



NATIONAL
SHAKESPEARE
COMPETITION

STUDENT HANDBOOK



Student Handbook

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Dear Young Shakespearean,

The English-Speaking Union is pleased to invite you to join **the ESU's National Shakespeare Competition!**

We encourage you to become one of the over 18,000 young adults from over 800 high schools across the United States students involved in the competition. Whether this is your first or your fourth competition, we welcome you and we look forward to another year of celebrating the Bard with you.

Since 1983, the **ESU National Shakespeare Competition** has made Shakespeare's work come alive for young people everywhere. In an atmosphere that's competitive but friendly, you'll have the chance to win great prizes as you read, analyze, perform and recite Shakespearean monologues and sonnets. Engage with material that transcends past and present, distance and differences. Practice essential skills you'll need in high school, college and beyond such as critical thinking and close reading. You'll connect with like-minded peers and increase your self-confidence. Over the years, the ESU National Shakespeare Competition has empowered more than 425,000 students like you to create and convey their own unique perspectives to an audience.

The ESU has provided you with this handbook that includes everything you need to participate in the ESU National Shakespeare Competition at the school, ESU Branch and national levels. Check our website for the Monologue Packet, which includes **over 260 monologues** from more than 120 characters in all 38 plays, as well as the Sonnet Packet. Work with your teacher/s who will guide you through your monologue and sonnet selections and the study process. See all the documents and forms you and your school might need by visiting the [Doc and Forms Section](#) of our website. We believe that teachers, students and the ESU make for an unbeatable team. Remember, we're here to help!

Want to participate in ESU National Shakespeare Competition? Get a teacher to register your school with the closest participating ESU Branch if they haven't already. A list of participating ESU Branches is available at www.esuus.org.

Everyone at the ESU wishes you good luck in the competition and in all your endeavors!

Best regards,

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Program Overview

What is the Competition?

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) National Shakespeare Competition is a nationwide competition in which high school students read, analyze, perform and recite Shakespearean monologues and sonnets in three qualifying stages: school, ESU Branch, and national.

Competition History

The ESU National Shakespeare Competition began in 1983 with 500 students in New York City. Now the competition involves approximately sixty ESU Branch communities nationwide. Thousands of high school students and their teachers, from Honolulu to Boston, participate in the program each year. Over the competition's history, more than 425,000 young people of all backgrounds have rediscovered Shakespeare's writings and learned to express his words with understanding, feeling and clarity.



The ESU National Shakespeare Competition has been recognized by the Globe Center (USA), the Children's Theatre Foundation of America, and the American Academy of Achievement. Judges for the competition have included: Andre Braugher, Kate Burton, Maurice Charney, Blythe Danner, Barry Edelstein, Lisa Gay Hamilton, Helen Hayes, Edward Herrmann, Dana Ivey, Peter Francis James, Kristin Linklater, Peter MacNicol, Jesse L. Martin, Cynthia Nixon, Tina Packer, Annie Parisse, Sarah Jessica Parker, Nancy Piccione, Phylicia Rashad, Christopher Reeve, Louis Scheeder, Carole Shelley, Jean Simmons, Richard Thomas, Courtney B. Vance, Sam Waterston, Dianne Wiest, Gene Wilder, and Irene Worth.



Competition Structure: School → Branch → National

The program begins in the classroom as an integral component of a Common Core-aligned ELA, Humanities and/or Theater curriculum, affording teachers the opportunity to use performance as a learning tool. Then, a school-wide competition is held in the Fall/Winter semester, in which students perform a monologue from one of Shakespeare's plays. The School Competition Winner advances to the ESU Branch (Community) Competition in the winter. There, the student performs their monologue *and* one of Shakespeare's sonnets. The Branch Competition Winner advances to the National Competition held in New York City in the spring; all of the winners perform a monologue and a sonnet at Lincoln Center in front of their fellow contestants from across the country. Seven to ten of those contestants are chosen for the final round of the competition. The finalists perform their selections later in the day for another panel of judges.

Awards

Branch Awards: In 2026 branch winners will travel to New York City. Details about the finals, the weekend in New York and our venue will be forthcoming. Additional prizes at this level vary by branch. Some branches also provide awards for the branch winners' teachers. Please visit our website.

National Awards: The three winners of the ESU National Shakespeare Competition receive prizes such as the following scholarships or a cash award. The ESU reserves the right to cancel, switch or substitute prizes as needed in case of unforeseen circumstances.

1st place: A scholarship to the Midsummer Conservatory at the British American Drama Academy in Oxford, U.K.
2nd place: A scholarship to the American Shakespeare Center's Theatre Camp in Staunton, VA.
3rd place: \$1000

National Competition Dates: All dates are tentative and subject to change. Please visit our website for the latest dates.

