



STORYTELLING

STARTER KIT



A Storytelling resource that explores:

- What is Storytelling?
- Event Rules
- Tips on Piece Selection
- How to Structure Your Speech
- Practice Techniques
- Planning Your Delivery



*A resource created by Douglas Chaiken for the
National Speech & Debate Association*

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WHAT IS STORYTELLING?

Storytelling is an interpretation event. If you are familiar with Humorous Interpretation, consider it as a miniature version of HI with a focus on child-like content, and a simple and complete plot. Storytelling is the only Interp event that has an optional use of a chair.

The purpose of Storytelling is often entertainment; while much of the interpretation side of speech is ingrained in advocacy, Storytelling's focus tends to be on the entertainment, fun, and creativity of childhood stories brought to life. Storytelling performances are the Disney movies of the speech and debate world: fun, lovable, and entertaining pieces enjoyed by all ages.

The majority of pieces are taken from children's picture books, folk tales, and even adaptations of classic fables. The performances usually mimic characteristics of Humorous

Interpretation as competitors employ the use of "pops," voices, "tech," fun faces/postures, and of course blocking into their performances to create the character and scenes.



WHO SHOULD TRY STORYTELLING?

If you enjoy breaking down what makes a compelling story or acting, especially Humorous Interpretation, Dramatic Interpretation, and/or Duo Interpretation, Storytelling is definitely within your wheelhouse. Also, if you're familiar with using a binder in Program Oral Interpretation, Prose, or Poetry, you might be interested in finding ways to incorporate the chair in Storytelling. Storytelling tends to be a more lighthearted and funny event, similar to Humorous Interpretation. Therefore, if you like developing big caricatures, making funny voices, and physical humor within blocking, Storytelling is an ideal event for you.

The characteristics of successful Storytelling performers include creativity, humor, and passion. While creativity and humor build the bulk of the performance, it is the passion for your humorous or dramatic beats, characters, and overall performance that will give you

the competitive edge. Focus should be placed on picking a selection you enjoy performing. The case tends to be: the more you enjoy performing, the more the audience enjoys watching.



ABOUT STORYTELLING

NSDA RULES

Storytelling is an interpretation event in which students will perform a five-minute memorized story with the optional use of a chair. The story must be a single published story, anecdote, tale, myth, or legend and must be retold without notes or props. Any theme/topic area may be used at the NSDA National Tournament. The retelling must be true to the original tale. The performance should not be original material, and the contestant cannot materially change the content of the story.

Competitors have a maximum time limit of five minutes with a 30-second “grace period.” Should a student go beyond the grace period, the student may not be ranked first. No minimum time is mandated. The same time limits apply for both middle school and high school NSDA competitions.

During the performance, a student must deliver the story from memory. Gestures, pantomime, and characterization are allowed and encouraged, but with restraint, as the focus must stay on the narrative. Students may deliver the story while standing, sitting, or by switching between both. While a chair is available to performers, contestants must remember that the use of props is prohibited. In the 2022-2023 season, new rules were added to clarify how performers can use the chair without it being considered a prop. From the *Unified Manual*:

“If a chair is used, students may choose the original position of the chair. Use of the chair is not considered a prop as long as: 1) Once the performance begins, all legs of the chair remain stationary on the ground and do not move from their original position, and 2) Competitors do not kneel or stand on the chair.”

While performers can be creative with their use of the chair in the round, standing or kneeling on the chair, lifting the chair, and twirling the chair around are not allowed.

As is the case with all speech and interpretation events, the student may not tell a story they have used previously in any Association tournaments (*district or national*).

Local rules may vary. Reference the [Unified Manual](#) for further information on NSDA rules.

PIECE SELECTION

Perhaps the most challenging part of any interpretation event is choosing the literature. There are three things to look for in a Storytelling piece, depending on your skills and talents:

- Storyline
- Characters
- Humor/Opportunities for Humor

Storytelling should have a piece with a simple storyline. Take ***The Three Little Pigs***, for example, which represents a rather simple storyline: the wolf moves from pig one, to two, and finally three. Selections—including stories, anecdotes, tall tales, myths, legends, etc.—tend to have an obvious problem and a search for a solution, finished off with a lesson learned by the protagonist. The storyline shouldn't sway too far from the "problem, solution, moral" style, since content and narrative are extremely important in Storytelling and the subsequent judging of the event. That being said, finding a piece with unique and unprecedented attributes, though risky, can be very rewarding; whether you follow the story of a donut, or take the route of a villain, a more exciting piece can make you stand out in a positive light.



