - The audience is likely to connect with the characters.
3. Based on your results, select the most suitable piece for performance and explain why in a short paragraph.

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7: ARRANGING LITERATURE FOR PERFORMANCE

Overview

When a piece is too long, performers use cutting to keep the story's key elements and fits time limits. Effective cutting follows basic dramatic structure (beginning, climax, end) and use methods like the Cha Cha Cha to select and trim sections. Performers often combine multiple works around a central theme to create varied, engaging programs. Performers can use contrast to enhance meaning and keep the audience interested. Strong performances rely on vocal and physical choices to differentiate characters and moods, with smooth transitions and practiced pacing. Oral interpretation is a creative, ethical act that shapes how audiences experience the story.

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7.1: Cutting

Overview

As noted in earlier chapters, performers in oral interpretation are not expected to present an entire dramatic play or lengthy work. Most performances are limited to approximately ten minutes in forensic competitions, and they might be even shorter in classroom settings. This raises an important question: how can a performer effectively convey the story or message of a much longer work within such a short timeframe? The answer lies in the practice of cutting.

In oral interpretation, cutting refers to the process of selecting and editing portions of a longer literary work so that the performance fits within time constraints while still capturing the essence of the piece. Rather than presenting the entire text, performers identify specific sections, or "cuts," that best highlight the central theme, characters, and emotional impact of the original work. This chapter will examine the strategies, structures, and techniques involved in making effective cuttings for performance.



Figure 7.1.1: Scissors like these are no longer necessary during the cutting process. (CC BY 2.0; Iainf - Scissor collection)

Learning Objectives

1. Define and explain cutting in oral interpretation and understand why it is necessary for performance time limits.
2. Apply principles of dramatic structure (beginning, middle, end; Freytag's pyramid) to create cuttings that maintain clarity, momentum, and audience engagement.
3. Use the Cha Cha Cha Method (chunk, chuck, choose, chum, chip, check, cheat) to effectively organize and refine cuttings.

Cutting

Sometimes, you will find a work of literature that is suitable for performance that fits nicely within time requirements you have been given for the presentation. This is not always the case, however. Many times, particularly with prose or drama, a piece you desire to use is too long for performance and requires you to make what is called a "cutting" to perform it.

A cutting of literature is a chunk or segment of the larger work or multiple segments of the work strung together. When cutting literature, a performer should consider several factors in addition to the general expectations of the performance such as the message/theme of the performance, audience interest and expectations, the number of characters that must be performed in the work, and whether the performer will need to provide background information in the introduction to give context and aid

understanding.

When cutting a single work of literature, the cut piece should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. You may find it helpful to find your desired ending point and cut the rest of the work that you feel leads nicely up to that point. Your cutting should also demonstrate part of the conflict of the piece, though not necessarily resolution. It simply helps the interest, feel, and momentum of the performance when something happens in the literature to move the cutting forward.

Dramatic Structure

While you are cutting, consider the basic elements of dramatic structure. The term "dramatic structure" refers to the parts into which a short story, a novel, a play, a screenplay, or a narrative poem can be divided.

Aristotle divided drama into three parts: a beginning, a middle, and an end. Perhaps equally influential to writers and literary critics alike has been Gustav Freytag's analysis of dramatic structure (figure below). Although Freytag's work is based on the structure of ancient Greek and Shakespearean five-act plays, it can be applied to works of prose (and longer works of poetry) as well. Freytag posited that plots are divided into five parts or acts:

1. Exposition - introduction of characters, setting, etc.
    - In the exposition, the background information that is needed to understand the story properly is provided. Such information includes the protagonist, the antagonist, the basic conflict, the setting, and so forth.
    - The exposition ends with the inciting moment, which is the single incident in the story's action without which there would be no story. The inciting moment sets the remainder of the story in motion beginning with the second act, the rising action.
2. Conflict and rising action - the issue is discovered, and problems arise due to the conflict.
    - During the rising action, the basic conflict is complicated by the introduction of related secondary conflicts, including various obstacles that frustrate the protagonist's attempt to reach their goal. Secondary conflicts can include adversaries of lesser importance than the story's antagonist, who may work with the antagonist or separately, by and for themselves.
3. Climax (turning point) - the height of conflict and highest tension; everything is unleashed.
    - In the climax, or turning point, there marks a change, for the better or the worse, in the protagonist's affairs. If the story is a comedy, things will have gone badly for the protagonist up to this point; now, the tide, so to speak, will turn, and things will begin to go well for them. If the story is a tragedy, the opposite situation will ensue, with things going from good to bad for the protagonist.
4. Falling action - events settle down and a solution is sought.
    - During the falling action, the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist unravels, with the protagonist winning or losing against the antagonist. The falling action may contain a moment of final suspense, during which the outcome of the conflict is in doubt.
5. Dénouement or catastrophe (depending upon whether the literature is a comedy or a tragedy) - the resolution/conclusion; things come to an end happily (or not).
    - The comedy ends with a denouement in which the protagonist is better off than they were at the story's outset. The tragedy ends with a catastrophe in which the protagonist is worse off than they were at the beginning of the narrative.

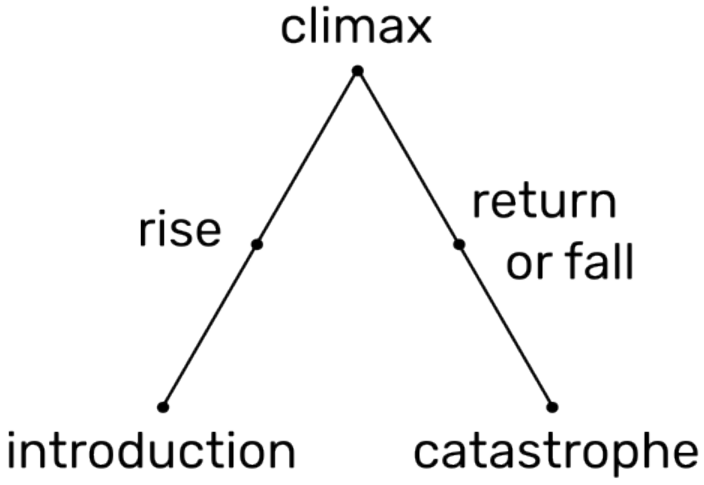


Figure 7.1.2: Feytag's Pyramid consists of the introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, and catastrophe. (CC-Zero; SinjoroFoster)

Exercise 7.1.1

Activity 1: Spot the Structure

Objective: Identify the elements of dramatic structure in a longer work.

1. Choose a short story, scene, or chapter you've read recently.
2. Break it into Freytag's five parts: introduction, rise, climax, return or fall, and catastrophe.
3. Share your breakdown with a partner or small group. Discuss whether the story's structure was easy or difficult to map, and why.

Organizing your cutting around the spirit of Freytag's five elements will help move the plot along in your performance and keep the audience involved. If your author tells the story in a non-linear fashion (e.g. through flashbacks or in reverse) try your best to craft a cutting that mirrors the structure they have created.

You will see the elements above in many works of prose and drama and sometimes in poetry, mostly within pieces that tell a story. However, works that do not include these elements should not necessarily be discounted. But, since the plot structure elements add interest and variety to an oral interpretation performance, you should find ways to create the spirit of these elements in whatever pieces you choose.

Cha Cha Cha Method

Should you find a piece that seems lacking in one of more of the plot structure elements, you can sometimes find ways to use your voice and body to create the same sorts of feelings that accompany some of the elements.

One method you might find helpful in cutting a literature selection is the Cha Cha Cha Method:

- **Chunk** it. Find the various selections of your piece that give brief plot synopsis of the work, then name each section (one to two words only).
- **Chuck** it. Throw out sections that you don't like. Don't worry about sections which may be important to the plot at this point. You may realize that you don't like the piece as much as you thought you did and opt to choose something different.
- **Choose** it. These are the most vital moments of your piece:
  - This section will be the first part of the literature that you present to us. You can place it right before your self-authored introduction or right afterward. It should get the audience's attention to set the mood. It may likely also introduce us to the main character(s).
  - Choose the section that includes the building of intensity, perhaps the moment where the reader/audience is breathless

as the events take place.
    - It is likely that the message of your piece will appear (directly or indirectly) in this section. This is the ending that should have an impact on the audience somehow (e.g. provides hope, foreshadows dark times, resolves in tragedy, etc.). Your last line should be memorable and let the audience feel the emotion of the program.
- **Chum** it. This section is the rising action which builds to the conflict. It should lead into the climax smoothly, so be aware of its "shape." This section will likely make the audience like or identify with the main character/narrator. It is helpful when each pi\ce of rising action is at a different emotional level and creates engagement with variety.
- **Chip** it. These are "trimming cuts" or the cutting of specific lines and words. This step should help to maintain the balance of each section. It can be the most difficult and painful step, and you should do it soon in the cutting process before you get too attached to the material.
- **Check** it. Time your performance. It is better to be short than long, as you can always add segments back into the cutting. Use time to determine the "shape" of your cutting – find a balance.
- **Cheat** it. Sometimes, in order to make two segments "fit" back-to-back in your performance or to add context or clarity, you might need to add very brief lines. These lines can help your cutting make sense or flow better. This should be done very sparingly and with absolute caution, however, to preserve author intent and to honor the spirit of the piece.

If you are having difficulties (e.g. the work is still too long), rethink your cutting. Is there any segment you left in the piece that has no real reason for being there? Is it necessary? If the audience does not need to know it, then cut that bit. Cuttings are organic and changing. You can always adjust them.

You may occasionally find that a piece of literature is too short to fill performance time, and if that is the case, you can often arrange multiple pieces of literature together around a similar theme.

Exercise 7.1.2

Activity 2: Applying the Cha Cha Cha Method

Objective:
To practice organizing a cutting of literature using Freytag's dramatic structure and the Cha Cha Cha method.

Instructions:

1. Select a Literary Piece
   Choose a short story, scene, or poem for oral interpretation. It can be linear or non-linear.

2. Chunk it
    - Break the piece into sections that summarize key events or moments.
    - Give each section a one- or two-word label.
3. Chuck it
    - Review your chunks and remove any sections that feel unnecessary, confusing, or off-theme.
4. Choose it
    - Select the most vital sections for your performance.
    - Identify which part will begin your performance, which section builds intensity, and which provides a strong ending.
5. Chum and chip it
    - Arrange the rising action (Chum) leading to the climax.
    - Trim lines or words (Chip) to maintain flow and keep within time limits.
6. Check and cheat it
    - Time your performance to see if it fits within your required limit.
    - Make minor adjustments (Cheat) if needed to improve flow or clarity.
7. Reflection Questions
    - How did using the Cha Cha Cha method help you structure your cutting?
    - Did your cutting preserve the spirit of the story's original dramatic structure?
    - What techniques did you use to maintain tension or audience engagement?

Optional Extension:
If your piece is too short, experiment with combining it with another piece around a similar theme. Note how the overall flow and emotional impact changes.

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7.2: Organizing

Overview

It is essential for performers to consider the overall theme, message, and intended audience while organizing oral interpretation performances. Thoughtful organization ensures that selected sections of text highlight main ideas, maintain dramatic tension, and engage listeners, often reflecting elements of dramatic structure such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, even in non-linear works. Performers must also plan how to portray characters, use voice and body, and manage transitions to create a seamless and emotionally resonant presentation. Programs can include multiple works centered around a common theme, allowing for creative juxtapositions that highlight contrasts between characters, moods, or ideas, enhancing meaning, emotional impact, and audience engagement. By carefully analyzing each piece and making deliberate choices in delivery, performers can craft dynamic, memorable performances that effectively convey the essence of the literature.