Schools may begin registering and holding their school-level competitions immediately. Please visit our website for school participation forms. School competitions must be concluded prior to your branch competition. Branch winners must submit the 2026 ESU National Shakespeare Competition Branch Winner Packets (with video links for the People's Choice Awards) by March 16, 2026. The competition finals are tentatively scheduled for Monday, April 27th, 2026.

(To be confirmed in early 2026)

Rules & Eligibility

Each student must select, memorize and perform one monologue from one of Shakespeare's plays. Please review the following rules and eligibility guidelines.

School/Home School Eligibility

- The school must register with its local ESU Branch via the School Participation Form.
 - The School Competition must be open to all students enrolled in the 9th, 10th, 11th, and 12th grades or the equivalent for home school students.
 - The School Competition must involve a minimum of three students. Home school students must also advance from a competition of three or more students.
 - School and Home School Competitions must be judged by a panel of at least three individuals familiar with Shakespeare's works.
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All students participating in the competition must meet the following criteria.

Contestant Eligibility

- Contestants must be enrolled in the 9th, 10th, 11th, or 12th grade or the equivalent for home school students.
- Contestants *may not* act for pay on television, the stage, or in film during the current or previous school year.
- Contestants should be available to represent their school at the National Competition. If, for any reason, the Branch Winner is unable to participate, the branch should send the First Runner-Up.
- Previous School and/or Branch Winners may participate each year they are eligible (regardless of results in past competitions). Schools and/or branches may not limit contestant participation except for the above mentioned eligibility requirements.

Selection Eligibility: Monologue and Sonnet

The selections you perform must meet the following criteria.

Students must select their monologues from the [Monologue Packet](#), provided by the ESU. The packet has been updated and now includes over 260 monologues from more than 120 characters in all 38 plays. The selections offer a variety of monologues, of 15 to 22 lines a piece; students may select any monologue, regardless of gender. Selections have been taken from the Folger Digital Texts resource (folgerdigitaltexts.org).

No alterations may be made to the monologues. They must be performed as written in the packet.

Sonnets must come from Shakespeare's 154 sonnet cycle. These are all listed in the [2026 Sonnet Packet](#) and are available at folgerdigitaltexts.org. Students must perform the complete sonnet; **no alterations are allowed.**

School Competition Rules

The school must adhere to the following rules at their School Competition.

- Each student must select, memorize and perform one monologue from a Shakespeare play.
 - Students' order of performance should be determined by lot.
 - Students should introduce themselves by name *only*.
 - Students should identify their selection before they begin their performance.
 - Students *may not* wear costumes or use props of any kind (including chairs, jewelry, items of clothing, and hair/hair clips). The use of props is grounds for immediate disqualification.
 - Students should speak naturally in their own voice (rather than affect a British accent).
 - Students are expected to memorize their pieces. If necessary, however, prompting is allowed. If a student requires prompting, they must say "Line."
 - A prompter must be available to students during the competition. Another student (one who is not participating in the competition) may fulfill this role.
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Additional Rules (for the Branch & National Competitions)

These rules apply only to the Branch and National Competitions.

- In addition to their monologue, each contestant must select, memorize, and perform one sonnet.
- Contestants may perform their pieces (monologue and sonnet) in whatever order they prefer.
- If the student has documented hearing, learning, physical and/or visual disabilities, please advise your local ESU Branch **prior** to the Branch Competition, so that appropriate accommodations may be made.

Cold Readings

Branch Competition (optional): Some ESU Branches with a large number of contestants also include a cold reading of a monologue in the final round of their Branch Competition. Cold reading options are chosen by ESU Branch representatives.

Monologue Selection & Preparation

Selecting a Monologue

Your Aim: To select a monologue from one of Shakespeare's plays that interests you.

Review the Monologue Packet. Select at least two monologues that interest you. You may pick any role regardless of gender.

When selecting your monologue, you should:

- **Read the script:** Actors research their roles; it would be a rare thing to perform a monologue convincingly without knowing the character inside and out. Therefore, your students should have read the play(s) from which their selections are taken and know the plot and characters. Free online editions of the plays are available at: folgerdigitaleditions.org.
- **Play the casting director:** When your students play their selections, they will need to be actors and casting directors at the same time. Your students should ask themselves if they would be a more convincing Viola or Olivia, Othello or Iago, Macbeth or Lady Macbeth.
- **Consider:** Advice from a teacher: "I see so many students looking for a piece to set them apart, but a speech we know, done with command of the language and brave choices behind it, is JUST AS EXCITING for those of us who know and love these works."

Understanding the Monologue

Your Aim: To understand the play, your chosen character and your selected monologue.

A monologue is a speech performed by a single character set within the context of a play. Remember that actions (whether implied, reported or performed) have both preceded and/or will proceed from this monologue.

The words spoken by your character fit within the larger framework of the play in one or more of these ways:

- They reveal the character's personality or goals.
- They are used by the character to incite others into action and move the plot forward.
- They set the scene or close the action (as in prologues and epilogues, respectively).

