

An Introduction to Dramatic Interpretation (DI)



Event Description

Using a play, short story, or other published work, students perform a selection of one or more portions of a piece up to ten minutes in length. With a spotlight on character development and depth, *Dramatic Interpretation* focuses on a student's ability to convey emotion through the use of a dramatic text. Competitors may portray one or multiple characters. No props or costumes may be used. Performances may also include an introduction written by the student to contextualize the performance and state the title and author.

Considerations for Selecting DI Literature

Students who do *Dramatic Interpretation* may perform selections on topics of serious social subject matter such as coping with terminal illness; significant historical situations, events, and figures; as well as racial and gender discrimination, suppression, and oppression. Students should select pieces that are appropriate for them. Considerations for selecting a DI topic should include the student's age, maturity, and school standards.

Traits of Successful DI Performers

When considering what event you should choose, or in which direction to point a student when selecting an event, below are some general traits of successful DIers to keep in mind:

- Insightful character analysis
- Mature demeanor
- Controlled performance
- Depth/breadth of emotion
- Makes motivated choices
- Expressive

Examples of Past DI Titles

- *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel
- *Master Class* by Terrence McNally
- *Pretty Fire* by Charlene Woodard
- *Shape of a Girl* by Joan McLeod
- *Inside Out Upside Down* by Four Young Playrights
- *Spoonface Steinberg* by Lee Hall
- *The Bald and the Beautiful* by JJ Jonas
- *The Women of Lockerbie* by Deborah Revooort
- *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* by Svetlana Alexievich
- *Crafty* by Paul Rudnick

Learn More! The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive and educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events. For *Dramatic Interpretation*, we provide a number of helpful resources—including live and recorded webinars designed to introduce foundational and advanced concepts in Interp; access to DI final round videos; an interpretation textbook for Resource Package subscribers; videos from champion coaches; and much more more! Take advantage of the amazing benefits of being a member by using our resources to help you advance yourself in competitive speech and debate activities. Visit www.speechanddebate.org for more information. 

Find Your Voice

“DI helped me develop a better understanding of the world in which I live. To be able to create a narrative that portrays a person you have never known or a situation you've never been in so others can learn from it is worth everything.”

— Jamaque Newberry, Association Alum

Middle School

Competition Events Guide

Dramatic Interpretation



Basic Understandings

Dramatic Interpretation, contrary to its name, is not all about drama. While dramatic elements are key aspects of the event, melodramatic, or overly-sad selections are not ideal choices for performance. DI lacks props, costuming, sets, and other luxuries seen in various forms of performance art. There is a set time limit of ten minutes, with a thirty second grace period. Students who choose to compete in Dramatic Interpretation should focus on suspending the disbelief of the audience by portraying a realistic, emotional journey of a character(s). The performance should connect to the audience.

Research

When looking for a Dramatic Interpretation, it's important to know your limitations, and your strengths. Technical skills, vocal flexibility, physicality, and gender can be factors in your choice. Additionally, it's important to think of the performance itself when searching for a script. Does the literature lend itself to performance, or is the language too flowery? Is the plot complicated or is it a simple story told in a simple way? Think about what you are capable of, and how you would like to be challenged throughout the season when making a selection. Remember to consult your state's rules in regards what is acceptable literature.

Ask yourself, what kind of character am I comfortable playing? What kind of story am I comfortable telling? What story do I want to tell? Narrow your search from there. Remember to keep an open mind. Sometimes, you can create an ideal of the piece you'd like to perform, and reject other suggestions that come along the way. Sometimes it's better to try something different that will stretch you as a performer.

When searching for a script, it's important that the language sounds natural when read aloud. For instance, Shakespeare and Hemingway may be less effective choices for DI because the language is archaic and less conversational. Find a script that when read aloud, feels natural, or comfortable to speak and hear.

Tense is also an important factor of selecting a dramatic interpretation. Because the majority of DI's take place

within one scene, or have an anchor reality, the tense should reflect the reality the character is telling the story from. An anchor reality is the imagined-space from which the character is speaking. For instance, a house-wife's anchor reality may be her kitchen. Throughout the story, she may move to other realities that exist in a different space and time, but she will return to tell her story from her anchor reality. Also, consider how the tense will influence blocking, or movement in the performance space, before deciding on a selection.

Go to your local library, visit the biographies section of a bookstore, or visit Play Scripts, Dramatists, or Samuel French online. These are just a few of the places you may find material for your performance.



Structural Components

Structure of an Interp (taken from *Interpretation of Literature, Bringing Words to Life*).

TEASER • 0:00 – 1:30

Previews the topic and mood of the selection

INTRO • 1:30 – 3:00

Explains the purpose of the performance

EXPOSITION • 3:00 – 3:30

Introduces characters and setting

INCITING INCIDENT • 3:30 – 4:00

Sends the conflict into motion

RISING ACTION • 4:00 – 7:30

Complicates the conflict

CLIMAX • 7:30 – 8:30

Emotional peak of the performance

FALLING ACTION • 8:30 – 9:30

Resolves the conflict

Middle School

Competition Events Guide

Dramatic Interpretation



There are a few key structural components of every DI:

Cutting. Your cutting is the 10 minute portion of your selection you chose to perform. This is how you've arranged the literature, and what aspects of the story you've decided to tell. It will directly influence the other two aspects of your performance.

