CHAPTER 16

Oral Interpretation
Learning Objectives

After completing this chapter, you will be able to do the following.

- Define oral interpretation.
- Choose material to read aloud.
- Analyze the meaning and feeling of a selection.
- Practice the oral delivery of a selection.
- Discuss the elements of Readers Theater.

Chapter Outline

Following are the main sections in this chapter.

1. What Is Oral Interpretation?
2. Choosing Your Material
3. Interpreting Your Material
4. Presenting Your Material

Speech Vocabulary

In this chapter, you will learn the meanings of the speech terms listed below.

oral interpretation  interior monologue
rhapsode          omniscient
anthology         rhythm
theme             meter
mood              rhyme
persona           auditory
first person      scene setting
third person      offstage focus
second person    aural
dramatic monologue

Academic Vocabulary

Expanding your academic vocabulary will help you become a more effective communicator. Listed below are some words appearing in this chapter that you should make part of your vocabulary.

enhanced  mimic  paraphernalia
mimic    minstrel  apoplectic
minstrel recitation  nectar
recitation spellbound  motif
Introduction

When Dr. Seuss died, an entire nation mourned. Appearing on the television program Saturday Night Live, the Reverend Jesse Jackson read from Dr. Seuss's beloved story Green Eggs and Ham. It was a fitting tribute. Millions of children, after all, have grown up in a world peopled by Hunches in Bunches and Brown Bar-ba-Loots. In fact, your first experience with oral interpretation might have been when one of your parents interpreted Dr. Seuss for you: “I do not like green eggs and ham. I do not like them, Sam-I-am.”

Whether you realize it or not, oral interpretation is still an important part of your life. When you read aloud in class from an essay you’ve written, you’re interpreting your words for your classmates. When you listen to the news on radio or television, the reporters are practicing the art of oral interpretation for you. Storytelling, a form of oral interpretation, has become an important tool for persuasion in the boardrooms of the United States. Moreover, oral interpretation can be great fun. In a memorable episode of the television show The Simpsons, Marge (the mother) experiences a flashback to her high school days and her participation on the speech team. In one scene, Marge, an academic standout, performs her interpretation of the play Butterflies Are Free and wins the heart of the classic bad boy Homer (the father).

Dr. Seuss stories, read aloud to you as a child, might have been one of your first experiences with oral interpretation.
What Is Oral Interpretation?

If you can accurately mimic the voice of your favorite celebrity or cartoon character, you are gifted in the skill of impression. You should not, however, confuse this ability with the art of oral interpretation. In oral interpretation, you do not impersonate a familiar voice—be it Eddie Murphy’s or Bugs Bunny’s. Rather, you try to create an appropriate and original voice to give life to words on a page. After analyzing the meaning and feeling behind those words, you use your voice and body to share the words with others. Oral interpretation, then, is the art of communicating works of literature by reading aloud well.

The history of oral interpretation as a distinct art—apart from public speaking and theater—is difficult to trace. The formal study of oral interpretation as a separate activity didn’t begin in the United States until early in the nineteenth century. In 1806, Harvard College offered courses that included “the interpretive approach to literary materials.” However, oral interpretation is one of the oldest of human social activities. Until writing was developed to aid memory, people needed to communicate ideas orally. Literature was passed down from generation to generation in oral form. Professional storytellers made their living by traveling through the countryside and entertaining people. Recently, storytelling has experienced a rebirth in the United States. The business world now realizes that storytelling can be an effective tool to persuade a potential client of the quality of a product, or to convince employees of the need for a policy change.

Even though oral traditions have been with us as long as human interaction, historians point to ancient Greece as the birthplace of the art of oral interpretation. Wandering minstrels known as rhapsodes would assemble to read their works in public competition. The recitations were often accompanied by music from a lyre or other primitive instrument.

Poetry recitations were also popular in ancient Rome. It is said that the emperor Nero would allow no one to leave a recitation contest in which he was competing until he himself had finished reading. The recitations were often accompanied by music from a lyre or other primitive instrument.

Recitation contests continued throughout the Middle Ages among minstrels, who competed for prizes provided by the nobility. In Margaret Bahn’s book A History of Oral Interpretation, you can learn about Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Norse oral literatures. Any study of oral traditions should also include a review of the literary works of India, China, Africa, and the Middle East.

The “poet’s corner” in London’s Hyde Park offers daily exposure to oral interpretations.

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Reading aloud has played an important role in the cultural history of our country as well. Before radio, television, and personal computers, many families would read aloud in the evenings. Young children, spellbound by the great works of literature, would spend hours in shared adventure. Much as musicians give concerts today, oral interpreters around the turn of the twentieth century would go on tour. These tours brought entertainment and culture to even the most remote regions of our country.

Today, as writers attempt to reach a wider audience, performance poetry has gained popularity, sometimes in the form of poetry slams in coffeehouses or bookstores. Larry Goodell, a poet and practitioner of the art, explores the creative possibilities of oral interpretation. Costumed in an old robe and makeup, Goodell dances and chants. He has been known to read poem fragments written on cardboard dog biscuits as a musician accompanies him on an electronic saxophone. Although few poets perform oral interpretation with such paraphernalia, most writers now recognize the need for students to hear the range and diversity of contemporary works—works that enrich and expand our enjoyment of literature and each other.