Figure 7.2.1: An example of juxtaposition. (CC BY 4.0; Thomas Bresson - reconstit-belfort)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify themes, messages, and elements of dramatic structure in a work or multiple works to create a cohesive oral interpretation performance.
2. Recognize what juxtaposition is and use contrasting characters, moods, themes, or time shifts to enhance emotional impact, clarify meaning, and engage the audience in their performance.
3. Apply voice, body language, and transitions to portray characters distinctly, maintain dramatic tension, and deliver a seamless and compelling performance.

Organizing

When preparing a performance, it is essential to consider the overall theme and message of the work, as well as the audience who will be watching. In the context of oral interpretation, organizing means arranging and structuring the selected pieces of literature (or segments of a longer work) in a clear, purposeful way to create a smooth, engaging, and meaningful performance. This involves deciding the order of pieces or sections, managing transitions, balancing pacing and mood, and ensuring the overall flow supports the theme or message you want to convey to the audience. Good organization helps keep the audience interested and makes the story or theme easier to understand and emotionally impactful. Effective performances also reflect elements of dramatic structure, such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution, even when the original text is non-linear. Additionally, performers must plan how they will portray characters, use voice and body, and manage transitions between

segments. These elements work together to create a seamless and emotionally resonant performance.

Oral interpretation of literature presents a performer with marvelous potential. Because the art of oral interpretation is not typically tied to costumes, props, scenery, and lighting (as would be the case in a play or movie), there is room for much flexibility in the sorts of literature the performer can present to an audience. A performer need not only perform one piece of literature. In fact, it is common for an oral interpretation program to include multiple pieces that all center around a particular theme, concept, message, lesson, or thesis. One can use the cutting advice from the previous section of this chapter to take segments from various works of literature to create a performance program.

Of course, this sort of interpretation program may put further demand on the performer in voice and body to ensure the works of literature and personae within them are distinct. But, when the performer fully understands the theme of the program, has analyzed and fully understands each work included, and gives careful thought and practice to vocal and body language delivery choices, the effect can be rewarding for audience and performer.

Exercise 7.2.1

Activity 1: Thematic Mini-Performance

Objective: Practice organizing a short oral interpretation performance around a clear theme.

Instructions:

1. Choose a Theme: Pick one central idea or emotion (e.g., courage, humor, friendship).
2. Select a Text: Choose a short poem, story excerpt, or scene that fits your theme.
3. Plan the Performance:
    - Identify the beginning, middle, and end of your piece.
    - Decide how you will use voice, tone, and body to highlight characters or emotions.
4. Perform: Present your 1–2 minute segment to the class or a partner.
5. Reflect: Share one way you emphasized the theme and one challenge you faced in organizing your performance.

Juxtaposition

Juxtaposition is the literary technique of placing two or more ideas, characters, images, or elements side by side in order to highlight their differences, create contrast, or emphasize a particular effect. In oral interpretation, this can enhance meaning, mood, or emotional impact by showing how contrasting elements interact within a performance. Performers can use this technique to enhance the emotional impact, clarify themes, or make transitions more dramatic. Here's how it might be applied:

1. Contrasting Characters – Alternating between two characters with opposing traits or viewpoints can highlight conflict or irony. For example, reading the dialogue of a calm, rational character immediately followed by a panicked or emotional character emphasizes their differences.
2. Shifting Moods or Tones – Juxtaposition can emphasize changes in tone, such as moving from a lighthearted or humorous section to a serious or tragic moment. The contrast makes both moments feel more vivid to the audience.
3. Theme Enhancement – Placing opposing ideas side by side—such as hope vs. despair, freedom vs. confinement, or love vs. betrayal—can underscore the central theme of the work and deepen audience understanding.
4. Time or Perspective Shifts – Juxtaposing past and present events, or contrasting a character's thoughts with their actions, can clarify narrative structure and create tension or dramatic irony.
5. Pacing and Rhythm – Juxtaposition can help control the pace of a performance. A slow, reflective passage followed by a fast, energetic one can create momentum and keep the audience engaged.

In short, performers use juxtaposition to highlight contrasts, emphasize meaning, and engage the audience, making the interpretation more dynamic and memorable.

Exercise 7.2.2

Activity 2: Juxtaposition in Action

Objective: Practice using juxtaposition to create contrast and enhance meaning in oral interpretation.

Instructions:

1. Select a Text: Choose a short dialogue, poem, or scene with at least two contrasting ideas, characters, or moods.
2. Identify Contrasts: Mark sections that show opposing traits, emotions, or themes (e.g., calm vs. panicked, humor vs. tragedy).
3. Perform in Juxtaposition: Read or act the contrasting sections back-to-back, emphasizing the differences through voice, tone, and body language.
4. Reflect: Explain how the contrast changed the emotional impact or clarified the theme for the audience.

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7.3: Organizing Multiple Pieces of Literature Together

Overview

Creating a thematic oral interpretation performance involves selecting multiple works around a unifying theme and organizing them to highlight contrasts in characters, moods, and perspectives. Performers analyze key events and emotions, use cutting to focus on impactful excerpts, and arrange pieces with attention to pacing, juxtaposition, and transitions. Through deliberate voice and body choices, balancing humor and sadness, and careful rehearsal, performers craft a cohesive, engaging program that communicates meaning and shapes the audience's emotional and ethical experience.



Figure 7.3.1: Layers in land are like layers of meaning in a performance. Just as you dig through earth to understand its history, a performer unpacks a text, bringing each layer to life for the audience. Both require patience, sensitivity, and skill to reveal the richness beneath the surface. (CC BY-SA 2.0; travelwayoflife - Quebrada de Cafayate, Salta (Argentina)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify how to select a unifying theme for multiple works of literature and explain how each piece contributes to the overall message or concept of the performance.
2. Recognize how to arrange selected literature segments to create a cohesive and engaging program, considering pacing, juxtaposition, transitions, and narrative flow to maintain audience interest.
3. Explore how to use voice, body, and mood (including humor and sadness) strategically to differentiate characters, emphasize contrasts, and communicate the ethical and emotional dimensions of the performance to the audience.

Organizing Multiple Pieces of Literature Together

Oral interpretation is the art of bringing literature to life through performance. While individual works can be performed on their own, many performers choose to create programs that include multiple pieces of literature centered around a unifying theme. Doing so allows for richer exploration of ideas, contrasts between characters and moods, and a more dynamic audience experience.

There is no "proper" way to organize or arrange multiple pieces for performance. In fact, you may find it is most effective for your performance purposes to present an introduction, then literature work A, then work B, then work C for the ending. However, this linear progression is not the only method. You may find that a bit more "hopping around" from piece to piece throughout the performance may create a more appealing performance and do more to amplify the communicative message you desire to

convey.

You may find you can create a performance program by organizing various segments of each piece into a compiled arrangement. You might, for example, begin with a little of piece A before presenting an introduction. Then, after the intro, perhaps piece B is the next segment before getting into a little of piece A again. Then, you may decide to present a bit of piece C before going back to a different segment of piece A before finally ending on piece D. You may liken this style to a classical music symphony where several different musical segments ebb and flow, appear and reappear, throughout the several-minutes long composition.

When using multiple pieces of literature, try to abandon the idea of telling a story. Instead, focus on the goal of imparting a theme, message, or persuasive thesis to your audience through the interpretation of your chosen literature. However, remember that you still want to create a "build" of sorts with your program and the progression of the literature, regardless of how it is arranged. As mentioned previously, you will find it helpful if you know the exact segment with which you want to end the performance. You can find ways to organize the other literature pieces that build to that moment, making your total performance take on qualities like a symphony – ebbs and flows of emotion and ideas, culminating in the final thought/mood on which you choose to end.

Selecting a Theme

The first step in creating a thematic performance is identifying a central idea, concept, or emotion that will tie the works together. Themes might include topics such as hope, identity, justice, love, or resilience. Every piece of literature selected should contribute meaningfully to exploring or emphasizing this theme, helping the audience understand the connections between works.

Selecting a theme in oral interpretation is critical because it determines the perspective, values, and issues the performance highlights. By choosing a theme, the performer decides which voices, ideas, and experiences will be centered, and which may be marginalized or left out. This is inherently political, as literature often reflects social, cultural, and historical dynamics, and emphasizing certain themes can challenge dominant narratives, question injustices, or amplify underrepresented perspectives. In essence, the theme shapes the story the audience experiences and influences how they understand the world, making thematic selection an ethically and socially significant choice.

In this sense, performance creates realities: it brings abstract words on a page into lived experience for the audience. The performer's interpretation influences how the audience sees the world, empathizes with characters, and engages with moral or social issues. For example, portraying a marginalized character with depth and humanity can foster understanding and challenge stereotypes, while highlighting injustice in a story can inspire reflection or action.

Thus, every oral interpretation is a form of moral storytelling: the performer does not merely reflect a reality. They co-create it with the audience. Through voice, body, and choice of emphasis, the performer shapes how the audience experiences and interprets the narrative, making performance a powerful tool for ethical engagement and social insight.

Exercise 7.3.1

Activity 1: Analyzing Themes as Moral and Political Choices

Objective: Students will critically evaluate how the selection of a theme in oral interpretation shapes social, cultural, and ethical perspectives, considering whose voices are centered and whose are marginalized.

Instructions:

1. Select 2–3 literary works (poems, short stories, or excerpts) that you might use for an oral interpretation performance.
2. Identify a central theme that connects all the works (e.g., justice, identity, resilience, oppression, freedom).
3. Critically analyze:
    - Ethical impact: How does emphasizing this theme shape the audience's moral understanding? What values or judgments does it communicate?
    - Political dimension: Whose voices and experiences are centered in your theme, and whose are excluded? What social or cultural narratives are reinforced or challenged?
    - Audience effect: How might different audiences interpret or respond to your theme, and what responsibilities does the performer have in shaping this interpretation?
4. Write a 1–2 page reflection addressing these questions and propose any adjustments to your theme or selection of works to enhance ethical and political awareness.

5. Optionally, perform a 1–2 minute excerpt highlighting the theme, then reflect on how your vocal and physical choices influence audience perception of the moral and political aspects.

Choosing Complementary Works

Once a theme has been established, select 2–5 pieces of literature that relate to the theme. Variety is important: works with differing perspectives, tones, or characters will create contrast and maintain audience interest. The goal is to explore the theme from multiple angles, giving the program depth and resonance. In oral interpretation performances, mood is the emotional atmosphere the performer creates, guiding the audience's feelings and engagement throughout the piece. A well-rounded performance often includes both humor and sadness because these contrasting emotions deepen the audience's connection to the work and its characters. Humor can provide relief, highlight human quirks, and make the narrative relatable, while sadness evokes empathy, underscores conflict or loss, and gives weight to the story's themes. By skillfully balancing these moods, performers create a dynamic emotional experience, making the performance more memorable, nuanced, and impactful.

Analyzing the Literature

Each selected work should be carefully analyzed before performance. Consider the following:

- The key events, characters, and conflicts
- The central message or emotional impact
- Passages most effective for performance

Performers may use cutting to select the most impactful excerpts, ensuring the program remains within time limits while retaining meaning and dramatic tension.