Characterization is informed decisions you've made on how the character(s) will think, act, move and sound. The choices you make about your character should be informed by the script itself.

Blocking, or tech, is how the character(s) moves in the space you've created for him/her/them. Sometimes blocking is expressive in nature, symbolizing how that character is feeling emotionally, while at other times, denotes events that are occurring in the imagined space i.e. opening up a soda or sweeping the floor.

Introduction. An introduction explains the purpose of the performance. Typically, after the teaser, a performer will give a brief explanation of the piece's relevance, then give the title and author before returning to the performance.



Organizing

Before memorizing the material, take the time to “beat” out your script. This means reading the script aloud and making notes as you go. As you read aloud, use symbols to indicate shorter pauses “/” or longer pauses “//.” Consider the emotionality behind each line. Ask yourself what the motivation for the characters’ actions are. Use this to influence blocking choices.

Indicate rough blocking in the margins of your script. Choose gestures that reflect the emotional state of the character, or blocking that enhances or creates the illusion of the imagined space of the character. (i.e. resting a hand on a counter or leaning on the back of a chair.) Think in terms of symbolic gestures and psychological gestures. A symbolic gesture is a gesture that is not commonly used in day to day communication. Example: if you were to show me what “freedom” looked like, you may outstretch your arms like Maria Von Trapp singing “The Hills Are Alive” on the side of a mountain. This isn’t a common gesture found in conversation. However, it communicates without words the idea of freedom. Conversely, a psychological gesture is one that is found in conversation. Examples include, scratching your nose, or shaking your head yes or no. For more information on these techniques, check out *Interpretation of Literature: Bringing Words to Life* by Travis Kiger and Ganer Newman.

Read your script aloud. Eliminate any excess language that sounds awkward or is unnecessarily redundant. A DI script should be no more than 1,200 words, which requires continuous cutting of superfluous language.

Standing it Up/Practicing

Often, you'll find that if you've spent the appropriate amount of time reading, cutting, and analyzing a script, memorization will be an easier process. Here are some things to keep in mind, to help simplify the process:

First, our brains are a muscle. The more time you practice memorizing, or simply memorize things, the better you become. Often, performers take more time in the beginning of a season to commit a script to memory than they do at the end of the competitive season. Memorizing is a process.

Middle School

Competition Events Guide

Dramatic Interpretation



Next, memorization is physical. Sitting down staring at a script, re-reading the lines in your head will not be beneficial. Memorize the script with the intent to perform it. Type up a clean version with only your finalized text and blocking. Then, tape it to the wall and actively memorize. Read the lines aloud moving with them as indicated by your cutting. Sometimes, it's helpful to do this in front of a mirror, so you can evaluate the effectiveness of your movements. It is helpful to memorize a paragraph at a time, building off of the paragraph that came before. This will significantly decrease the time it takes to memorize your performance.

Once memorized, you and your coach can then build off of the choices you've made for your character. Adjustments to blocking, characterization, and line delivery can be made.

Performance Tips

It may sound cliché, but confidence is key! If you've put the legwork in, you should feel confident in the product you've created. Walk into that round with your head held high, ready to show the world what you've got! Trust what you and your coach created. Do what you practiced, and if you feel compelled to "try something new," review it with your coach beforehand. Consistency is key. It's hard to evaluate what to change in practice if your performance in the round is completely different than what you've been working on.

Pay attention to other performers. Smile, be a warm, inviting audience member. There is nothing worse than getting up to perform and having an audience that either stone faces you or won't look you in the eye. Think of it this way: each round is about 60 minutes. Ten of those involve you performing, the other 50 are for you to listen, learn, and support your competitors.

Keep a notebook for between rounds. Sometimes, another person's performance will inspire you, and it's a good idea to have a notebook handy to write down new ideas. It's also nice to know who you competed against in each round. This way, you have a better understanding of who your competition is. When you review your ballots



after the tournament, you can go back through your notebook and compare your ballots to your notes.

Between rounds, figure out what room you will be performing in next. Congratulate your competitors on a good performance after the round ends, and make friends during downtime. Be gracious, and keep criticisms of other performers to yourself, even if someone else tries to start a negative conversation.

Resources

A great source is *Interpretation of Literature—Bringing Words to Life* by Travis Kiger and Ganer Newman. They cover cutting, characterization, blocking, and the structure of a story. Additionally, if this is your first time doing Dramatic Interpretation, go watch a final round of DI! Observe the rounds not only as entertainment, but keep your eyes peeled for effective cutting, characterization, and blocking. Ask yourself, how can I apply similar techniques to my performance? How can I build off of what this performer is doing? The best way to learn DI, outside of actively doing it, is by watching and learning from other performers.

The textbook, final rounds, and more can be found on www.speechanddebate.org.