**SECTION 1 REVIEW**

**Recalling the Facts**

1. Why is impersonating a familiar voice not interpretation?
2. How might businesses use the art of storytelling?

**Thinking Critically**

At current rates, some 90 percent of the world’s languages will vanish during this century. As these languages face extinction, what can be done to preserve the stories and memories that will be lost in the disappearing words?

**Taking Charge**

Performance poets like Larry Goodell are dedicated to “oral poetry.” These artists use things other than the words—such as costumes, props, and music—to help the audience appreciate the power and magic of language. Goodell explains: “Things I make extend from the words, sometimes cradle them like a mouth cradles the words you say, before they are said.”

Now it’s your turn. Choose a short poem to read. As you interpret the poem for the class, incorporate things that will extend the meaning of the words. You could, for example, perform dribbling tricks with a basketball as you interpret John Updike’s poem “Ex-Basketball Player.”
Choosing Your Material

When you are assigned to give an oral interpretation in class, you have a problem: where to look for material to perform. Although you have a seemingly unlimited range of material available to you, how do you find it? Many interpreters have found anthologies to be useful, because such books include a wide selection of literary works in a single volume. In some anthologies, literary works are arranged by subject matter, such as love, war, or nature. Anthologies may include poems and different types of prose, such as short stories, essays, and humorous pieces. If you are interested in contemporary music, you could turn to the anthology *The Poetry of Rock*, edited by Richard Goldstein.

Another way to find material for oral interpretation is to ask your teachers to provide suggestions. They have a wealth of reading experience that they can share. Your school librarians also can recommend literature that they believe might be suitable for reading aloud.

In addition to these resources, you can use the Internet to search for material to interpret. When searching the Internet, use specific keywords. For example, you will get many thousands of hits if you simply enter the word *love* in the search field. However, the phrase *teenage love and heartbreak* in quotation marks will bring up fewer sites. The more hits you get, the more time you will have to spend sorting through them to determine which sites have the material you need. Narrowing your search will provide the most useful links.

Your most important consideration, though, should be your own tastes in literature. You are more likely to devote time and energy to the performance of material that you care about.

Think back over the poems and stories you have read. Which ones moved you the most? Which ones made you stop and think? Chances are that the selections you remember as favorites will be good choices for your first oral interpretation.

As you select material to read aloud, you will also want to consider the quality of the literature. Why? Because literature that has worth gives you, the reader, something to interpret. True, a grocery list is writing that matters, but how many different interpretations can you give to a gallon of milk and a loaf of bread? If, however, you read Henry David Thoreau’s observation that “the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” then you have layers of meaning to interpret. What did Thoreau mean by “quiet desperation”? How does that desperation affect people’s lives? As a reader, Thoreau gives you a lot to think about and interpret.

Look for writings that are valued both for their beauty and for their permanence or universal interest. You can learn a lot from literature, because it offers insights into life—inner truths that teach lasting lessons. In choosing material, you should also consider the occasion and the desires of your audience. If you have three minutes to share a work of literature in class, you may want to avoid long, complex stories or poems. Your material should suit the occasion and meet the audience’s expectations.

Consider the poetry of Mark Strand for oral interpretation.
When selecting material for an oral interpretation, you should consider your personal tastes in literature and the occasion for the interpretation. The writers shown here will appeal to different speakers and be appropriate for different occasions.

Recalling the Facts
1. Name three things you should consider in selecting material for an interpretative reading.
2. What is the name for books that collect a variety of literary works in one volume?

Thinking Critically
Some 57 percent of U.S. children age three to five are read to by a family member every day of the week. What might be done to bring reading oral interpretation into the lives of the other children?

Taking Charge
Make a list of five selections that you might use for an oral interpretation in class. Remember to consider these four factors: your personal tastes, the quality of the literature, the occasion, and the desires of the audience.
To interpret a selection well, you must first understand it. You reach this understanding by considering both the meaning and the feeling of the selection. Once you have determined the meaning and feeling of a particular work, you must adapt your interpretation to the requirements of the form: prose, poetry, or drama.

**Meaning**

The meaning of any selection includes all the ideas that are communicated by the work. You analyze those ideas as a means to an end—the performance. An important part of the analysis is to make sure you know what each word means (and how each word relates to every other word) so that you can share that understanding with the audience. For example, if you are reading a passage from Harper Lee’s novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* and you don’t know that the word *apoplectic* can describe a person in a fit of rage, then you may not correctly understand how to interpret that passage.

You must, of course, determine the denotation—the dictionary definition or explicit meaning—of words like *apoplectic*. You should also determine the connotation, or the range of meanings associated with a word that go beyond its dictionary definition. Connotations are especially important to an interpreter. If you were to ask your classmates to define *love*, you would have as many different definitions as you have classmates. The same is true for poets writing about love: some will say love is affection; some, an affliction.

To make sure you understand the meaning of a selection, try paraphrasing it. If you can put the ideas of the work into your own words, then you are off to a good start in understanding what the author is trying to say. These “author messages” or central ideas in a literary work are the themes that you must make clear in your interpretation. In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example, an important theme is that one shouldn’t judge people simply by what they look like or what other people say about them. Knowing the theme helps you to make choices in interpreting the denotive and the connotative meanings of all the words.

**Feeling**

After you have analyzed the connotative meanings of the words in your selection, you will begin to understand not only the themes of the work but also the feelings the author is trying to arouse. The overall feeling or atmosphere in a piece of writing is often referred to as the mood.

