

Ballots are located at the end of the Coaches' Handbook. Click link below

California High School Speech Association Ballot: **Original Prose/Poetry**

HOW TO BEGIN AND DEVELOP AN ORIGINAL PROSE/POETRY

~ Ray Schaefer, (retired) Sherman Oaks Center for Enriched Studies
California Hall of Fame member,

Original Prose/Poetry remains the only competitive event designed to encourage creative writing. There are important advantages to you who enter this event. I have noticed that when a student writes for performance, the writing tends to be better quality and the performance tends to be more effective because the ideas originate from the performer. The purpose of Original Prose/Poetry is to stimulate original thoughts and performance.

The question is "Where does one begin the process?" I have a few suggestions. Writing is thinking. Thinking is a response to what occurs around you. Search within, look around, and notice stuff. Be open and creative. Journal observations allow ideas and feelings to come. Develop a love for words. When it is time to write, make several decisions. Who is the audience? What will be the writing approach? What is the style? If the genre is a short story, what point of view will be used, first, second or third person? Will the selection be a monologue? Will the selection be poetry? Will the tone be humorous, serious, or a combination of the two? Will the use of language create graphic pictures or characters? Is the underlying purpose to entertain, enrich, or frighten? Will the tone be sensitive, sympathetic, satirical or threatening? Whatever you decide, be creative, be playful and, above all, keep your mind open.

Allow me to offer a few suggestions to help the thinking process get moving. Imagine the following:

1. You are invisible and you have the gift of flight. Take your reader on a journey. Where will you go? What will you see? Will you tease someone? What tricks would you play?
2. You enter your bedroom. Slam! The door closes. The pictures shift. Suddenly your bedroom wall begins to talk to you. Remember, your bedroom wall and the pictures on the wall you know best.
3. You discover one day that the plants in your yard and your furniture are angry enough to kill.
4. You wake up one morning to discover you are only two inches tall.
5. You are babysitting; you are alone as the baby sleeps. Suddenly you hear a noise outside.
6. You are an animal, a tree, or a trashcan with human thoughts. (I once had a student who wrote a piece about a dog in the pound. In this story, the dog remembers the happy days; then feels the loss of a friend and the isolation of living in a cell. The dog then experiences the loss of life as it is put to sleep. The details and feelings made this story memorable.)
7. You are a person on death row remembering events that got you there. You then experience the execution to become a spirit looking over your crumpled body.
8. You are a pawn that comes to life in a chess game. You fall in love with the Queen and try to protect her.
9. Envision a peaceful setting. Sense a concern, experience fear, panic, and then, conclude, either saved or dead.

Finally, I offer this approach in search for content: consider writing a scene where the character engages in a series of actions and reactions. Look around right now and begin the writing process:

"I entered the room. I noticed a woman standing in a darkened corner. Only the moonlight ignited her flaxen hair. She turned and looked directly at me. A compulsion urged me to step toward her. I did so. I fell over the glass coffee table. As I was crawling over the broken glass, my left hand slipped under the overstuffed chair. Snap! A mouse trap went off. An unbelievable pain ran up my fingers and

arm...” Now by thinking in terms of the action/reaction process, the fumbling character could have this entire room in shambles. With this situation, there might be the beginnings of a misfit detective story.

Stories like this can occur anywhere. Perhaps you could use your own house for the setting. You can begin anywhere and move forward. For more content, think of a large number of embarrassing moments you have encountered and give these events to a character. [Caution: try not to write too fast. Allow events to occur and settings to reveal themselves to you and then to your reader.] By all means have fun writing. Be playful with your imagination.

Once you have written your story, it is time to work on your presentation. Before you begin, I suggest you read Hamlet’s “Speech to the Players.” It is one of the greatest acting lessons ever presented. Try to follow the principles stated. “Speak the speech...” Practice orally. “Do not mouth my words...” Read for meaning. “...trippingly on the tongue...” Read for diction. Please remember that all sentences are divided into thought units. In performance, read no faster than it takes for you to see, feel, and react. Most people read too fast, leaving no time to feel. It is important to keep in mind that “acting is believing...” and that “acting is reacting.” This is your work; believe it!

During the practice session, read for diction. Make certain you exaggerate pronunciation. In slow motion, enunciate and articulate consonant and vowel sounds. Also play with vocal tones. Say a word, then convert the sound to a note and play that note on the piano. To develop your voice as an instrument, read a paragraph and see how many notes you can include. Use high, middle and low tones. When imitating different languages, you need to realize that languages have different pitches. If you want specific information to help you develop different accents or dialects, I recommend two books which are extremely effective sources, *Foreign Dialects* and *American Dialects* by Lewis and Marguerite Herman. Use them and the piano to help establish the vocal tones. In the meantime, listen to people who speak with accents or dialects. Notice how they form sounds. Notice the shape of the jaw as well as the emphasis within the mouth that produces sounds. Again, note the pitch. It will vary from language to language. Even dialects vary. Oxford English emanates from a different place and has a different pitch than Cockney English. The Scottish dialect is very different in sound emanation and pitch from Irish. French is very different from German.

After you practice with exaggeration of sounds, then read your selection fast. This becomes a good diction exercise for the selection to be performed. Finally, it is time to read for feeling. What should happen is that your mouth will be more responsive to thoughts and sounds.

The last consideration in oral practice involves gestures. “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action...” Allow yourself to respond honestly. The key is believing the thought units. I do offer a few suggestions.

1. Cup your hands and keep your fingers together.
2. Do not suddenly drop a gesture; instead, move from one level to the next.
3. Allow the life force to go through your arms and out your fingertips.
4. Allow the life force to move down your legs and out the bottom of your feet.
5. Avoid overdoing.
6. Avoid underdoing.

If you concentrate and believe in what you are doing, if you truly feel the emotions, your body will respond naturally. If you are creating many characters, view each character as a unique person and develop a set of gestures and body attitude for each character. You may exaggerate at first, then make it as “t’were a mirror held up to nature.”

In conclusion, I again suggest that you enjoy the writing process. Do not rush. Allow the ideas, images and character perceptions to come to you. If “Thirty days hath September, April, May, and No Wonder; all the rest eat peanut butter, except for Grandma: she drives the Buick” makes sense to you, writing may be a difficult process for you. Focus. Become a keen observer of what goes on around you. When walking or driving home, look at signs and make up stories. Be playful with your imagination. Have fun writing. Practice orally, exaggerate vocally, exaggerate gestures, read the selection fast, then read for feeling.

Original Prose/Poetry is designed to encourage you to write and then enrich the lives of your audience members. Go for it, please, and ignite our lives.