Organizing for Flow

Arranging the pieces thoughtfully is critical to audience engagement. Consider:

- Pacing and intensity: Alternate between slower, reflective passages and faster, energetic sections.
- Juxtaposition: Place contrasting works or passages side by side to emphasize differences in characters, tone, or perspective.
- Narrative arc: Even across multiple works, aim for a sense of progression with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Planning Transitions

Smooth transitions between works help the program feel cohesive. Transitions can be verbal introductions, subtle vocal or physical cues, or brief reflections that connect pieces to the overarching theme. These help the audience understand the relationship between each work and maintain engagement.

Voice and Body Techniques

Because thematic programs often include multiple characters, moods, and tones, performers must plan how to use their voice and body effectively:

- Differentiate characters through vocal variety, gestures, and facial expressions
- Use tempo, pauses, and emphasis to highlight meaning
- Ensure consistency in mood and tone to support the thematic flow

Rehearsal and Refinement

Practice is essential to creating a polished program. Performers should:

- Time the program to fit performance requirements
- Adjust pacing, transitions, and delivery for coherence and emotional impact

- Rehearse the program as a whole to ensure it feels unified rather than disjointed

Engaging the Audience

The ultimate goal of a thematic oral interpretation performance is to leave a lasting impression. By carefully selecting works, organizing them thoughtfully, and performing with clarity and emotion, the performer can communicate the theme effectively and create a memorable experience for the audience. It is important to remember that performance is not simply the act of reading or acting out a text. It is also a moral act because it actively shapes the perceptions, emotions, and understanding of an audience. Every choice a performer makes carries ethical weight. By deciding how to present a story, the performer implicitly communicates values, perspectives, and judgments about the characters, events, or ideas in the work.

Exercise 7.3.2

Activity 2: Exploring Thematic Oral Interpretation

Objective: Develop skills to perform a text in a way that communicates its theme and ethical perspective effectively.

Instructions:

1. Select a text (poem, short story, or excerpt) that conveys a strong theme.
2. Analyze the text:
    - Identify the central theme.
    - Note key emotions, values, and ethical messages.
    - Consider how the characters' actions and events reflect these messages.
3. Plan your performance:
    - Decide how your tone, pacing, gestures, and expression will reveal the theme.
    - Think about how your choices communicate values and perspectives to the audience.
4. Perform the text: Deliver it clearly and with emotional depth, aiming to leave a lasting impression.
5. Reflect: Write a short paragraph answering:
    - How did your performance highlight the theme?
    - What moral or ethical messages did you convey?
    - How might different performance choices change the audience's understanding?

Critical Point: Every decision you make in a performance carries ethical weight—it shapes how the audience perceives and interprets the text.

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7.4: References

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8: COMPOSING INTRODUCTIONS AND TRANSITIONS

Overview

An introduction is a short, performer-written paragraph at the start of a performance that connects the literature to the audience by explaining its relevance, theme, or message. It usually includes an attention-getter (hook), the title and author, a statement about the message or moral, and a personal connection. Background info may be added if needed. Introductions should be natural, relatable, brief (about 10% of performance time), and avoid detailed plot summaries.

When performing multiple pieces, transitions help connect sections. These can be brief spoken bridges or subtle shifts in voice and body language. Thoughtful transitions enhance audience understanding and emotional flow, while careless ones can confuse or mislead. Performers have an ethical responsibility to use introductions and transitions to respect the literature and engage the audience meaningfully.

8.1: Composing Introductions

8.2: Composing Transitions

8.3: References

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8.1: Composing Introductions

Overview

An introduction is a key feature of oral interpretation, providing a brief, engaging paragraph at the start of a performance that connects the literature to the audience. Effective introductions include elements such as an attention getter, title and author, message or moral statement, personal connection, and optional background information. Performers should craft introductions that are clear, relatable, and concise, delivering them naturally while keeping the focus on the audience and the theme rather than the plot or character emotions.

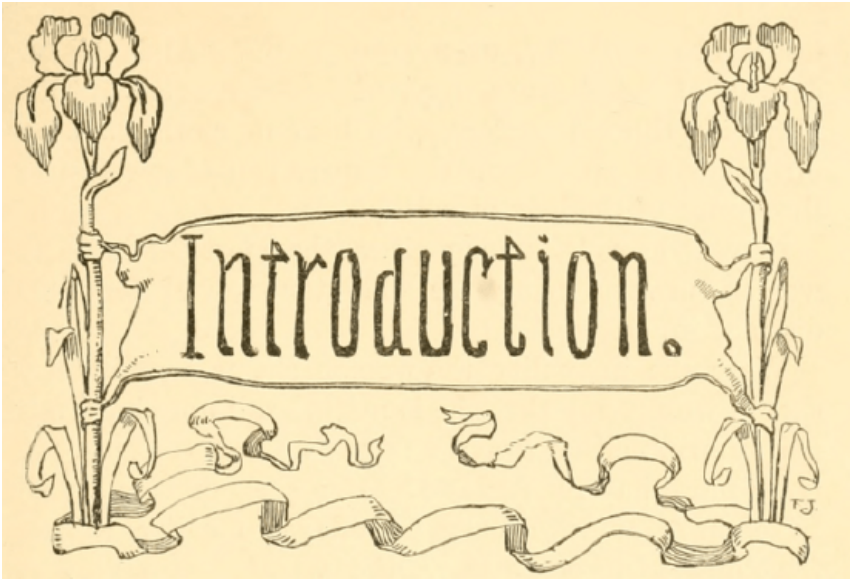


Figure 8.1.1: Similar to books, oral interpretation performances begin with an introduction. (Public Domain; Frances E. Jones - New Orleans (1895) introduction headpiece)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and apply the key elements of an effective oral interpretation introduction, including attention getters, title and author, message/moral statement, personal connection, and optional background/context.
2. Write and organize an introduction that establishes relevance and engages the audience, ensuring the theme or message is relatable, concise, and clearly connected to the literature.
3. Deliver the introduction with clarity, confidence, and authenticity, maintaining a natural tone distinct from the performance itself while effectively preparing the audience for the thematic content of the piece.

Introductions

One specific characteristic of oral interpretation is the often-present introduction. This is a brief paragraph written by the performer that is placed toward the beginning of a performance. Its purpose is to impart relevance, connecting the literature and the performance to the audience. Essentially, it tells the audience why the literature and the performance are important and what lesson the audience can learn or theme they can celebrate because of it.

Elements of an Introduction

An oral interpretation intro generally contains the following elements:

- Attention getter. Also known as a “hook,” this is the very first part of your introduction. It is the first time we are seeing and hearing you when you begin your performance, so it should be something that makes us want to continue to listen. When you deliver this moment, you should exude confidence. There are several techniques you can use as an attention getter:
  - Teaser – This is a short segment of the literature that is being performed.
  - Question – Get your audience thinking about your performance by asking them something. You can either solicit responses or let it be rhetorical.
  - Quote – Use a quote that relates to the message you have chosen to highlight in your literature.
  - Joke – Using humor is an effective attention getter, assuming it is connected to the performance theme somehow.
  - Startling research/fact/statistic – Citing your source immediately afterward, you can begin your performance with a relevant piece of information that reveals insight about your literature or your message.
  - More! – There are many other sorts of attention getters, from dancing to singing to sign language to foreign language… basically, anything other than, “Hi, my name is ____, and I’m doing (title and author) for you today” can work.
- Title and author. You should clearly state these for each piece of literature that appears in your performance. If an author is unknown, you should say so. If you are using work from a movie or television show, the screenwriter(s) is considered the author. You don’t need to cite illustrators as the words are what you are sharing, not the pictures. You should also be sure to state all authors if there are multiple ones for any particular work.
- Message/moral/relation statement. This is a sentence that tells the audience why they should pay attention for the next several minutes. The statement should include the word “you,” “we,” or “us,” and it should explain the message/theme/moral/lesson of the literature that you discovered through your analysis of the work.
- Personal connection statement. This sentence gives the performance a personal quality and explains to the audience why this particular literature or message/theme is important to you. This statement should include the words “I” or “me.”
- Background information or context (optional). If your literature is a cutting of a larger work or if it is so heavy in rhetorical context that the audience must understand a bit more in order to grasp the meaning of the work you wish to convey, you can provide some brief information to get an audience up to speed. For example, if you are doing chapter 11 of a novel, you may need to explain what has happened in the previous ten chapters or give us background on the main character before beginning your selection.

The order of these elements, except for the attention getter, does not matter. You may even find that you can use the personal connection or relation statement as the attention getter.

Exercise 8.1.1

Activity 1: Crafting Your Oral Interpretation Introduction

Objective: Practice creating a strong, engaging introduction for an oral interpretation performance.

Instructions:

1. Choose a short literary excerpt you plan to perform.
2. Write an introduction that includes:
   - An attention getter (teaser, question, quote, joke, or fact/statistic).
   - Title and author of your piece.
   - A message/moral/relation statement explaining why the audience should listen.
   - A personal connection statement sharing why this piece matters to you.
   - (Optional) Background/context if needed.
3. Swap introductions with a partner and give feedback:
   - Does the attention getter grab your interest?
   - Is the theme/message clear?
   - Does the introduction feel personal and engaging?
4. Revise your introduction based on feedback and practice delivering it confidently.

Considerations for Writing/Delivering the Introduction

Once you have a rough idea of what you’d like to say in your introduction, you may want to keep the following in mind as you polish it and begin to practice delivering it.

- Ensure that your central message is something relatively universal. It should be something to which many people can relate.

This means you should do a good amount of audience analysis before finalizing this theme for your performance. Consider your audience members' cultures, ages, gender identity, socioeconomic statuses, political affiliations, interests, etc.
- Avoid detail about the plot of your piece. Let that develop as you perform. If you must go into plot in your intro, limit it to only one sentence. We want to see societal relevance and a connection to ourselves.
- Be you in the introduction, not a character. The intro should sound more neutral and natural compared to the piece itself. Most of the emotion and feeling in your performance should be demonstrated through the literature, not the intro.
- Remember to either memorize your introduction or use a notecard or paper that is separate from your literature script.
- Aim to limit your introduction to no more than 10% or less of the time of your entire performance.

Sample Introductions

To help in your own composition of a performance introduction, here are some samples. You will see that each intro element has been labeled in brackets to help you identify them more easily (you would not say these words in the actual performance).

Sample Intro for a Single-Piece Performance

[attention getter] "What defines responsibility when it comes to a divorce? [central message] Is it better to stay together for the sake of the kids, or is it better to break the ties and get on with our lives? As future parents, this is a decision we may all have to eventually face, whether we want to or not. [personal connection] My parents finally divorced when I was 12 after a decade of misery together, and I'm still not certain what I feel is the best choice. [background info] In this piece, Joanie Marcus is faced with this decision when her chronically irresponsible husband comes back to her claiming that he has changed. [title and author] Little Footsteps, by Ted Tally.

Sample Intro for a Multiple-Piece Performance

[attention getter] According to the VA News (2025), an estimated 11,000 women served in the Vietnam War: nurses, staffers, volunteers. In all of our wars, women have been killed, maimed, disabled, and most of all psychologically injured. [central message] But, they are the forgotten veterans, and it is our duty to remember them. [personal connection] I became attached to this cause after taking a college course in Vietnam-themed literature and felt pulled to create this program in tribute to these wonderful women. The Women Wounded: a program including Home Before Morning, prose by Lynda VanDervanter, "Vo Thi Troung," poetry by Lady Borton, and "Letter from Home," poetry by Dana Schuster [titles and authors]. Here, women's voices are heard as they cry for recognition.