Just as your mood changes throughout the day, so can the mood of a work of literature. Consider the Dylan Thomas poem “Do not go gentle into that good night”:

Harper Lee wrote the Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 
Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Questions
1. Do you agree with the speechwriter that the quality of “public utterance” has declined in this country?
2. Should students be required to read aloud from Shakespeare, the Bible and Dickens to learn the rhythms of language?
The Medium Is the Message

From its beginning, MTV recognized the importance of words—not only the words themselves but the way they were presented to viewers. Consider this early MTV advertisement directed at hip couch potatoes:

People who make TV COMMERCIALS use words just like these to COMMUNICATE A MESSAGE. This practice is supposed to be SIMPLE AND EFFECTIVE. These words ... will hang out for fifteen seconds until it’s time for another COMMERCIAL. These are words that could be saying something ... But they’re not. They’re just sitting here LIKE YOU. MTV.

What is the general mood of the Thomas poem? If you knew that Thomas was angry that his father had given up the will to live, do you think it would make a difference in your interpretation? Do you think Thomas admired the “wild men” described in the poem? If you do, then you must use your voice to show the mood changing from anger to admiration and back to anger.

Interpreting Prose

When you tell a personal story, you are the narrator of the events that you relate. In interpreting a work of prose, however, you need to analyze the form of the written narration to determine who is the narrator. The form of the narration tells you who is telling the story, to whom that person is telling the story, what relationship that person has to the events described, and how much knowledge that person has of those events.

Once you have determined who is the fictional speaker (the persona), you use your imagination to fill in the details—such as vocal characteristics and facial expressions—necessary to re-create that speaker, that “voice,” in the mind of listeners.

The outlook from which the events in a novel or short story are related, called the point of view, varies from story to story and within stories. Many authors write in the first person, using I to identify the narrator. Others prefer the third person, describing characters as he, she, or it. Occasionally, you will find a work written in the second person, in which the author addresses you (for example, this sentence and this textbook). Let’s look at each of these points of view more closely.

Author Toni Morrison’s writing could provide you with excellent material for interpreting prose.
First-Person Narrations  In a first-person narration—a story whose narrator is *I*—the author may be using a variety of approaches. One popular form of first-person narration is the dramatic monologue. A **dramatic monologue** presents a single character speaking. Although you may associate this approach with the theater, authors of prose use the technique when they want you to overhear somebody speaking aloud to another person. Another form of first-person narration is the **interior monologue**. Here, the author has the narrator speaking to himself or herself. We hear the narrator’s thoughts.

Consider this passage from Tom McAfee’s short story “This Is My Living Room”:

> My Living Room,
> It ain’t big but big enough for me and my family—my wife Rosie setting over there reading recipes in the *Birmingham News* and my two girls Ellen Jean and Martha Kay watching the TV. I am sitting here holding *Life* magazine in my lap. I get *Life*, the *News*, and *Christian Living*. I read a lot, the newspaper everyday from cover to cover. I don’t just look at the pictures in *Life*. I read what’s under them and the stories.

Read the McAfee selection again and ask yourself these questions: What does the narrator look like? How is he dressed? Where does he live? What kind of accent might he have? How old is he? How does the narrator feel about his wife and children? Is he happy with his life? Answering these kinds of questions will help you decide how to portray this narrator in your interpretation.

Third-Person Narrations  In a third-person narration, the narrator is not *I*—the person to whom the story is happening—but an observer of the action. Third person can allow the narrator to tell the story through the eyes of more than one...
character. Typically, the narrator is all-knowing—or omniscient—and moves freely into and out of the minds of various characters. As an example, consider this passage from Flannery O’Connor’s short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”:

The grandmother didn’t want to go to Florida. She wanted to visit some of her connections in east Tennessee and she was seizing at every chance to change Bailey’s mind. “Now look here, Bailey,” she said, “see here, read this. . . Here this fellow that calls himself The Misfit is a loose from the Federal Pen and headed toward Florida and you read here what it says he did to these people. Just you read it.”

Read this selection again, asking yourself the same kinds of questions that you answered for the McAfee passage. Note that a significant difference exists between the McAfee and O’Connor stories. As you interpret the McAfee story, you must portray one character: the “I.” In the O’Connor story, however, you have two characters: the author’s omniscient narrator’s “voice” and the grandmother’s “voice.” The challenge for you as an interpreter is to create two unique voices for these characters. The grandmother must talk the way this specific grandmother would talk. Furthermore, the narrator must sound different from the grandmother.

Interpreting Poetry

As you interpret prose or poetry, some scholars think you should be sensitive to the author’s intent. They say that determining the author’s intent is crucial, because you must always respect the integrity of the words in the work. Others place less importance on the author’s intent and stress that you should instead thoroughly study the text itself. Understanding how some common features of poems work can help you determine how to orally interpret the poems. These features include rhythm, meter, rhyme, and imagery.

Rhythm In the English language, rhythm is the natural back-and-forth or rise-and-fall movement between stressed and unstressed syllables. It is present in prose and even in everyday speech, but it is most strongly marked and patterned in poetry. The effect of rhythm on meaning should be your primary concern when reciting a poem. Listeners can concentrate on a given idea for only a brief time. Therefore, you must pace your recitation to allow listeners to relax occasionally and reflect on what you have read.
A poet may use pauses within a line to vary a poem’s rhythm, thus adding interest and emphasizing certain words. Shakespeare was a master of pauses, those “sounds of silence.” Note the breaks created by his use of commas in the lines that follow:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino,
That o’er the green corn-field did pass,
In the spring time, the only pretty ring time,
When birds do sing, hey ding a ding, ding;
Sweet lovers love the spring.