Characters can make or break a Storytelling performance. If you are good at voices, and characterization (*postures, faces, etc.*), play into that and pick a piece with more characters; many performers even give their narrator a voice and posture. If voices might be a hindrance, no worries, choose a piece with fewer characters and focus on other areas you might be better at! Just remember, even though Storytelling is shorter than most Interpretation events, creating complete complex characters is extremely important. If you're coming from Duo, Humorous, or Dramatic Interpretation use those skills of character development to make your characters have depth. Many protagonists have to change personalities or ideologies to learn the moral of the story, try to embody the change, it will make the characters come to life even more!

Humor is common in Storytelling. One of the best things you can do for yourself is to pick literature with opportunities for humor. Whether there are numerous jokes, situational irony, lots of fun lines in voices, or chances to block out physical humor, search for something you can creatively use to entertain your audience as you move through a story.

Now that you know what to include, where should you start? Libraries are fantastic, although many won't have the newest or the

more niche pieces that might be perfect for you. If possible, bookstores are a great option, as it is free to skim the newest and best books while still in the store, and you can easily find pieces that have never touched the circuit. Since the goal is a simple children's story, the children's section of picture books will almost assuredly do the trick.

The types of stories you want to find include children's stories, folk tales, tall tales, Aesop's fables (*or recent adaptations*), and classic stories/storybooks (*or recent adaptations*). Little known and successful authors alike do well, although it is recommended you choose lesser-known pieces (*for instance, **The Cat in the Hat** may not be a wise choice due to its popularity*). The reason for this is simple but twofold: first, a common story is less exciting since the audience knows how it ends, and second, the audience may compare your interpretation to theirs. Choosing something new or unpopular can save you from both of these shortcomings.

SPEECH STRUCTURE

Once you've chosen your selection, it should follow the following format (*aim for a total time of no more than four minutes and 45 seconds*):

- i. Teaser (~45-60 seconds)
- ii. Embedded Introduction (~30 seconds)
- iii. Story (~3 minutes)

Embedded introductions are becoming more frequent and more successful. Within the teaser, you should develop some level of storyline or character building. Think of it as your exposition. Ideally, it should have at least one humorous moment. An example of an embedded introduction occurs in the [2018 performance](#)

by national finalist Callie LaVanway. The teaser in the performance is a narration and introduction of the protagonist and the problem he faces. This shows great time use and lets us get into the heart of the story by "teasing" the plot.

As for the introduction, since the event is only five minutes, a rather concise introduction is recommended. That being said, the introduction is one of the most important parts of Storytelling. The introduction should have both a joke and more importantly the basic moral explored in the piece. Concluding the introduction, students must name their selection, cite the author's name, and proceed with telling the story.

The introduction is one of the most important parts of the performance, and choosing your words wisely here can definitely be a gamechanger. Often, performers will try to meet two goals within an intro: to introduce the moral of the story, and to have some level of humor.

The moral is what your protagonist learns; it can be serious or less so, but it is commonplace to give the moral of the story within the intro. It is highly recommended you include one, and it is encouraged that the moral chosen is rather obvious. You're usually looking for the surface-level interpretation, but as long as the audience can follow your interpretation, be creative!

As for humor, anecdotes, puns, and even fun metaphors are great ways to show your creativity and humor, although they ought to introduce the moral of the story. Some perfectly crafted examples include the hilarious intro by [2019 national champion Ingamwie Acha](#) and the fun intro by [2019 national finalist Tanner Hemmingsen](#).



PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

Since Storytelling is a prepared event, the rule to live by is repetition. Consistency works wonders in interpretation events. Additionally, since the event is memorized, make knowing the script your first priority.