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8.2: Composing Transitions

Overview

Transitions in oral interpretation help guide the audience when moving between multiple pieces of literature. Performers can use brief, conversational bridges to refocus attention or highlight shifts in theme, mood, or idea. Often times, these transitions are created by the performer and are delivered separate from the literature. While not always necessary, these transitions should be concise to maintain the emotional flow, with alternatives including subtle cues like page turns or changes in voice and body language.

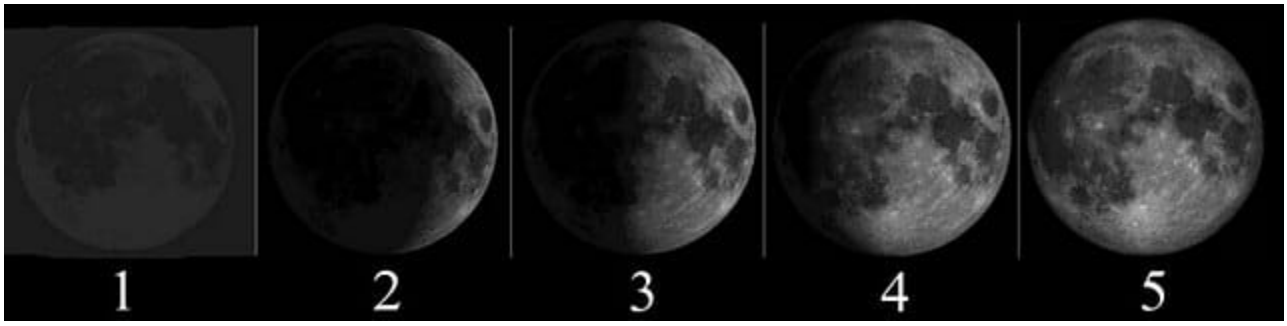


Figure 8.2.1: Transitions impact the meaning of a performance. (Public Domain; Puchatech K. - Waxing Moon slides)

Learning Objectives

1. Explain the purpose of transitions in multi-piece oral interpretation performances and how they guide the audience's attention between pieces.
2. Demonstrate effective transition techniques, including brief, conversational bridges or nonverbal cues like page turns, voice, and body language.
3. Evaluate when and how to use transitions to maintain the emotional flow and coherence of a performance without disrupting momentum.

Transitions

Particularly when arranging multiple pieces of literature for performance, a beginning performer may not know how to transition from one piece to another. You may feel a need to include mini-intro-style "bridges" between the pieces to help your audience members refocus or to shift their attention more directly to a new thought or idea. In these moments, you can close your literature script and speak directly to the audience, using your own words in a natural, conversational style (similar to the vibe of an introduction) to tell the audience directly what you feel is necessary to understand the movement from one piece to the next.

While this may seem as though it should be the default method when a performer is using multiple pieces to minimize audience confusion as to which piece is which, these transitions are not always necessary, and can sometimes break the momentum of the "symphony" of build and emotion that you've created with your arrangement of the works.

Instead of direct, separate-from-the-literature transitions, you can simply use a page turn and a change in body language and/or voice to indicate a shift in literature, mood, or thought. There are also times where you might feel like the message of a piece is best conveyed if you do provide transitions throughout the performance. If so, it is best when these transitions are brief. They should make a quick reference to the literature or segment that was just heard before moving on to the next.

Ethical Implications in Transitions

The ethical implications of transitions in oral interpretation lie in how performers influence the audience's understanding,

perception, and emotional response. Every choice a performer makes (what to emphasize, how to frame one piece before another, or whether to include a bridge) carries ethical weight because it shapes how the audience interprets the literature.

For example, a transition can highlight or obscure a story's theme, moral lesson, or cultural perspective. The performer implicitly communicates judgments about the work and its characters by choosing to draw attention to certain ideas or values. If done thoughtfully, transitions can help the audience engage critically and empathetically with the material. If done carelessly or manipulatively, however, transitions can mislead, oversimplify, or bias the audience's understanding.

Imagine if a performer moved from a light, humorous poem into a piece about trauma with a joking transition: *"Now that we've laughed a bit, let's get serious."*

The abrupt shift trivializes the second piece's subject matter. This can feel disrespectful to the text, the audience, and real experiences connected to the topic.

Additionally, transitions impact the emotional experience of the audience. Abrupt or insensitive shifts can confuse or emotionally jar listeners, while well-planned transitions foster reflection and meaningful engagement. Ethically, performers have a responsibility to consider the accuracy, fairness, and respect of the interpretations they present, using transitions to enhance clarity and insight rather than distort meaning.

In short, transitions are not just structural tools. They are ethical choices that influence how audiences perceive, feel, and think about the literature and its messages.

Exercise 8.2.1

Activity: Exploring Ethical Transitions

Objective: Understand how transitions influence audience perception and practice creating ethically responsible transitions.

Instructions:

1. Select Two Short Literary Excerpts: Choose two pieces that can be connected thematically or contrast in tone/mood.
2. Plan Two Types of Transitions:
    - Thoughtful/Ethical Transition: Write a brief bridge that clearly connects the two pieces, highlights important themes, and respects the integrity of the literature.
    - Manipulative/Unethical Transition: Write a bridge that exaggerates, oversimplifies, or misrepresents the theme or character motives.
3. Perform Both Transitions: Deliver each transition aloud, using appropriate voice and body language.
4. Reflect and Discuss:
    - How did the ethical transition affect your understanding, emotional response, and engagement?
    - How did the manipulative transition change your perception of the material?
    - What ethical responsibilities do performers have when guiding audience interpretation through transitions?

Transitions Shape Meaning

Transitions in oral interpretation performances are more than simple pauses or shifts between pieces; they are strategic moments that can shape how the audience interprets the meaning and receives the message of a performance. Performers can clarify the connections between works and reinforce the overarching theme by using brief, conversational bridges.

Transitions also guide the audience's emotional journey by signaling changes in tone or mood. A lighthearted scene followed by a darker or more serious excerpt can benefit from a subtle transition, helping the audience adjust and fully absorb the emotional impact of the next piece. Additionally, the way a performer executes a transition can highlight specific meanings or ethical perspectives, encouraging the audience to reflect more deeply on the message.

Finally, transitions play a crucial role in maintaining the flow and momentum of a performance. Smooth, concise transitions preserve the pacing and dramatic build, while awkward or overly long transitions can disrupt engagement and dilute the intended effect. By carefully planning and executing transitions, performers ensure that the audience remains connected to the literature, the theme, and the emotional and ethical layers of the performance, resulting in a cohesive and memorable presentation.

For example, let's say you are doing a multiple-piece interpretation program with a theme of "the hidden dangers of fairy tales." If you just finished the last moments of *Cinderella* and are transitioning into *Beauty and the Beast*, you would close your script and address the audience directly either through memorization of the following or using a separate note card/paper to assist you:

"So, Cinderella's story could potentially teach children that a woman's life will only be satisfying if she finds a rich man to marry. This is not the only dangerous message these tales can send to children. As we see in Beauty and the Beast, the message sent about appropriate relationships could be even more sinister."

In essence, transitions serve as the connective tissue of an oral interpretation performance. They help the audience understand how each piece relates to the larger theme, guide listeners through emotional and tonal shifts, and ensure the performance flows naturally from one moment to the next. When crafted thoughtfully, transitions enrich the audience's comprehension and heighten the overall impact of the program. By closing one idea before opening the next, performers not only maintain coherence but also invite deeper reflection. This helps turn individual pieces of literature into a unified, meaningful experience.

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9: FINDING OUR VOICE AND PURPOSE

Overview

Effective oral interpretation combines voice, body, and delivery to express meaning and emotion, enhancing character portrayal and audience connection. Performers draw from both their own experiences and those of the characters to create authentic, empathetic presentations. This shared liminal space invites audiences to engage in co-creating meaning beyond the performance itself. Techniques like breaking the fourth wall and participatory performance, as emphasized by Augusto Boal, further deepen audience engagement and can inspire empathy and social change.

9.1: Practical Vocal Delivery Techniques

9.2: Liminality Within Performance

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9.1: Practical Vocal Delivery Techniques

Overview

This chapter explores how the use of voice and body can bring literary works to life through oral interpretation. Unlike traditional public speaking, oral interpretation requires performers to embody the emotions, personalities, and messages within a text, using their voices and physical expression as interpretive tools.

The chapter begins by comparing effective and ineffective literary readings. Engaging readers demonstrate confidence, volume, pacing, and expressive inflection, while disengaged readers often appear monotone, quiet, or detached. In oral interpretation, these basic reading skills are elevated into performance techniques that enhance meaning and audience connection.



Figure 9.1.1: Performers exploring different delivery techniques on stage. (CC BY 4.0; Harrison Keely - The theatre stage and auditorium of the Peacock Performing Arts Center in Hayesville, North Carolina 04)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and distinguish the key vocal and physical traits that contribute to engaging and effective oral interpretation performances, as opposed to ineffective or disengaged readings.
2. Apply principles of paralanguage including rate, volume, pitch, enunciation, pronunciation, pauses, and special vocal characteristics.
3. Demonstrate awareness and intentional use of voice and body language as interpretive tools to convey character, emotion, and meaning in oral performance, informed by observation and analysis of real-life communication behaviors.

Approaching Delivery

How many of you have attended an author's reading or listened to poets read online? Do you remember story time in elementary school? If you have seen these sorts of events, think of what made the reading enjoyable or made you wish you were somewhere else—anywhere else.

If we look at the characteristics that mark good literature readers, we frequently find these traits:

1. Confidence
2. Ample vocal volume

3. Appropriate pacing
4. Heightened inflection and cadence
5. Eyes off of page

In contrast, readers who bore the audience show the following traits:

1. Disinterested demeanor
2. Low vocal volume
3. Pacing too fast
4. Monotone voice
5. Eyes glued to page

The traits in the first list above are the bare minimum of what might make an interesting and compelling literature reading. In oral interpretation of literature, however, performers use their voice and body to take these things just a step further. An oral interpretation performer's goal is to amplify a central message or theme that is inherent in a literary text(s). To breathe life into the literature and ensure the audience is compelled to receive that central message, interpretation performers make ample use of their vocal and body language resources.

Whenever we are speaking or presenting to a group of people in the form of a speech, it becomes more important to use appropriate vocal characteristics and body language to enhance the effectiveness of our communication. When we present literature to an audience as opposed to a speech, it becomes even more critical to pay close attention to these elements so we can more accurately convey emotions, feelings, and nuance of characters/personae with literary texts.

You may also find that while taking this course, it will behoove you to become a "people watcher." What better way to analyze and discover different ways of using voice and body than by watching others use them? Pay close attention to what actors do with characters in TV and movies to convey feeling, emotion, and personality. As you wait for the bus, keep your phone in your pocket and simply watch the people walking by. Observe the voices you hear, the posture you see, and how the whole package comes together to send you messages (sometimes intentional, sometimes not) about the people. Begin to play with these sorts of mannerisms as you prepare and present your own oral interpretation performances.

This chapter will explore the various resources at our disposal within our earthly vehicles (our bodies) that we can modify to effectively bring our chosen literature to life for our audiences. This use of voice and body to convey a message to others is often called "delivery."

Voice

Our voices are truly one of the most flexible instruments we possess. Consider all the ways you can modify your voice in order to create feeling and amplify a message. As you learn to perform literature for your audience in oral interpretation, you can learn to play with these variations to add color, depth, and emotion to the personae you portray. These various modifications we can make to our vocal instruments are called "paralanguage," the non-verbal aspects of voice. In other words, paralanguage refers to everything we can do with our voices independent of simply saying words. Below, we will explore ways we can vary the voice.