Read the passage again as if there were no commas in lines 2, 4, and 5. Do not pause at all as you read these lines. Do you hear how the poem’s rhythm has been flattened out? As an oral interpreter, you must always be aware of the rhythm of any literature that you perform.

**Meter** When you hear the word meter, you probably think of a unit of measurement. Meter, in poetry, is also a way of measuring. Instead of measuring length, width, or capacity, though, meter measures more or less regularly repeating units of rhythm in a line of poetry. Specifically, meter measures the number of stressed syllables or of stressed and unstressed syllables in the words that make up the line.

You place stress on particular syllables, based on your knowledge of proper pronunciation and on your interpretation of a poem. You can look up proper pronunciation in any dictionary, but your understanding of the poem is up to you. You should never sacrifice meaning as you vocalize the meter, but you should also never lose sight of the basic rhythmic pattern provided by the poet. As an interpreter, you must balance these two factors: meaning and pattern.

The choices you make about meter do make a difference. By noting how a poet varied the rhythm within the meter of a poem and then conveying that to your listeners, you can heighten their attention to what is going on in the poem musically and you can reinforce the poem’s meaning.

**Rhyme** In a poem, rhyme is usually the repetition in different words of the last stressed vowel, and of any sounds following it, at the end of lines. Rhyme may also occur within lines. This repetition tends to please the ear; literary scholar M. H. Abrams described the effect as the “delight given by the expected but variable end chime.” You, as an oral interpreter, must be careful not to spoil this “delight” for your listeners by falling into a singsongy or predictable pattern of delivery. To ensure that the rhyme scheme and meter don’t overwhelm meaning, experienced interpreters pause where punctuation and sense require—which isn’t always at the end of lines.

Let’s consider how to balance meaning and pattern by examining a poem by Emily Dickinson. The poem describes how those who lose at something understand better what it means to win than those who win. Perhaps you know this truth already.

Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed.
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.

Not one of all the purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory

As he defeated—dying—
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!

Note how Dickinson rhymes the second and fourth lines in each stanza—for example, succeed and need in the first stanza. One way that you might avoid a mechanical or singsongy delivery of the first stanza would be to give special emphasis to ne’er and the last syllable of comprehend. In addition, you might try pausing briefly after requires rather than nectar. A final suggestion: When you read the word need, lower your pitch slightly and say the word quietly. By doing so, you will deemphasize the rhyme and also suggest the mood of the poem.
The rhythm and rhyme of Emily Dickinson’s poems make them interesting to read aloud.

If you study the second stanza, you will find an imperfect rhyme of the second and fourth lines: today and victory. We think of Dickinson as a modern poet, and one of the reasons is her willingness to subordinate rhyme to meaning. As an oral interpreter, you have to be willing to make the same artistic choice.

**Imagery** As you may recall from Chapter 11, the word *imagery* refers to language that creates mental pictures. These pictures in the mind of the oral interpreter will differ from those in the mind of each listener. An image sparks in each person an association with some real-life experience that is unique to that person. For example, the image of a bicycle in a poem may remind you of your first trip to the grocery store alone. The person sitting next to you may think, instead, of crashing into a neighbor’s new car. This recalling of what we have experienced can give poetry (or prose) emotional power.

As an oral interpreter, you should pay special attention to a poet’s use of imagery. In the poem “On Driving Behind a School Bus for Mentally Retarded Children,” Grace Butcher compares the children to flowers. She uses this metaphor throughout the poem to illustrate the unique challenges faced by the children. In reading this work aloud, you must use your voice creatively to suggest the meaning and feeling of the poet’s metaphor.

Full deep green
bloom-fallen spring
here outside,
for us.
They,
like winter-covered crocuses:
strange bright beauty
peeping through snow that never melts—
(How quietly,
how quietly,
the bus.)
These flowers have no fragrance.
They move to an eerie wind
I cannot feel.
They rise, with petals fully opened,
from a twisted seed
and neither grow
nor wither.
They will be taught
the colors of their names.

**Interpreting Drama**

When a play is performed onstage, the actors attempt to become the characters they portray. The goal of the actors is to make the performance seem as close to real life as possible. In contrast, the reader in traditional oral interpretation of drama tries only to suggest characters. For example, a reader, at a dramatic moment in a script, might have tears welling up in his eyes. An actor portraying the same character at that moment might go beyond the mere suggestion of an emotional climax; she might have tears streaming down her face.

In contemporary speech competitions, “Humorous Interpretation” and “Dramatic Interpretation” are events in which participants recite material they have memorized. Such participants are often described as “acting from the waist up.” This description arises from many participants’
practice of pretending to be the characters in their material. Their performances may include extensive use of gestures and actual movement around the room. By taking on the techniques of acting, these participants may no longer be presenting a traditional oral interpretation, but they are creating a powerful union of the two arts.

“Duo Interpretation” has become a popular event at many speech tournaments. This event lets two interpreters work as a team, allowing each performer the chance to respond to the genuine emotions and rhythms of another. Rules vary. For example, some tournaments require scripts; others do not.

Regardless of your approach, as an interpreter of drama, you need to help your listeners create a mental image of each character you portray. You must provide the visual and auditory (hearing) clues that will stimulate the imagination of each audience member.

