

An Introduction to Declamation (DEC)



Event Description

Declamation requires students to select a speech that was delivered in public and perform an excerpt of that speech to an audience. Speeches are up to 10 minutes in length. As a result, students typically shorten the text of the speech to meet time requirements. The event is not designed for students to mimic the original author of the speech. Instead, speakers are to develop an oration that delivers the message of the author in an original and engaging manner.

Considerations for Selecting Literature

It is important for students to select a speech that is meaningful to them. The speech could be meaningful because of the style or the content of the speech. It is important that the student find a speech that they not only fully understand, but also, can effectively deliver both verbally and nonverbally. Students should consider more than their enjoyment of the speech, but also, whether or not the audience can connect to the speech as well. Finally, students should not pick a speech because they are impressed by the original speaker's delivery. They should select a speech that they are confident they can persuasively deliver.

Traits of Successful DEC Performers

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

- Persuasive
- Confident
- Expressive
- Good at Memorization
- Process Oriented
- Creative

Samples of Past DEC Titles

- “Commencement Address to Tulane University” by Ellen DeGeneres
- “I Have a Dream” by Martin Luther King Jr.
- “Farewell to Baseball” by Louis Gehring
- “Adopting the Declaration of Human Rights” by Eleanor Roosevelt
- “Commencement Address to University of Michigan” by Dick Costolo
- “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July” by Frederick Douglass
- “Quit India” by Mahatma Gandhi
- “Give me Liberty or Give me Death” by Patrick Henry
- “The Gettysburg Address” by Abraham Lincoln
- “Commencement Address to University of Virginia” by Stephen Colbert

Learn More! The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive & educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events. For Declamation, we have final round performances from past Middle School Nationals available to members. Additionally, the resources on persuasion for MS orators would also apply to Declamation. Webinars on delivery would also be a go-to resource for members. Take advantage of the amazing benefits of being a member by using our resources to help you advance yourself in competitive speech & debate activities. .

Find Your Voice

Declamation was the first speech event I did as a freshmen. It removed some of the pressure because the words were already written (very well written at that, usually by famous people), but I still had to find the right way to deliver them. Playing with different ways to deliver the speech allowed me to explore speech patterns, breathing methods, and all of the other devices important in speech delivery. It helped create a foundation for my success in other speech events.”

— Sarah Gordon, Association Alum

Middle School Competition Events – At A Glance

Declamation



Basic Understandings

Declamation is a public speaking event where students deliver a portion or portions of a speech previously delivered. The goal of a declamation is to convey a message with clarity, emotion, and persuasiveness. The speech the student delivers can be any publicly delivered speech. Commencement addresses, historical speeches, political speeches, and celebrity speeches are common examples that students may use to select their declamation.



Research

Finding quality speeches to deliver in declamation is one of the easier things that students can research in competitive speech and debate. The full text of speeches, and videos or recordings of speeches, can be found online in simple searches. However, it is important to note that students may not listen to a recording or watch a speech and transcribe what was said. They must find a published transcript of the speech in order to deliver it in competition.

Here are some potential sites you could visit:

- www.americanrhetoric.com/top100speechesall.html
- www.historyplace.com/speeches/previous.htm
- content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1841228_1841749_1841736,00.html
- www.theguardian.com/theguardian/series/greatspeeches
- www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2014/05/11/cnbc-12-best-commencement-speeches-of-all-time/8941633/
- www.realclearsports.com/lists/top_10_sports_speeches/

Some common search terms:

- political speeches/address
- commencement speeches/address
- historical speeches/address
- social movement speeches/address
- moving speeches

Often students find amazing speeches to deliver in other mediums beyond just the internet. For instance, a student may find a great speech on music education in an educational magazine or journal, or a student may find a speech about a discovery in a scientific publication.

Structural Components

There are a couple of key structural components of DEC:

First, the “cutting.” Your cutting is the 10 minute portion of your selection you chose to perform. This is how you’ve arranged the performance, and what aspects of the speech you’ve decided to tell. It is okay for sections of the speech to be moved around to help make the ten-minute version you’re delivering flow best.

Second, the “introduction.” After you have selected the portion of the text you want to deliver, and organized it, you need to write out an introduction. At a minimum, the introduction should establish the title of the speech, the author, and when it was delivered. Typically students will do a short portion of the speech before delivering their intro. Some students do the introduction and then go into the speech.

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Declamation



The declamation could follow this general structure:

Teaser - thirty to forty-five seconds - student delivers a small portion of the speech to establish the mood and general theme

Introduction - twenty to thirty seconds - student delivers the introduction

Main Body of Speech - seven to eight minutes - student delivers the main points of the speech

Conclusion of Speech - thirty to forty-five seconds - student wraps up the speech.

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 emotions behind each line. Ask yourself what the motivation for the speaker’s words are. Use this to influence your own choices.

Indicate transitional movement and gesturing in the margins of your script. Typically a declamation student will move during key transitions in the speech. For instance, after the “teaser” of the speech and introduction, the speaker may move to one side of the room to deliver the first main point, then move back to the middle for the second main point, before going to the other side of the room for the final main point. The speaker will end up in the same point they started when delivering the conclusion.

When considering gestures, the speaker needs to remember that this is a public speaking event. They are delivering the message of someone else; however, it is not full-on interpretation with excessive blocking. Gestures should not be a focal point of the declamation. Choose gestures that reflect the emotional state of the speaker. 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. It communicates without words the idea of freedom. A psychological gesture is one that

is found in conversation. Examples include scratching your nose or shaking your head yes or no. These are typically more subtle and easier to incorporate into a declamation.

Read your script aloud. Eliminate any excess language that sounds awkward or is unnecessarily redundant. Declamation scripts 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 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.

Next, memorization is a physical process. 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 movement/gesture notes. 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.

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Declamation



Once memorized, you and your coach can then build from the choices you've made for your performance. Adjustments to movement, gestures, and delivery can be made.



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

The National Speech & Debate Association offers a number of resources. These include, but are not limited to, past national final round performances, lesson plans, textbooks, and more. Given that declamation is a public speaking event, many of the public speaking resources are applicable to declamation.

Performance Tips

It may sound cliché, but confidence is key! If you've put in the legwork, 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.