Rate

This involves changes in the speed or tempo of our speech. Consider what it might communicate to someone if we speak at a rapid pace. What impression does that give to our listener? It might indicate we are in a hurry, stressed, or frustrated with the conversation, just to name a few possibilities. In contrast, speaking at a slower pace could indicate we are trying to get an important point across, that we are having trouble forming our sentences, that we are relaxed, or that we aren't feeling well.

Exercise 9.1.1

Activity 1: Awareness Exercise

1. Choose a short text (10–12 lines) from a poem, short story, or dramatic monologue.
2. Read it aloud three times:
   - Fast rate: Read quickly, as though you are in a hurry or anxious.
   - Moderate rate: Read naturally and conversationally.

- Slow rate: Read deliberately, as though the words carry great weight or sadness.

3. After each reading, reflect:
   - How did your pacing change the tone or emotion of the passage?
   - Which rate felt most natural for the message or mood?
   - Did the meaning of the text shift as your speed changed?

Volume

When we lower or raise our vocal volume, we change the decibel level of our voices. We could use a loud voice to indicate that a character or persona is angry, excited, or in a crowded location. A quiet voice or whisper could indicate shyness, youth or old age, or small stature.

Pitch/Intonation

Our voices come fully equipped with their own musical range, and even small changes in pitch or intonation using the musical scale of our voices can communicate many nuances of meaning to our audience members. If literature that you choose to perform includes a young boy character, you can raise your pitch a little to indicate his younger age. If your literature includes the character of a bear, you might lower your pitch significantly to demonstrate the bear's large and intimidating stature. You may even want to use a one-note monotone to display a persona's boredom or robotic qualities.

Enunciation

Enunciation involves the pronunciation of individual sounds within a word. Small changes in this can help a performer demonstrate where a particular character might be from or even his emotional or physical state.

You can indicate accents and dialects by using small changes in enunciation (and pronunciation, see next paragraph). Think of the way a Californian says the word "going" [GO-eeng] compared to someone who hails from Texas [GO-in]. In addition to the dropping of the last "g," the Texan employs more of a short "i" sound in the second syllable while the Californian uses more of a long "e" sound.

A performer might also decide to overemphasize all consonant sounds within a sentence or paragraph to show seriousness or a desire to be very clear with their words. Or, one may decide to purposely slur words of dialogue to illustrate a seriously inebriated character.

Pronunciation

Like enunciation, pronunciation deals with the way we say things. But, pronunciation refers to the sound of an entire word itself, and may also include the stress that is placed on particular syllables. Performers can use changes in pronunciation (like enunciation) to indicate origin of a persona. For example, the British typically say "adult" by placing the stress or emphasis on the first syllable [Ă-duhlt] while Americans place the stress on the second [a-DUHLT].

Consider how words like sherbet, picture, drawer, and button may all be pronounced differently depending on where someone is from. You can research and use different appropriate pronunciations to enhance the depth of your character portrayals.

Pauses

It is important the note the absence of voice as a valuable tool to add meaning and feeling to a performance. It is amazing how much "nothing" can say. Pauses can indicate time to think, nervousness, seriousness, shock, suspense, and more.

In addition to using pauses within performances, oral interpretation performers should also learn the value of pausing in the moments before beginning a performance (the time between arriving on a stage and beginning the first moments) as well as at the end (the time between the last performance moment and when a performer would walk off stage). These pauses give the performer time to reflect and process the event rather than speeding through the motions.

Special Vocal Characteristics

In addition to all the above, performers can use so many other marvelously effective techniques with their voices. You can play with resonance, letting your voice embrace deep, full sound or restrained sound depending on where you concentrate the air in your body (head, chest, throat). You can use nasal qualities, sending your voice into your nose on its way out of your body. You can use breathiness, allowing more air to escape from your mouth when you speak. You can use shakiness, giving your voice a bit of a warbly sound. There is so much more – stutters, lisps, onomatopoeia, sound effects. Often, these sorts of things can be called "vocalizations," sound effects we can make with our voices that don't necessarily involve words but that still add meaning to our messages. What effects do you think these sorts of vocal changes would have on the meaning of your words? What personality characteristics or emotions might they evoke?

Exercise 9.1.2

Activity 2: Playing with Special Vocal Qualities

A. Experiment with Vocal Texture
Practice saying the same neutral phrase—such as “I can’t believe it”—using each of the following vocal characteristics:

- Resonant (deep, full sound from the chest)
- Nasal (sound directed through the nose)
- Breathy (soft, airy tone)
- Shaky (unsteady, emotional tone)
- Crisp and clear (precise articulation)

After each version, note:

- What emotion or personality did that sound suggest?
- How might this vocal quality fit a particular character or moment in a literary text?

B. Apply to Literature
Select one line or short passage from a text you’re preparing for performance.
Experiment using at least two different vocal styles from above.
Discuss or journal:

- Which style best fits the emotional tone of the piece?
- How did the vocal change alter the audience’s potential perception of the character?

Variations in vocal characteristics are critical to engaging and meaningful oral interpretation performances. In speeches and formal, linear presentations, we are often told to use natural and conversational speech (clear articulation, adequate vocal volume, appropriate pronunciation, etc.) so that audience members may understand our words completely. In oral interpretation, however, we may purposely wish to violate these “norms” to better convey a character’s personality or amplify a message. Oral interp performers must learn to walk the line of using these techniques while still ensuring that their audience understands their words regardless of the choices they make in vocal variation throughout the performance.

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9.2: Liminality Within Performance

Overview

Liminality, a concept introduced by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and developed by Victor Turner (1969), refers to a transitional "in-between" state where transformation and ambiguity coexist. In oral interpretation, performers occupy this liminal space, navigating between their own identity and that of the character.

Effective performance arises from connecting personal experiences with the character's world, fostering empathy and layered meaning (Ellis & Burger, 2003). The audience also participates, responding to both performer and character (Chase, 2008). As Anna Deavere Smith (1992) notes, the power of performance emerges in the "gaps" between identities, where new understanding is co-created.

Thus, oral interpretation does not present the performer's, character's, or audience's story in isolation; it reflects the convergence of all narratives, generating shared meaning that resonates beyond the performance itself.



Figure 9.2.1: The reflection is not identical to the mountain itself; it retains its own distinctive features while simultaneously mirroring the original form. Together, the mountain and its reflection co-create a new visual composition, one that maintains elements of their individual identities while producing a combined, emergent image. This is similar to the process performers encounter while performing other people. (Public Domain; Holly Cheng - Mount Hood reflected in Mirror Lake, Oregon)

Learning Objectives

1. Define and explain liminality in the context of performance, identifying how it represents transitional spaces where identities, narratives, and meanings intersect.
2. Analyze the role of empathy and personal experience in oral interpretation, demonstrating how performers connect their own perspectives with the character's to create layered and authentic performances.
3. Evaluate the co-creative relationship between performer, character, and audience, explaining how shared liminal experiences generate new meaning and deepen audience engagement.

What is Liminality?

According to Oxford Reference (2025), liminality is defined as "a ritual space or phase of transition in which a person is no longer what they were, but is not yet what they will be. The liminal is the in-between, the neither one thing nor the other." The concept was

first introduced by anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1909) and later expanded by Victor Turner (1960s). In literature, theatre, and performance studies, liminality often describes moments, spaces, or characters that exist between worlds or identities. They are moments where transformation and ambiguity coexist.

For example, a second-generation Mexican American student switches seamlessly between Spanish and English depending on the space they occupy. At home, they are expected to uphold Mexican traditions such as respecting elders, eating traditional foods, and celebrating quinceañeras. At school or work, they are read as American and expected to conform to U.S. norms of individuality and self-expression. They feel fully accepted in neither space, yet draw meaning and identity from existing in the in-between—belonging to both, but not entirely to either.

In oral interpretation, performers also enter a liminal space. During performance, performers are neither entirely themselves nor entirely the character they are portraying. Rather, performers inhabit a space between these two identities. While creating performances, the goal is not to erase your own identity to convince the audience that you are the character, but to discover points of genuine connection between your lived experiences and the character's world. Through this process, you create a layered and authentic performance that draws on both empathy and imagination.

Exercise 9.2.1

Activity 1: Exploring the Liminal Space

Objective:
To experience and reflect on the liminal space between performer and character, and to identify ways personal experiences can connect to the character's story.

Part 1: Reflection and Identification

1. Choose a short passage, monologue, or poem you plan to perform.
2. Identify one aspect of the character's experience (emotion, motivation, or life circumstance) that resonates with your own life experiences.
3. Write a brief reflection (3–5 sentences) describing how your experience connects with the character's.

Co-Creating Meaning Through Performance

Ellis and Berger (2003) note that "we try to understand others by comparing our experiences to theirs" (p. 177). This act of comparison forms the foundation of empathetic performance. By reflecting on your own life while exploring the circumstances and emotions of a character, you enter a liminal space where understanding deepens and new meaning emerges. In this space, the performer and the character co-create new realities, each shaping and transforming the other through performance.

This process also extends to the audience. As you perform, viewers engage not only with the character but also with you.

Chase (2008) describes, "the narrator's story is flexible, variable, and shaped in part by interactions with the audience" (p. 65).

The exchange between performer, character, and audience creates a shared liminal experience, where personal and collective meaning intertwine.

Playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith (1992) captures this idea eloquently:

"Character lives not in one place or the other, but in the gaps between the places, and in our struggle to be together in our differences. It lives not in what has been fully articulated, but in what is in the process of being articulated, not in smooth-sounding words, but in the very moment that the smooth-sounding words fail us" (p. xli).

In oral interpretation, your task as a performer is to find yourself in those gaps and to inhabit the spaces between your story and the character's story. Equally important is leaving room for your audience to find themselves within those same gaps. When this occurs, performance transcends the moment, leaving a lasting impact that extends beyond the boundaries of time and space.

The performance does not merely represent the character's story, the performer's story, or the audience's story in isolation. Rather,

it reflects the complex interplay of all these narratives as they converge, intertwine, and co-create new layers of meaning and shared reality.

Exercise 9.2.2

Activity 2: Co-Creating Meaning Through Performance

Objective:
To develop empathetic connection with a character and explore how performer, character, and audience interact to create shared meaning.

Part 1: Performance Exploration

1. Rehearse a passage aloud. While performing:
   - Notice moments where your personal experience informs the character's portrayal.
   - Identify areas where you are simultaneously yourself and the character (inhabiting the liminal space).
2. Perform for a peer or record yourself. Focus on:
   - Conveying the emotional depth of the character while allowing your authentic self to shape the performance.
   - Creating space in your delivery for the audience to interpret and engage with both you and the character.

Part 2: Audience Interaction

1. If performing for peers, ask them to provide feedback on:
   - Moments where they felt connected to the character.
   - Moments where your personal interpretation added depth or nuance.
2. Reflect on how audience engagement influenced your performance or understanding of the piece.

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9.3: Transformative Performance

Overview

Performances serve multiple purposes, including communication, self-expression, exploration of identity and history, entertainment, and education. Effective performance engages both the performer and the audience, creating a collaborative dialogue that allows meaning to be co-constructed. Techniques such as breaking the fourth wall and participatory approaches, as explored by Augusto Boal, illustrate how performance can foster empathy, critical reflection, and social transformation, functioning as both a mirror and a laboratory for society.