Recalling the Facts

1. What is the difference between the theme and the tone of a work?
2. Why is imagery important to oral interpretation?

Thinking Critically

Modern speechwriters have argued that the quality of modern speeches has declined because we no longer learn the rhythm of public utterances from Shakespeare and the Bible. If this assessment is accurate, then what should be done to improve oratory today?

Taking Charge

Many oral interpreters read two or more selections built around a single theme. This program of reading provides an opportunity to show how different authors approach the same theme. You will find an example of a student’s programmed reading at the end of this chapter. The student chose selections that celebrated the many sounds of poetry that cause the listener to want to “speak like rain” (her theme).

Now it’s your turn. After deciding on a subject—death, friendship, patriotism, or the like—find two to five short poems and formulate a theme that shows the relationships among them.
Choosing and analyzing material for oral interpretation is only part of your preparation. Next, you have to prepare and practice for the actual performance. Unlocking the mystery of effective presentation involves introducing material, cutting material, developing material, and practicing material.

### Introducing Your Material

You will need to prepare an introduction for your interpretation. The principles you learned in earlier chapters about writing a good speech introduction still apply here. But you should note the following distinctions.

First, you are responsible for giving your listeners the information they need to understand your material. Characters need to be identified, relationships explained, and important plot points outlined. You don’t want to spoil the story by giving away the ending, but you don’t want to confuse your listeners either.

A second requirement for an effective introduction is to establish a mood that is consistent with the mood of the material itself. For example, if you were reading from *Romeo and Juliet*, a Shakespearean tragedy, you probably wouldn’t begin by cracking jokes. A humorous introduction, however, might be appropriate for *Romeo and Juliet* if you were going to perform only the scenes with speeches by Juliet’s nosy nurse, who provides comic relief in the play.

Finally, keep your introduction brief. If you are allowed five minutes for your entire performance, you shouldn’t spend most of that time explaining what you’re going to do. Most introductions can be kept to around a minute (or less). Remember, you need only include the information necessary for the audience to share the meaning and feeling of your selection. (For an example, see the student speech at the end of the chapter.)

### Cutting Your Material

You may need to cut, or condense, your material. This may be necessary for several reasons: You may have too much material for the time allowed, certain parts of your selection may be inappropriate, or a particular episode may lessen the overall effect you are seeking. If you are working with a lengthy short story or a novel, you will probably need to choose a climactic scene and present only that scene. In that case, when writing the introduction, plan on telling the audience what they need to know to understand the scene. Other guidelines that may prove useful include the following:

- Always cut in, not out. In other words, build your selection by including your favorite lines and the lines that you feel are the most
important to understanding the selection. If you tried to cut Gone with the Wind down to a five-minute presentation by taking out, one by one, the lines you didn’t need, you would quickly lose interest in the project (and your youth). Instead, pick your favorite scene and highlight the lines you most want to keep (in priority order), as well as the lines needed to make sense of the story. As soon as you’ve highlighted a total of four minutes’ worth of lines, stop! Save the extra minute for your introduction.

- Eliminate dialogue tags, the parts of written dialogue that tell us who is speaking. Consider the following example:
  “May I have another chocolate bar?” Jane asked.
  “But you have already had three this morning,” Elizabeth replied.
  “Jane asked” and “Elizabeth replied” are dialogue tags. Such tags can usually be cut. However, if they are needed to make clear who is speaking or if this is the first time a character has spoken in the material you are using, the tags should not be cut.

- In drama, eliminate stage directions (Elena rises, crosses left) as well as lines that suggest physical action. For example, suppose that in your selection Larry asks Melvin why he is tap-dancing. You have to eliminate that line so that your listeners don’t expect you to tap-dance. (Alternatively, you could suggest the movements in some limited way or start taking tap-dancing lessons.)

- Eliminate minor characters that might confuse your listeners.

- Cut references to events that you do not have time to fully explain.

**Developing Your Material**

In developing your material for performance, you need to work on certain skills that will improve your effectiveness as an oral interpreter. These delivery skills include eye contact, character placement, characterization, word color, and showmanship.

**Eye Contact** You have already learned about the importance of eye contact. In oral interpretation, how much eye contact is enough? How often should you look up from the script, and when? These questions are a source of great controversy among the teachers of oral interpretation. Some say that a 50-50 balance is appropriate. Others argue for maintaining eye contact with the audience as much as 90 percent of the time. Regardless of your position on this issue, you need to remember two factors: (1) You must look at the script often enough to remind the audience that you are sharing a work of literature; (2) you must not be tied to the script, or the audience will soon tire of staring at the top of your head.

Effective interpreters often use a technique known as scene setting. They use their eyes to focus...
the scene that they are describing on an imaginary stage in front of them. This helps the audience members to see that same scene in their imagination. When not scene setting, these interpreters look into the eyes of individual audience members or at the script.

**Character Placement** If you are portraying various characters, then you must “place” them by looking at a different location for each one. By directing your focus to different locations, you can create the illusion that a number of characters are speaking to each other. Readings of drama require this skill, but prose, too, can necessitate character placement. In prose readings, most interpreters place the narrator directly in front of them, with the rest of the “voices” distributed to the left and to the right. In drama, the most important characters are placed closest to the center, with the minor characters farther to the sides.

Take care not to place characters too far apart. If the characters are widely separated, the time it will take for you to rotate your head to the proper position will cause you to pause too long between speakers. The effect of these long pauses is similar to what happens in plays when actors do not pick up their lines: the performance drags. It is also important to be consistent in your character placement, or the audience may become confused as to who is speaking.