WATCH FINAL ROUNDS

If you have access to the [Storytelling Final Round Recordings](#), these videos easily hold the most wisdom on where you can improve and what makes a great Storytelling performance. Watching final rounds is invaluable and will give you insight into the highest standards of competition, irregardless of your event. For Storytelling, watching final rounds is nonetheless one of the most important forms of practice, as you get exposure to styles and ideas you may never have thought of previously.

Additionally, while watching these performances, ask yourself: What aspects of

delivery did this performer exemplify? What subtle choices did the performer make in the energetic climactic parts vs. the calm parts? Try to notice where the performer made themselves stand out and use those unique additions to help you find ways to elevate your performance and make the piece your own.

DISCLAIMER: With the recent changes to chair blocking rules, do not assume you could use the chair in the same way as past performers. Reference the rules to ensure you are not using the chair as a prop.

SPRINGBOARD SERIES

With the NSDA offering free opportunities to compete, participating in extra tournaments can only help. The [Springboard Series](#) is a great opportunity to showcase your Storytelling performance and receive comments from a diverse judge pool from across the country.



If Springboard tournaments don't fit your schedule, mock tournaments, extra tournaments, or even just performing your piece for a coach, teammate, or alum for feedback and critique can elevate your performance through repetition and finding areas for improvement.

TIMED RUN-THROUGHS

Once you've gotten the piece memorized and blocked, it is time to run it! Set yourself a stopwatch timer and perform it, checking the time at the end of each run-through. The goal is to both give yourself more repetition in this event, while also measuring your consistency on time.

Two things to remember when timing yourself:

- Aim for a time of four minutes and 45 seconds
- Consistency is key!

The more timed run-throughs you do, the more consistent you'll become.

MIRROR/RECORDED RUN-THROUGHS

As an extension of timed run-throughs, recording your performance or watching yourself in a mirror can be extremely helpful, especially when practicing alone. Moreover, since you are your biggest critic, being able to watch each movement and even freeze-frame a recording can help you identify parts of your performance you might not like or adjust blocking that is indiscernible.

Recording, watching, changing what you dislike, and rerecording is a cycle that can easily transform a piece—and quickly.

As is the case with all of these practice suggestions, repetition and commitment are the defining factors for improvement.



DELIVERY

As for the most important aspect of performance, understanding the different concept areas can help you learn about and improve in Storytelling. Great pieces to turn to for inspiration that encapsulate all aspects of delivery include those by [2022 national champion Douglas Chaiken](#) and [2016 national champion Stephen Durosaiye](#). Both pieces have great combinations of the following invaluable elements to a Storytelling performance. Pay attention to their fluid characterizations (*both vocally and physically*), consistent and clean blocking, and their fun and creative performance choices. Most importantly, notice how both performers create a unique scene and an eye-catching story, just using their bodies and the space. Ask yourself: What sets these performances apart? How did these performers give themselves a competitive edge in their piece? What about

these interpretations makes them fun and entertaining? Answering these questions can help you find the integral qualities that will elevate your Storytelling piece.

BLOCKING

As is the case with all interpretation events, thoughtful and wise blocking can and will elevate your piece, so long as it contributes to the performance and doesn't take away from the narrative. Blocking should be clean, consistent, and intentional. This means making movements with confidence and precision. If you're blocking objects, make sure the sizes/places are consistent. Additionally, make sure every addition of blocking has purpose, and your miming can be easily interpreted by the audience. Especially when used for humor, blocking must be polished. A great example of a performance with easy to understand,

consistent, and unique blocking is the [2016 finalist performance by Shreya Chandran](#). Notice how Chandran's blocking is repetitive and easy to understand. It makes the characters and actions of these characters vivid for visualization. Ask yourself: How does their performance really create a scene and a plot just by select movements?

POPS/POSTURES

Since Storytelling does have many derived qualities of Humorous Interpretation, character pops between characters are extremely common. When playing numerous characters, making clean "pops" between them (*their voices, faces, and postures*), is extremely important as pops make character differentiation possible. However, consistency is most important here, as making one wrong posture or voice shift may confuse two or more characters for the audience. Another important note to remember: you can pop between your characters while using the chair or while standing, but when doing so, make each pop precise and fast. This will help make your performance flow well and can add a change of pace. When finalizing these character pops, it is important to be able to be able to change these characters in an instant.