Figure 9.3.1: The audience plays an important role in shaping our performances. (CC BY-SA 4.0; Chris.sherlock2 -Lyric Theatre audience for 2023 Wicked)

Learning Objectives

1. Explain how the audience actively contributes to the co-creation of meaning in performance, moving beyond a passive observer role.
2. Describe and implement Augusto Boal's concept of the "spect-actor" and understand how participatory performance can foster critical thinking, social engagement, and transformation.
3. Identify and practice methods for breaking the fourth wall to enhance audience interaction, intimacy, and engagement during a performance.

Finding Purpose in Performance

While this text has focused extensively on how to create performance, it is equally important to critically examine why performances are created.

Performances can be created for a variety of reasons:

- Communication and Expression:

  Performance enables individuals to convey ideas, emotions, stories, and experiences to an audience, translating internal thoughts and feelings into a shared, perceivable form.

- Exploration of Identity, History, and Meaning:

  Performers can investigate aspects of themselves, historical events, characters, or social realities, often inhabiting liminal spaces where personal, fictional, and collective meanings intersect.

- Entertainment and Engagement:

  Performances captivate and engage audiences, fostering a shared experience that can inspire, challenge, or delight.

- Education, Transformation, and Impact:

  Performance can teach audiences new concepts and encourage critical reflection on social issues. By creating a space for rehearsal and exploration, performances can transform both participants and viewers, fostering new insights, perspectives, and emotional experiences that extend beyond the performance itself.

In oral interpretation, performances often integrate these purposes, emphasizing the potential for performance to shape, reflect, and remake realities.

Exercise 9.3.1

Activity 1: Exploring the Purpose of Performance

Objective: Reflect on and identify the purposes behind different types of performances.

Instructions:

1. Choose a Performance: Select a performance you have seen, read about, or plan to create. This could be a play, oral interpretation, poetry reading, or other staged event.
2. Analyze the Purpose: Using the four categories below, identify which purposes the performance fulfills. Provide examples from the performance to support your observations.
   - Communication and Expression: How does the performance convey ideas, emotions, or stories?
   - Exploration of Identity, History, and Meaning: How does it explore the performer's identity, historical events, or societal issues?
   - Entertainment and Engagement: How does it captivate or engage the audience?
   - Education, Transformation, and Impact: Does it teach, inspire reflection, or encourage change?
3. Reflect: Write a short paragraph discussing which purpose was most central to the performance and why. Consider how understanding the purpose can influence performance choices in oral interpretation.

The Role of Audience in Performance

As discussed in the previous chapter, the character, performer, and audience intertwine to co-create meaning during a performance. While creating a performance, it is natural for performers to focus on their own preparation, delivery, and individual choices. However, an exclusive focus on the self can obscure the importance of the audience and their active role in the performance. Effective performance should be conceived as a dialogue rather than a monologue, inviting the audience to engage and participate in the creation of meaning.

Brazilian theatre practitioner, Augusto Boal, explored this idea extensively in his book Theatre of the Oppressed. Boal's work demonstrates how performance can empower individuals and communities, enabling participants to explore and challenge oppressive social structures. He emphasized the active role of the audience, coining the term "spect-actor" to describe participants who both observe and engage in performance. Through this participatory approach, Boal's theatre fosters critical thinking, collective action, and social transformation, illustrating the profound educational and societal potential of performance.

One technique to foster audience engagement is breaking the fourth wall, a theatrical concept in which performers directly acknowledge the audience, dissolving the imaginary barrier that typically separates the stage from spectators. When breaking the fourth wall, performers may:

- Speak directly to the audience.

- Respond to the audience's presence.
- Include the audience in the action or narrative.

The effects of breaking the fourth wall include:

- Creating intimacy between performer and audience.
- Challenging the illusion of the performance and highlighting its constructed nature.
- Inviting audience participation, reflection, and engagement.

I might be dating myself with the following example, but often times, Jim from *The Office* breaks the fourth wall. Jim commonly turns to the camera and raises his eyebrows, silently sharing the joke with the audience. By actively engaging the audience, performers make viewers co-creators of the performance. This interaction can produce transformative experiences, allowing audiences to develop new perspectives and insights. Although performances occur in specific times and places, the meaning co-created between performer and audience has the potential to extend beyond the immediate moment, and transcend through space and time.

Exercise 9.3.2

Activity 2: Engaging the Audience and Breaking the Fourth Wall

Objective: Explore techniques for audience engagement and understand the participatory role of the audience in performance.

Instructions:

1. Read and Reflect: Review the concept of the "spect-actor" from Augusto Boal and the idea of breaking the fourth wall. Think about a performance you have seen or will create.
2. Plan an Interaction:
    - Identify a moment in your performance where you could directly engage the audience.
    - Decide which technique you will use:
        - Speak directly to the audience
        - Respond to the audience's presence
        - Include the audience in the narrative or action
3. Rehearse: Practice this section of your performance with a partner or small group, experimenting with different ways to break the fourth wall and observing the effect on audience engagement.
4. Reflect: After the rehearsal, answer the following questions:
    - How did the audience (or partner) respond?
    - Did the interaction create a sense of intimacy or shared meaning?
    - How might this approach change the audience's understanding of your character or story?

Performance as a Reflection and Catalyst for Social Change

Performance functions as both a mirror and a laboratory for society, simultaneously reflecting and reshaping social ideas, norms, and values. Through storytelling, embodiment, and staged interactions, performances depict cultural practices, social hierarchies, conflicts, and collective experiences, offering audiences an opportunity to critically examine the world around them. By presenting familiar social dynamics in tangible and performative forms, performances allow viewers to recognize patterns, question assumptions, and engage with societal issues in a mediated, reflective space.

Beyond reflection, performance actively reshapes society by presenting alternative perspectives, challenging dominant narratives, and fostering empathy or critical awareness. Participatory and interactive performances enable audiences to experiment with social roles, rehearse new behaviors, and envision transformative possibilities. These experiences cultivate agency, encouraging individuals to consider their own role within social structures and motivating collective action.

For example, the lunch counter sit-ins performed by Black college students reflected the everyday reality of racial segregation in the United States. By calmly sitting at "whites-only" counters, dressed neatly and behaving peacefully, protesters made visible the absurdity and violence of Jim Crow laws. The performances mirrored existing social hierarchies, racial norms, and power imbalances already embedded in daily life.

At the same time, the sit-ins functioned as a catalyst for social change. Their highly visible, disciplined, and repeatable nature transformed ordinary public spaces into stages of moral confrontation. Media coverage amplified these performances, generating public empathy, pressuring businesses to desegregate, and contributing to broader legislative and cultural change, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

In this way, performance is not merely a representation of existing social realities but also a dynamic and generative force, influencing beliefs, attitudes, and communal practices. By engaging both performers and audiences in the co-creation of meaning, performance can contribute to social critique, cultural dialogue, and the ongoing evolution of societal norms.

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10: EMBODIED PERFORMANCES

Overview

In oral interpretation, performers often emphasize the oral aspects of performance. While the voice is indeed central to the interpretive process, the body also plays an essential role. The body communicates meaning, reflects experience, and embodies the cultural norms that shape how individuals move through the world. This section emphasizes the critical role of body language in oral interpretation, highlighting how a performer's physical presence shapes audience perception even before speaking. Central to this is the use of eye contact, focal points, posture, hand gestures, attire, and body language. Performers are encouraged to direct their gaze intentionally based on the context and perspective of each character. Mastery of these techniques, combined with familiarity with the text, allows performers to maintain engagement, convey meaning, and create an immersive, dynamic performance without requiring full memorization of the script.

10.1: Your Focus

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10.1: Your Focus

Overview

This section emphasizes the critical role of body language in oral interpretation, highlighting how a performer's physical presence shapes audience perception even before speaking. Central to this is the use of eye contact and focal points, which guide the audience's attention and clarify relationships between personas. Performers are encouraged to direct their gaze intentionally based on the context and perspective of each character. Mastery of these techniques, combined with familiarity with the text, allows performers to maintain engagement, convey meaning, and create an immersive, dynamic performance without requiring full memorization of the script.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and apply the four types of focal points (audience, off-stage, on-stage, and inward) based on character perspective and context within a literary performance.
2. Demonstrate purposeful eye direction to enhance audience engagement, convey character relationships, and maintain immersion without relying on full memorization of the text.
3. Display eye contact and familiarity with the literature to create dynamic, clear, and ethically grounded performances that communicate both textual meaning and emotional nuance.

Eye Contact and Focal Points

You've probably heard the expression that "the eyes are the windows to the soul." This sentence definitely rings true in an interpretation course. Your ability to connect to both the material and the audience with your eyes is likely the most valuable physical resource you can use in a performance.

In most communication courses that involve presentations, instructors emphasize the importance of eye contact, encouraging speakers to engage directly with the audience while referring to notes only occasionally. Similarly, in the interpretation of literature, audiences do not want to see a performer reading a text continuously, as this prevents full immersion in the performance. Unlike traditional public speaking, interpretation performers are not expected to memorize the entire script; the text remains accessible during the performance. However, the performer's goal is not simply to look at the audience throughout but to direct their gaze purposefully according to the context of the piece. Effective eye direction relies on careful analysis of the text: for each section and for each persona, the performer must determine to whom the character is speaking. These intentional eye directions, known as focal points, can be categorized into four primary types: audience, inward, off-stage, and on-stage.

Focus on Audience

The performer may choose to direct their gaze directly to audience members, bringing them directly into the performance.

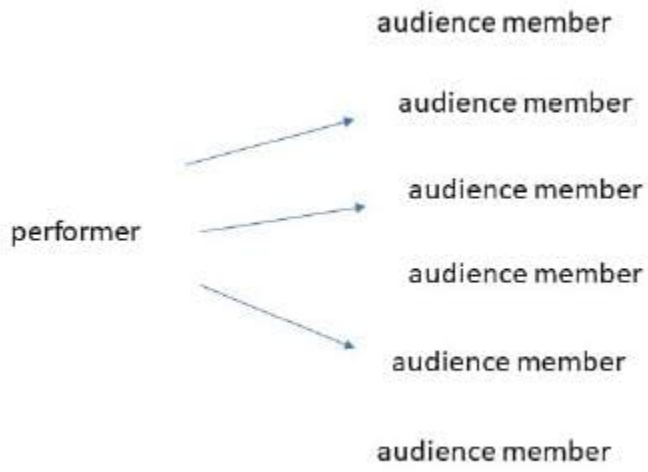


Figure 10.1.1: Performer gaze is directly upon audience members' faces during performance. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; Martinez - Oral Interpretation)

Performers usually use this form of focal points during introductions (when the performer is speaking as themselves, introducing the piece and establishing its significance), but they also use it frequently when performing a prose story during narration lines. Performers may also choose to use this sort of focal point in expository sorts of literature, for example, when performing a section of an informative essay they wrote in college. Or, if a character in a story is addressing a large crowd, the performer can make the actual audience become the crowd in the story by looking directly at everyone present. Essentially, anytime you feel as though the persona speaking in a moment of your performance might be addressing the crowd as a whole, consider looking at your audience directly as you perform that portion.

Focus Off-Stage

Some literature typically chosen for oral interpretation performances include dialogue or moments where a person (or people) is (are) speaking to one other specific character or characters. In these moments, it might be confusing if the performer gazes at audience members while performing these lines. For example, if you are performing a bit of dialogue from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, it might be awkward and confusing to audience members if you look at them during these lines. You can still immerse them in the literature and bring it to life, however, by establishing off-stage focal points for these characters. Whenever you say a line as Juliet, you might angle your eye gaze toward the back wall behind the audience, aimed slightly right. For Romeo, your eye gaze might also look at the back wall but aimed slightly left. Then, the audience sort of sits in the middle of this "conversation" you are having between the two characters.