**Characterization** Look around your classroom. No two of your classmates sound or act the same. Similarly, each character you portray in a selection must be distinct. Each should be characterized by a unique voice, facial expression, and body position.

To create distinctions in voice, some interpreters experiment with a variety of pitch patterns. Some vary the pacing, making the characters speak at different speeds. Others try to re-create dialect, the pronunciation that is used in a particular geographical area. Whether or not you use dialect should depend on your ability to make it sound convincing. An annoying or distracting characterization damages the integrity of the selection and makes for a disappointing performance.

You should also avoid using a stereotypical voice that lessens the believability of a character. Stereotypical voices usually turn into nothing more than caricatures, comic exaggerations that lack uniqueness. Not everyone from the South talks with a drawl, and not every football lineman plays without a helmet.

Along with vocal distinctions, you should respond with your face and the rest of your body to each word spoken by a character. If a character is happy, the audience should not only hear that happiness in the warmth of your voice but see it in a smiling face and relaxed body as well. Each character and each moment in the script require subtle changes in facial expression and posture. The audi-
ence must see you suggest the individual traits of each character in the selection to get caught up in the illusion that the character is a real person.

**Word Color** You must give each word in your selection its due. Your responsibility is to change written symbols into sound symbols by “coloring” them with your voice. You would not, for example, say “I want to kiss you” and “Please pass the butter” in the same way. You must suggest the denotative and connotative meanings with vocal variety. But how? Experienced oral interpreters use, in combination or alone, some of the following techniques: pauses of varying lengths before key words, changes in pitch, holding vowels, hitting consonants, manipulating tempo, and unusual or unexpected emphasis.

To see how these techniques can make a significant difference in an oral interpretation, experiment with them on any literary work included in this chapter. You can change the entire meaning of a particular work by varying your voice in these ways.

**Showmanship** The sense of professionalism that you must have when performing is called showmanship. From the moment you leave your seat until you return to it, you should make clear that you enjoy sharing literature with an audience. If you mumble misgivings under your breath or seem hesitant at any point, the experience of your listeners will be lessened. Care about your material. Care about the people in your audience. Show them.

**Practicing Your Material**

You need to practice your material by reading it aloud. Silent rehearsal does not allow you to experiment with a variety of vocal approaches. Furthermore, you should try to practice the material exactly as you plan to present it. In the early stages, however, you might want to break the performance down by practicing a few lines at a time. By polishing shorter sections, you won’t fall into the trap of simply running through the material to get the practice session over. Memorized material should never sound as if you are merely reciting the words from rote memory. You must make the material seem fresh, as if you were performing it for the first time. You must seem to be thinking as the character you are portraying. This quality is necessary for a believable reading.

Try recording your practice and listening to it several times to check word color, articulation, pronunciation, pacing, and use of pauses and emphasis. It is important that you have absolutely crisp, clear vocalization. Some oral interpreters find it helpful to mark scripts to remind themselves of when to pause and which words to emphasize. Whether you mark your script or not, you should spend the time necessary to become completely familiar with your material. In other words, by the time of your recitation, you should be able to look down at your script because you choose to, not because you have to. Avoid looking down while saying words: The up-and-down movement of your head should come between words so as not to create motion that will distract from giving each word its full worth.

In using a script, be careful not to wave it around as you gesture. The script should remain still at all times. Furthermore, do not hold it too low. If you hold it too low, you will have the tendency to drop your head too far as you struggle to see the words on the page. A final suggestion: Rather than reading from a book, most oral interpreters photocopy, type, or print out their material. They cut and paste the sections they are going to read and place them in a binder.
Against Forgetting

Oral interpretation tries to express the inexpressible in terms of the unforgettable. Take Sonia Schreiber Weitz—a Polish survivor of five Nazi concentration camps, and author of the book *I Promised I Would Tell*. Weitz travels around the country speaking about her experiences through her poetry. One of the most difficult things for her to talk about is sneaking into her father’s barracks to see him one last time before he was taken away on a transport. Audiences seem able to understand the emotions she felt, and to never forget them, as she reads her poem “Victory”:

**Victory**

I danced with you that one time only.
How sad you were, how tired, lonely . . .
You knew that they would “take” you soon . . .
So when your bunkmate played a tune
You whispered: “little one, let us dance,
We may not have another chance.”

To grasp this moment . . . sense the mood;
Your arms about me felt so good . . .
The ugly barracks disappeared
There was no hunger . . . and no fear.
Oh what a sight, just you and I,
My lovely father (once big and strong)
And me, a child . . . condemned to die.

In 1945, while Weitz was in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and death camp, Nazis began evacuating such camps. Weitz was among the walking dead who participated in the final march. She composed the following poem in her head while marching:

**Death March**

A night . . . A storm . . .
Their blood still warm,
Soaking into the snow.
Their bodies recoil
Upon frozen soil,
Of pain, that whips.
Their lifeless lips belie this final hell.
At the break of dawn
They barely moan,
A silent: “Sh’mah-Israel”

Questions

1. Do you ever find it easier to write about something than to talk about it?
2. How might the recitation of poems make the telling of horrifying experiences unforgettable?
Readers Theater

Group reading of literature offers participants the opportunity to create a theater of the mind. In group reading, most of the action takes place in the imagination of the audience. Typically, the readers suggest movement rather than actually moving as actors do. Group reading sometimes takes the form of Readers Theater. Although definitions vary, Readers Theater generally involves two or more oral interpreters sharing a reading with an audience.