PRO TIP: Try having someone go through your character list naming each one at random and quickly pop into each character's posture, facial expressions, and voice, if applicable.

TECH

Similarly, since Humorous Interpretation commonly has tech (*sound effects*), Storytelling has been accustomed to their usage, too. It is common to include animal sounds as well as door creaks and other obvious sounds in correspondence to associated blocking. Tech



must be clean, not overused, and above all else, obvious as to what the sound is supposed to be. When considering the addition of a tech sound effect, ask these three questions: Is adding this funny? Does this help make blocking easier to understand? Can this addition hurt my performance?

CHAIR USAGE

Use of the chair is optional, and contestants should consider whether it will enhance their performance. In highly competitive rounds, chair use may end up being the single most dividing factor between top and bottom of the room. While there are new restrictions, as long as you don't move, stand, or kneel on the chair, finding ways to creatively incorporate the chair into your scene beyond just sitting in it can be an important aspect of the Storytelling event and one that separates Storytelling from Humorous Interpretation. However, overuse can do more

harm than underuse, so when unsure, limit your chair usage. A reasonable number of chair uses is three to seven. Any more and it might be distracting; any less and it is barely incorporated. Ways to use it can be simple from sitting down, or leaning on the chair, or more complex like incorporating it into your blocking, such as stepping over it.

ADVOCACY

As explained briefly, Storytelling is to entertain and connect with your audience, but above all else, to tell a complete story. The introduction should be fun, most are funny, and advocacy tends to simply be the moral of your story. Some competitors tie their morals into real-world social, political, or other issues. You can choose either to approach the event with primarily entertainment in mind, a focus on advocacy, or strike a balance of both.

FUN

Storytelling is meant to be fun—fun for the competitor and fun for the audience. Each delivery ought to be fun for the audience and fun for you. Try to give yourself opportunities through all the aspects of the piece, from the literature to the characterization and blocking, to create a fun and energetic performance for you and the audience alike. If you don't enjoy every moment, why should your audience?

PACING

When delivering your piece, it is important to change up the pacing of your phrases, especially if you are using a poem. Moreover, pausing can be a great source of comedy—don't underestimate it. Pacing is key in keeping every moment new to the audience. Proper pacing will ensure your performance is entertaining

and easy to focus on from the audience's perspective.

NARRATION/IN-SCENE

In many cases a Storytelling piece may flow in and out of a narration portion and an “in-scene” portion—meaning, you may have a narrator talking directly to the audience, and at another point you may have a character communicating with another or interacting with their environment. Making these obviously differentiated is enormously important for luring your audience into the development of suspense, action, or even humor. Make the narration or fourth wall breaks a complete contrast to in-scene moments. Although it isn't common, some performers will narrate solely while using the chair, or may use the chair as the pop between in-scene and out-scene. One example of a performance in which the narration is performed entirely while seated is the [2015 national champion Shawn Miles](#). Their performance also serves as an alternative case study for chair usage, in which the majority of the performance was completed while seated.



ABOUT THE NATIONAL SPEECH & DEBATE ASSOCIATION:

The National Speech & Debate Association was created in 1925 to provide recognition and support for students participating in speech and debate activities. While our organization has evolved over the decades, our mission is more relevant today than ever before. We connect, support, and inspire a diverse community committed to empowering students through competitive speech and debate.

As the national authority on public speaking and debate, the National Speech & Debate Association provides the infrastructure for speech and debate competitions around the world. We create a platform for youth voices to be heard and celebrated, which culminates with an annual National Tournament, the pinnacle of public speaking.

Speech and debate changes lives. NSDA membership builds confidence, boosts classroom performance, improves communication, and increases critical thinking skills to prepare students for college. Our activity provides life skills vital to a young person's success in the future.

MISSION:

The National Speech & Debate Association connects, supports, and inspires a diverse community committed to empowering students through speech and debate.

VISION:

We envision a world in which every school provides speech and debate programs to foster each student's communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and creative skills.

Learn more at www.speechanddebate.org