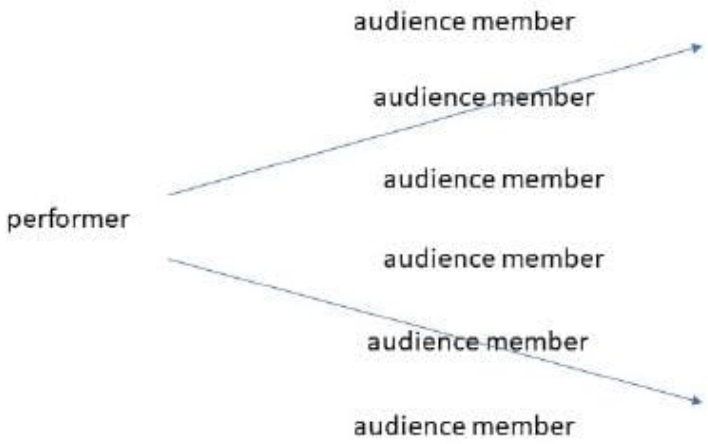


Figure 10.1.2: Performer gaze is over the top of audience members' heads at a more distant target during performance. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; Martinez - Oral Interpretation)

When these focal points pair with effective body language and vocal techniques, it will always be clear to your audience which character is speaking. You can also use off-stage focus when performing a monologue where someone is speaking to one specific person, for example, a letter from a daughter to a mother.

Essentially, any time a person within a piece of literature is speaking to a specific other or others, consider using off-stage focus.

Focus On-Stage

Oral interpretation performers do not commonly engage in focus on-stage, but it warrants mentioning as it is used (but sparingly) in group interpretation performances. This focus involves directing one's eye gaze to another persona on the same stage.



Figure 10.1.3: Performer gaze is at other performers during performance. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; Martinez - Oral Interpretation)

This focus is often problematic in solo interpretation performances because if a performer is playing two or more characters, they must turn their body too far to the left or right to make it appear as though they are addressing a person next to them. Therefore, solo performers are best advised to use a focus off-stage when establishing focal points for different characters.

In group interpretation performances, however, this sort of focus is more tempting and often feels more natural for performers. But while looking at their fellow group mates might feel more natural, group interpretation performers should use caution in choosing this sort of focus in any part of the performance as off-stage focus is considered by many oral interpretation enthusiasts to be a major differentiation between oral interpretation vs. plays/theatre/acting. Group performers will often look at one another in an introduction to their performance, but once the literature begins, you will mostly see them maintain an off-stage focus, even when the people they are portraying are speaking to someone portrayed by another group mate.

Focus Inward

Sometimes, a person is not speaking to any particular group of people or to any other individual present in the person's same physical space. Examples might include one speaking in a diary entry or a character leaving a message on a voicemail. In these cases, a performer's gaze might not be on the audience or any particular point off-stage but rather everywhere and nowhere at once. Consider how one looks when talking to someone else on the phone. That person's eyes might gaze up or down or all around during the conversation. Or, think about where a character might look when talking to themselves or, perhaps, to their god. Again, it might be confusing to aim eye gazes at audience members during these lines, so directing a gaze at no particular spot (or all spots) while performing the literature might be best.

Summary

To establish effective focal points, you need to become familiar with the literature you are choosing to perform. This "familiarity" will allow you to take advantage of these focal point techniques to connect more to your audience and immerse them in your performance. While memorizing your script is fine, do not feel as though you must. You should aim to look up from your script somewhere around 75% of the time. No audience member wants to watch an interpretation performer stare at the text/script for the entire performance, and it will be much harder for the audience to see your great facial expressions and hear your voice in full if you stare down at a script the entire time. Become familiar with your text to allow you to break from staring at it, and use focal points effectively for a more immersive experience for your audience.

Exercise 10.1.1

Activity 1: Focal Point Exploration

Objective: Practice directing eye gaze purposefully to enhance audience engagement and clarify character relationships.

Materials: Short excerpts from dialogue-heavy or narrative literature, scripts/printed copies.

Instructions:

1. Select an excerpt: Each student chooses a short passage (1–2 paragraphs) that includes dialogue or narration with multiple people.
2. Identify people and targets: For each line, determine:
    - Who the persona is addressing (audience, another character, self/inward).
    - Which type of focal point is most appropriate (audience, off-stage, on-stage, inward).
3. Rehearse with eye focus: Students rehearse reading their excerpt aloud, consciously directing their gaze according to their chosen focal points.
    - For audience focal points, look directly at the listeners.
    - For off-stage, aim at an imaginary character location beyond the audience.
    - For inward, gaze unfocused or “to nowhere” as if talking to self or a distant entity.
4. Peer feedback: Perform for a small group. Peers note if focal points were clear and if gaze helped clarify character relationships or narrative context.
5. Reflection: Students discuss how shifting eye focus impacted clarity, audience engagement, and emotional resonance.

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10.2: Mimicking Movement

Overview

This section explores the integral role of physical expression in oral interpretation, emphasizing how facial expressions, posture, attire, hand gestures, and fully body movement communicate character, emotion, and meaning. Performers can enhance audience engagement by making deliberate choices with micro-expressions and body positioning that align with the text and person they are performing. Through practice, exaggeration, and conscious experimentation, students develop greater control over these tools, creating dynamic, immersive performances that convey emotion and narrative effectively.



Figure 10.2.1: Your posture and body language shape your performance. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; Martinez - Oral Interpretation)

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and intentionally use facial expressions and micro-expressions to convey character emotions and enhance audience understanding of the performance.
2. Demonstrate purposeful use of body posture to highlight character traits, emotional states, and narrative context in oral interpretation.
3. Apply coordinated attire choices to create dynamic, immersive, and emotionally engaging performances.

Facial Expressions

Many of us don't realize that we have almost 20 muscles in our faces that allow us to show a range of feelings and emotions. Even the subtlest of movements (often called micro expressions) can convey meaningful messages to those who perceive them. Think about what it might mean to someone if you frown at them when you are saying hello (as opposed to smiling at them). Consider how many times you've suspected someone was lying to you when their mouth kept twitching as they gave reasons for being late in meeting you for lunch.

It will add so much more meaning to your performance when you make conscious choices in facial expressions. For example, if a character is envious of another during a bit of dialogue you are performing, consider narrowing your eyes, furrowing your brows, and tightening your lips as you speak the character's lines to demonstrate this emotion to your audience. Or, as a third person narrator describes a disgusting stench coming from a nearby dumpster in a story, consider wrinkling up your nose and narrowing your eyes to communicate a feeling of disgust. Even if the material you are performing is somewhat expository/informative in nature rather than emotional, when your facial expressions "match" the vibe of the information you are sharing with your audience,

it will make it easier and more pleasing for your audience to attend to your presentation.

Posture

The way we position our shoulders and torso in relation to our head and limbs sends messages to others. For example, if your professor walks into class with their shoulders hunched forward more so than usual, you might assume they injured their back or that they are tired. We can take advantage of this movement in our performances to create character and convey feelings.

If your literature includes a soldier, you might say that character's lines while erecting a stick-straight posture every time they have a line. If the narrator of a piece you are performing has a secret they'd like to share with the audience, they might lean forward a bit, maybe shifting one shoulder forward to create a barrier preventing another imaginary persona in the story from hearing the secret.

Exercise 10.2.1

Activity 1: Expressive Faces & Posture Practice

Objective: Develop awareness and control of facial expressions and body posture to enhance character and emotional clarity in performance.

Materials: Short dialogue or narrative excerpts, mirror (optional), small group or pairs.

Instructions:

1. Warm-Up Facial Muscles: Spend 2–3 minutes exaggerating different facial movements—raise eyebrows, furrow brows, smile, frown, scrunch nose, purse lips—to become aware of micro expressions.
2. Assign Excerpts & Characters: Each student selects a short passage with a clear emotion or persona.
3. Identify Emotional Cues: Read the lines silently and decide which emotions or reactions the character is experiencing.
4. Facial Expression Rehearsal: Perform the excerpt in front of a mirror or peers, exaggerating facial expressions that match the character's emotion (e.g., narrowed eyes for envy, wrinkled nose for disgust).
5. Posture Integration: Add body positioning that reinforces the character:
    - Straight posture for confidence or authority
    - Leaning forward for secrecy or intimacy
    - Hunched or slouched for sadness or exhaustion
6. Peer Feedback: Partners or small groups provide feedback on how well facial expressions and posture conveyed emotion and character.
7. Reflection: Students discuss which expressions or postures felt natural versus exaggerated, and how subtle changes can impact audience perception.

Attire

What we wear and how we adorn our bodies communicates messages. As stated before, costumes are not used in oral interpretation, but it is often a nice touch to dress honoring the mood/theme of a performance. When I was in high school, I performed excerpts of an anti-racism play entitled *God's Country*, by Stephen Dietz. I played multiple characters of various genders, races, and attitudes, and the message of the performance had dark and scary undertones. For every performance, I wore black shoes, black pants, a black turtleneck sweater, and pulled my hair back in a tight, low ponytail. I wanted to appear androgynous and wearing any sort of color felt like dishonor to the piece. It wasn't by any means a costume, but it allowed me to help set the mood of the piece for my audience before I had even said a word.

If you are performing a children's bedtime book, perhaps wear a comfortable pastel shirt with kittens on it. If you are performing a Christmas poem, you could wear red pants. Disneyland prohibits adult visitors from wearing costumes, so many people engage in something called "Disney bounding" where they dress in usual street clothes that have a similar color scheme and style that suggests their favorite Disney character. You can use this technique as inspiration to make purposeful choices in attire for your performances.



Figure 10.2.2: Oral interpretation performers do not wear specific costumes, but they can wear attire that abstractly matches the performance. (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0; Martinez - Oral Interpretation)

Hand Gestures

Using hand movement to convey meaning and feeling is a powerful tool for performers. Gestures can be used as symbols that signify or even substitute for particular words (e.g. an OK sign made with the hands), or they can be supplementary to words, adding feeling and meaning without actually standing for the words on their own (e.g. a palms up, hands out gesture while explaining something important).

Hand gestures can also be particularly helpful when you need to establish physical differences between personae in a performance. For example, if a teacher is speaking to an uninterested student in a bit of dialogue, you might have the teacher often repeat a pointed-finger gesture as she speaks to the student. For the student, you might have her mime a phone in her hand by constantly doing a texting movement with your thumb.

Sometimes, beginner interpretation performers make the mistake of trying to use gestures to paint pictures of almost everything they say in a performance. This is not necessary and often results in a stilted appearance. If a specific gesture will help an audience understand a concept or feeling, you should probably use it. Otherwise, think of your hand movements more as accompaniments to your lines, similarly to what we do with our hands in normal conversation.

Full Body Movement

While hand gestures are the movements of your hands (and perhaps arms), movement refers to repositioning of the entire body. Typically, full-stage movement is minimal in solo interpretation performances. There is sometimes a bit more in group performance, but it still isn't quite as much as the way actors in a play might use an entire stage. Once again, full-stage movement is considered by oral interpretation enthusiasts to be a definitive factor separating stage plays from oral interpretation performance. That being said, you can use some movement to communicate meaning and feeling to your audience, and you can also use it to create transitions between literature pieces within one performance.