The sharing in Readers Theater includes vocal and physical suggestion as well as elements of staging. Staging is usually minimal, but scenery, lighting, costuming, and makeup have been used successfully in some productions. Staging choices should depend on whether they will clarify the meaning of the literature. They should always enhance the literature.

Other common characteristics of Readers Theater include the following:

- A narrator who introduces the different portions of the program and provides transitions between them
- Offstage focus—a technique by which the readers use scripts and envision the scene out in the audience

Remember, the primary concern in Readers Theater is intensifying the aural appeal of the performance—that is, the performance’s appeal to the sense of hearing.
Recalling the Facts
1. Explain the five guidelines for cutting material.
2. Why is showmanship important?
3. What is offstage focus?

Thinking Critically
A “duo interp” team from Florida performed an excerpt from the recorded conversations of Clinton White House intern Monica Lewinsky and her confidante Linda Tripp. The team consisted of two boys parodying these women in highly unflattering ways. Are there limits to how real people should be portrayed? What are those limits?

Taking Charge
Successful oral interpreters introduce a selection to create an environment that will help the audience understand the selection. This introduction not only should suit the selection and the audience but also should demonstrate the imagination of the interpreter.

If you look in a mirror and raise one hand, which hand are you really raising in your mirror image? Joyce Carol Oates poses this question in her poem “Love Letter, with Static Interference from Einstein’s Brain.” Perhaps Oates borrowed this mirror motif from a story about Lewis Carroll reported in the London Times on January 22, 1932. According to this story, Carroll asked his young cousin Alice Raikes in which hand she held an orange. Alice replied, “The right.” So Carroll asked the girl to stand before a mirror and tell him in which hand she now held the orange. And Alice replied, “The left.” For you see, in a mirror all asymmetrical objects go the other way. So let us go the other way—through the looking-glass that is poetry. We begin our journey with an excerpt from Ishmael Reed’s “beware: do not read this poem.”

tonite, thriller was
abt an ol woman, so vain she
surrounded herself w/ many mirrors
it got so bad that finally she
locked herself indoors & her
whole life became the mirrors
one day the villagers broke
into her house, but she was too
swift for them, she disappeared into a mirror . . .
the hunger of this poem is legendary
it has taken in many victims
back off from this poem
it has drawn in yr feet
back off from this poem
it has drawn in yr legs . . .

it is a greedy mirror
you are into this poem
from the waist down
nobody can hear you can they?
this poem has had you up to here belch
this poem ain’t got no manners
you cant call out from this poem . . .
do not resist this poem . . .
relax now & go w/this poem
this poem is the reader & the
reader this poem

statistic: the us bureau of missing persons reports
that in 1968 over 100,000 people disappeared
leaving no solid clues
nor trace only
a space in the lives of their friends

Now it’s your turn. Choose a short poem and write an imaginative introduction for it. Share both your introduction and the poem in a performance for the class.
Junior Sharahn McClung was a Catholic Forensic League high school national champion in oral interpretation of prose and poetry. Her poetry program consisted of five poems unified by the theme “speak like rain.”

Good morning, daddy!
Ain’t you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?

Listen closely:
You’ll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a—

You think
It’s a happy beat?

Listen to it closely:
Ain’t you heard
something underneath
like a—

What did I say?
Sure,
I’m happy!
Take it away!

Hey, pop!
Re-bob!
Mop!
Y-e-a-h!

For Langston Hughes, the “yeah” in his poem “Dream Boogie” is an affirmation of life. The knowing that no matter how many dreams may be deferred, there is still the possibility, the hope for a happy beat. And we hear this happy beat from the playgrounds in Harlem to the plantations of East Africa.

Isak Dinesen, who spent part of her life on a plantation in Kenya, once observed how Kikuyu tribesfolk reacted to their first hearing of rhymed verse. Although they had a strong sense of rhythm, they knew nothing of verse. That is, until they were sent to missionary schools. “On Reading Poems to a Senior Class at South High,” by D. C. Berry:

Before
I opened my mouth
I noticed them sitting there
as orderly as frozen fish
in a package.

Slowly water began to fill the room
though I did not notice it
till it reached my ears
and then I heard the sounds
of fish in an aquarium
and I knew that though I had
tried to drown them
with my words
that they had only opened up
like gills for them
and let me in.

Together we swam around the room
like thirty tails whacking words
till the bell rang
puncturing
a hole in the door
where we all leaked out

They went to another class
I suppose and I home
where Queen Elizabeth
my cat met me
and licked my fins
till they were hands again.

To amuse herself one evening, Isak Dinesen spoke to the tribesfolk in Swahili verse. “Ngumbe na-pende chumbe, Malaya-mbaya. Wakamba na-kula mamba.” The meaning of the poetry was of no consequence to the tribesman . . . only the sounds. “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll:
'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought—
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,
Came whiffling through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

Isak Dinesen discovered that the tribesfolk would wait for the rhyme and laugh at it when it came. When she tried to get them to finish a poem she had begun, they would not. They turned their heads away. “Cracked Record Blues” by Kenneth Fearing:

If you watch it long enough you can see the clock move,
If you try hard enough you can hold a little water in the palm of your hand,
If you listen once or twice you know it’s not the needle, or the tune, but a crack in the record when sometimes a phonograph falters and repeats, and repeats, and repeats, and repeats—
And if you think about it long enough, long enough, long enough then everything is simple and you can understand the times,
You can see for yourself that the Hudson still flows, that the seasons change as ever, that love is always love,

Words still have a meaning, still clear and still the same;
You can count upon your fingers that two plus two still equals, still equals, still equals, still equals—
There is nothing in this world that should bother the mind.

Because the mind is a common sense affair filled with common sense answers to common sense facts,
It can add up, can add up, can add up, can add up earthquakes and subtract them from fires,
It can bisect an atom or analyze the planets—
All it has to do is to, do is to, do is to, do is to start at the beginning and continue to the end.

Dinesen recalled that as the tribesfolk became used to the idea of poetry, they begged, “Speak again. Speak like rain.” Although Dinesen did not know why they thought verse to be like rain, she believed it to be an expression of applause. For, in Africa, rain was always longed for and welcomed. “Jazz Fantasia” by Carl Sandburg:

Drum on your drums, batter on your banjoes, sob on the long cool winding saxophones.

Go to it, O jazzmen.
Sling your knuckles on the bottoms of the happy tin pans, let your trombones ooze, and go husha-husha-hush with the slippery sand-paper.

Moan like an autumn wind high in the lonesome treetops, moan soft like you wanted somebody terrible, cry like a racing car slipping away from a motorcycle cop, bang-bang! you jazzmen, bang altogether drums, traps, banjoes, horns, tin cans—make two people fight on the top of a stairway and scratch each other’s eyes in a clinch tumbling down the stairs.

Can the rough stuff . . . now a Mississippi steamboat pushes up the night river with a hoo-hoo-hoo-oo . . . and the green lanterns calling to the high soft stars . . . a red moon rides on the humps of the low river hills . . . go to it, O jazzmen.

So let us always give this gift to each other, to speak like rain.
Learning Objectives

Listed below are the major ideas discussed in this chapter.

- The oral tradition is as old as human interaction.
- Ancient Greece is considered the birthplace of the art of oral interpretation.
- When selecting material to read aloud, you should consider the quality of the literature, the occasion, and the desires of the audience.
- To interpret a literary selection, you must analyze it for meaning and feeling.
- As an interpreter of narrative prose, you must analyze selections to determine the point of view.
- In interpreting poetry, you must show sensitivity to the meter, rhythm, rhyme, and imagery in the work.
- When interpreting drama, you must help listeners create a mental image of the characters you are suggesting.
- Your introduction to a recitation should give listeners the information they need to understand your selection.
- You may need to cut your selection when you have too much material, when certain sections are inappropriate, or when a particular section lessens the overall effect.
- Effective recitation requires mastery of these techniques: eye contact, character placement, characterization, word color, and showmanship.
- Recording your practice sessions can help you evaluate your progress as you prepare for a performance.
- Readers Theater offers participants the opportunity to create a theater of the mind.

Speech Vocabulary

Match the speech term on the left with the appropriate description on the right.

1. rhapsode
   a. fictional speaker
2. persona
   b. measurement of rhythm
3. anthology
   c. a wandering minstrel
4. mood
   d. all-knowing
5. rhythm
   e. creating an imaginary scene
6. meter
   f. a book that includes a variety of literary works
7. aural
   g. related to hearing
8. scene setting
   h. rise-and-fall movement of stressed and unstressed syllables
9. omniscient
   i. a literary work’s overall feeling or atmosphere
Academic Vocabulary

Use context clues to write the meaning of each academic vocabulary word. Then use a print or online dictionary to check the accuracy of your definition.

- enhanced
- mimic
- minstrel
- recitation
- spellbound
- paraphernalia
- faltering
- apoplectic
- nectar
- motif

To Remember

Answer the following based on your reading of the chapter.

1. Impersonating a familiar voice is not interpretation but ____________.
2. Poetry reading was popular during the ____________ Age in ancient Rome.
3. Name three things you should consider in selecting material for oral interpretation.
4. The ____________ is the emotional atmosphere that predominates in a selection.
5. A story in which the narrator uses I is written in ____________ person.
6. When an author moves freely into and out of the minds of characters, the story is probably written in ____________ person.
7. Rhyme is usually the repetition of the last ____________, and of any sounds following it, at the end of lines.
8. When readers use their eyes to place what they are describing on an imaginary stage, they are using a technique known as ____________.
9. ____________ refers to the sense of professionalism you have when performing.
10. Name three guidelines that you should use in cutting, or condensing, material.

To Do

1. Young children are a responsive audience who give immediate and honest feedback. Arrange to visit an elementary school to read to children. After reading an appropriate selection, ask the children to critique your effort.
2. Record yourself reading a brief poem aloud. Evaluate your interpretation for word color, pacing, articulation, pronunciation, and use of pauses and emphasis.
**To Talk About**

1. When a news anchor reads a story about the damage caused by an earthquake, is that oral interpretation? Why or why not?

2. What is suitable material for oral interpretation? The list of ingredients on a cereal box?

3. If you were going to read a Dr. Seuss book to children, which one would you choose? Why?

**To Write About**

Answer the following based on your reading of the chapter.

1. Write a poem consisting of nonsense words that suggest meaning by the sounds they produce. For inspiration, you might refer to “Jabberwocky” by Lewis Carroll, beginning on page 424.

2. Write a one-page essay discussing why parents should be skilled at oral interpretation.

3. Choose a country in which you are interested. Research and write a brief description of the oral tradition in that nation.

**Related Speech Topics**

Professional storytellers
Learning dialects
Norse oral literature
Celtic oral literature
African oral literature
The history of Readers Theater
Your favorite poet