If a character dances in a piece of literature, you can feel free to use your space a bit to demonstrate this. If a character is dodging a bullet, it would be appropriate for you to jump to the side to show this. Be mindful, however, of trying to do too much movement in a performance. Since oral interpretation does not involve scenery, costumes, props, etc., literature that involves a lot of physical movement can be incredibly challenging to perform and often quite confusing for audiences to watch.

When performing bits from multiple pieces within one performance, a bit of movement can help show your audience when you are shifting out of one piece and into another. For example, you might set the script on the lectern and present your poem from there, but you might take your script and step in front of the lectern, closer to the audience to perform the prose piece that follows.

Employing Vocals and Body Language

Many beginning performers have a hard time using these vocal and body language delivery resources more dynamically than they are accustomed to. Give yourself permission to be “bigger” in your vocal characteristics and body language when you work in this course and practice at home.

As you learn which of the vocal and body language characteristics you might need to work on in your performances, consider using an old trick I used to employ during my high school competitive oral interpretation days. When you practice for an upcoming performance, go overboard with that particular characteristic. For example, if your peers and instructor have remarked that you could use more hand gestures in your presentations, move your hand(s) with every word you utter as you practice your performance. Don’t worry about whether the movement makes sense at first, just move for movement’s sake to get used to how it feels. You’ll find that after doing this a time or two, using more natural gestures will begin to come more naturally. Similarly, if you have heard that you are monotone when you speak, try practicing the words while exploring every note in your musical range of inflection. Again, don’t worry about the inflection making sense, just try almost “singing” the words. Of course, you would not employ these extreme techniques during an actual performance. However, going “bigger” in practice will help you break the ice and learn what it feels like to fully employ those elements, making it easier to pull back as needed in a performance.

As you learn to incorporate gestures into your performances, you may even want to write little side notes in your script/text to remind you when to do certain movements. As you gain in experience, using natural gestures will start to feel more natural to you.

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10.3: Abstract Movement

Overview

Performers can incorporate abstract movement to embody emotional rhythms, visualize thematic concepts, and engage audiences in an embodied experience. Effective use of movement requires attention to time, space, and energy, with variations in speed, spatial positioning, and intensity shaping audience perception and emotional impact.

Abstract symbols, images, and gestures further enhance performance, allowing subtle, universal cues to convey thematic and emotional significance. Objects, colors, and bodily gestures can carry metaphorical weight, while stillness can heighten tension, focus attention, or punctuate expressive gestures. Performers may also use their bodies to create visual metaphors or socially recognizable images, inviting audiences to co-create meaning.

Context and audience influence interpretation, underscoring the ethical responsibility of performers to avoid misrepresentation. Oral interpretation performers can create rich, ethically grounded performances that communicate textual meaning while engaging audiences both intellectually and sensorially by integrating abstract movement, gestures, and symbolic elements.



Figure 10.3.1: While oral interpretation does not involve dance, performers employ movement techniques similar to those used in choreography to convey meaning, emotion, and thematic nuance. (CC BY 2.0; Barry Goyette - Two dancers)

Learning Objectives

1. Understand how time, space, and energy impact the message of a performance.
2. Apply symbols, images, and gesture to enhance audience engagement and convey nuanced meaning.
3. Recognize how embodied practices reflect identity, social norms, and cultural context, and apply strategies to perform ethically without misrepresentation.

The Body as an Instrument of Performance

Every individual engages in a series of social performances daily, and these performances collectively shape personal identity. In oral interpretation, it is important to remain aware of how such embodied practices influence the meanings communicated on stage. Performers should not attempt to solely mimic the actions of other people or erase their identities to fully “become” a character, as doing so risks ethical and cultural misrepresentation. Instead, performers should use their bodies as an instrument to abstract everyday performances. For instance, if white woman attempted to imitate traditional Indian classical dance by

exaggerating hand gestures (mudras) and facial expressions without understanding the cultural or spiritual significance, her performance reduces a rich, sacred art form to a caricature. This causes offense to those who value the dance's deep meaning and context. Instead, the performer should inhabit a liminal space moving authentically and abstractly while sharing the character's story.

By embracing the body as and instrument of abstract interpretation, performers can engage ethically and meaningfully with their texts, audiences, and identities.

Exercise 10.3.1

Activity 1: Exploring Embodied Identity in Oral Interpretation

Objective: To help performers become aware of how bodily gestures, posture, and movement communicate meaning, identity, and social cues in oral interpretation.

Instructions:

1. Observation Exercise: Pair up with a partner. Observe your partner sitting naturally for two minutes, noting gestures, posture, and subtle movements (e.g., crossed legs, hand placement, leaning). Discuss what these gestures might communicate about confidence, composure, or social identity.
2. Gesture Experimentation: Select a short passage from a text you will perform. Identify two or three gestures or postures that could convey the emotional tone or social positioning of the speaker. Experiment performing the passage with exaggerated, neutral, and subtle versions of these movements.
3. Reflection: Write a brief reflection on how your bodily choices altered the meaning of the text. Consider how context, audience, and cultural norms influenced your interpretation.

Incorporating Abstract Movement in Oral Interpretation

In oral interpretation, movement plays a crucial role in shaping meaning and engaging audiences. While theatrical performers focus primarily on gestures that mimic literal actions (such as walking, pointing, or holding an object), oral interpretation performers incorporate abstract movement. Abstract movement offers a more expressive and symbolic ways to communicate emotion, theme, or rhythm. Abstract movement refers to physical actions that do not directly imitate realistic behaviors but instead evoke ideas, sensations, or emotional states through form, flow, and energy.

For example, instead of physically acting out "opening a door," a performer might extend their arms slowly outward to suggest openness, vulnerability, or transition. These kinds of movements communicate mood or metaphor rather than literal narrative detail.

Purpose of Abstract Movement

Rather than relying on literal gestures, performers can experiment with nonliteral motions that suggest meaning symbolically. Abstract movement helps performers:

- Express emotion and tone: Movements can mirror the emotional rhythm of a text—sharp, angular gestures might convey tension or conflict, while fluid motions can express calm or introspection.
- Visualize themes: Performers can embody abstract concepts such as freedom, confinement, or transformation through shape and motion.
- Create visual interest: Dynamic movement patterns draw the audience's attention and enhance engagement.
- Build connection: Movement invites the audience to feel rather than just understand, transforming interpretation into an embodied experience.

To effectively integrate abstract movement into oral interpretation, performers should begin by identifying emotional or thematic peaks where movement can deepen understanding, such as points of discovery, conflict, or transformation.

Time, Space, and Energy

When incorporating abstract movement into a performance, three primary elements should be considered: time, space, and energy. Time refers to the speed at which movements are executed; alternating between fast and slow motions can sustain audience engagement while emphasizing the emotional or thematic significance of the performance. Space involves the performer's use of the stage or performance area, as movement across the space can reflect changes in mood, emotion, or power dynamics, and variations in proximity to the audience can influence the perceived intimacy of a moment. Energy pertains to the quality and intensity of movement, with sharp, forceful gestures conveying strength or urgency, while soft, gentle motions communicate subtlety, vulnerability, or calm. By thoughtfully integrating these three elements, performers can enhance the expressiveness and impact of their movements within oral interpretation.

Symbols, Images, and Abstract Gestures

When performers encounter difficulty incorporating abstract movement into oral interpretation, they can explore the use of symbols, images, and gestures as tools to enhance meaning. Performers usually avoid using multiple large props in oral interpretation performances. Rather, performers typically only incorporate a black binder into their performances. Performers can integrate symbols into attire or minimal objects, providing subtle and universal cues that audiences can intuitively interpret. Effective symbols extend beyond their literal presence and can take the form of objects, colors, or gestures that evoke deeper emotional or thematic significance. For instance, a chair may symbolize absence or presence, while a scarf could represent connection. Similarly, colors carry connotations, such as red indicating passion or conflict and blue suggesting calmness or sorrow. When using symbolic objects, it is advisable to select items that are wearable or already present in the performance space, maintaining a clean and focused staging. Performers should avoid overloading the performance with multiple symbolic elements; instead, they should select one or two symbols that align with the text's central themes and allow these elements to sustain emotional and thematic weight throughout the piece.

We might also use movement to replicate specific images that are commonly performed in society. The performer's body can become the image. Through shape, stillness, and spatial arrangement, the performer can sculpt visual metaphors. For example, curving the body inward might evoke protection or grief and expanding outward can symbolize freedom or revelation. Performers can also invite the audience to contribute to the imagery perhaps by holding cards, responding to cues, or imagining scenes collectively. This transforms the act of seeing into a shared, co-created experience.

Incorporating abstract gestures into an oral interpretation performance enhances meaning, emphasizes emotion, and helps communicate subtext through physical expression. In oral interpretation, abstract gestures act as a bridge between the spoken word and the embodied experience of the character or narrator, allowing performers to make the text more vivid and accessible for the audience. Abstract gestures should arise naturally from the text's emotional and thematic content rather than being added as decoration. Avoid literal gestures that simply act out the text (e.g., pointing when saying "over there"). Instead, focus on expressive gestures that amplify or suggest meaning. Abstract gestures should feel metaphorical, complementing the spoken language rather than mirroring it. Effective abstract gestures emerge from genuine emotional connection rather than planned choreography. During rehearsal, explore how your body naturally wants to move as you speak the text. Notice spontaneous impulses (hand movements, shifts in posture, or head tilts) and refine them to ensure they feel purposeful and clear.

Stillness

Stillness can be as powerful as gesture. A lack of movement can draw attention to the voice, create tension, or emphasize control. Alternating between stillness and gesture creates rhythm and visual interest, allowing gestures to carry more weight when they do occur. These approaches align with abstract performance techniques where the performer embodies the imagery rather than merely describing it. By incorporating abstract movement, oral interpretation becomes not only a vocal but also a physical exploration of meaning. Through intentional, expressive motion, performers can translate the emotional and thematic undercurrents of literature into embodied form, creating a performance that resonates on both intellectual and sensory levels.

Exercise 10.3.2

Activity 2: Exploring Abstract Movement in Oral Interpretation

Objective: To help performers integrate abstract movement, symbols, and gestures into their oral interpretation to enhance emotional expression, thematic depth, and audience engagement.

Instructions:

1. Select a Passage: Choose a short excerpt from a text (1–2 minutes). Read it silently and aloud to identify emotional or thematic peaks—moments of tension, revelation, or transformation.
2. Movement Mapping:
   - Identify one or two abstract movements that could express the text's emotion or theme (e.g., angular gestures for conflict, fluid gestures for introspection).
   - Experiment with time (speed of movement), space (use of stage or proximity to audience), and energy (intensity and quality of motion) to convey meaning.
3. Symbol Integration:
   - Select one symbolic object, color, or gesture to reinforce the text's message (e.g., a scarf for connection, red for passion).
   - Incorporate this symbol into your movements without distracting from the text.
4. Gesture Exploration:
   - Allow gestures to emerge naturally from the text's emotional content.
   - Avoid literal mimicry (e.g., pointing when saying "over there") and instead focus on gestures that metaphorically amplify meaning.
5. Stillness and Rhythm:
   - Experiment with alternating stillness and movement to emphasize key moments, create visual interest, and complement vocal delivery.
6. Performance and Feedback:
   - Perform the passage for a partner or small group, inviting them to reflect on how movement, symbols, and gestures influenced their understanding and emotional engagement.
   - Revise based on feedback and refine gestures and abstract movements for clarity and expressive impact.

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