Tasks for Students:

Once you have selected your monologues, you should:

- Become the character!
 - As you read the play, you will imagine yourself in the circumstances of your character. If necessary, make a chart of your character's emotional journey over the course of the play, highlighting high and low points. Pay particular attention to what happens immediately before the monologue begins.
- Be a Textual Investigator!
 - Using textual evidence, answer the following questions:
 1. Who is my character?
 2. In what situation do I (the character) find myself?
 3. What decisions and discoveries am I (the character) making?
 4. What do I (the character) want to happen as a result of this speech?
 5. Given my past and my personality, how will I (the character) act to bring about the desired effect?

6. What is my character's mood at the beginning of the speech?
7. Has it (my character's mood) changed by the end? If so, how?

Preparing the Monologue

Your Aim: To thoughtfully interpret your character on stage. You must understand their role in the play and accurately interpret the meaning of the character's actions.

Our advice to you comes from Shakespeare himself: "Suit the action to the word, the word to the action" (*Hamlet* 3.2). You should discover which movements and gestures best fit with the words of your monologue and vice versa. Great actors are praised for their "natural" performances (i.e. performances that naturally fit and flow with the text and character). Actors do this by mastering the tools of vocal and physical expression so completely that they *seem* natural.

Explore the words—the character's thoughts and feelings—with your voice and body. This helps you make your character come alive on stage. In doing so, you convince the audience to accept you as that character and to believe in the message you deliver. As you discover your own interpretation of Shakespeare's works, guidance and feedback from both your teacher and your classmates are encouraged.

Avoid the temptation to "blow the audience away" with an excess of emotion. In acting, more is often less. An actor who "doth protest too much" (*Hamlet* 3.2) rarely convinces.

Tasks for Students:

As you work on your monologue, you should:

- Perform with your **whole body**.
- **Explore** a range of expressive possibilities, both physically and vocally.
- **Experiment** with emphasis and volume as well as gesture and facial expression.
- Allow your work to naturally **grow and change**.
- **Decide** what means of expression best fits the tone and character of the monologue.

Performance Tips

- **Project:** Projection is an essential element of performance. Everyone in the audience should be able to hear you, including the back row. However, projection is *not* the same as yelling.
- **Talk at an appropriate pace:** Talking too quickly makes your performance difficult to understand, just as talking too slowly can break up the language or cause the audience to lose interest. Find an appropriate pace and stick with it.
- **Think multi-tone, not monotone:** Do not speak in a monotone voice. Instead, vary your pitch, tone, emphasis and inflection. Feel free to experiment with your voice as you rehearse!
- **Be a know-it-all:** You should know the meaning of every word in your selection(s). If necessary, use a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words. (We recommend the Oxford English Dictionary, because you can look up what a word meant in Shakespeare's day!) Also, remember to check the footnotes for textual clues.
- **Increase your applause, not a pause:** While a momentary pause may be effective, avoid long pauses that detract from the language, or lose the interest of your audience.
- **No Shakespearean Idol** (for the sonnet): This is not a singing competition, so please do not recite the sonnet in a sing-song manner. Shakespeare's language is musical enough.
- **No Charades** (for the sonnet): Do not act out the sonnet like a game of charades. Movement and gesture as part of the sonnet recitation are permitted if it will *enhance* your delivery. Excessive movement that distracts from the language and rhythm of the selection, however, is discouraged.
- **Perform for others:** Perform for your teacher/s, classmates, family and friends and ask them to give you feedback. This is the best way to learn!

Sonnet Selection & Preparation

Applies to School Winners who advance to the Branch Competition.

Selecting a Sonnet

Your Aim: To select a sonnet that serves as a counterpoint to your monologue and demonstrates interpretive range.

Review the Sonnet Packet. You may choose to focus on sonnets that you have already studied/will study in class, or be adventurous and discover Shakespeare's lesser-known sonnets. The sonnet you select should serve as a counterpoint to your monologue. For example, if your monologue features a character in love, you might want to pick one of Shakespeare's poems about death, morality, art, beauty or the passage of time, to name a few.

When selecting your sonnet, you should:

- **Decide what's missing:** Look at your monologue and think about the character's emotions and situation in the play at that moment. Ask yourself questions about their character's mood and tone in this scene: Is your character light-hearted or bitter? Celebrating a victory or plotting revenge? Once you have these answers, select a sonnet that contains the opposite emotions, moods, tones, etc.
- **A whole not a half:** Think of the sonnet and monologue *not* as two separate pieces, but as *one complete performance*. Use the sonnet as an opportunity to expand upon and highlight your interpretive range.
- **Put in the time:** Your sonnet and monologue are equally weighted (i.e. your sonnet is worth 50% of your overall score). Put the same time and attention into selecting your sonnet as you did with your monologue.

Understanding the Sonnet

Your Aim: To understand the sonnet's form, rhythm and content.

A sonnet is a type of poem. **What is a poem?** A poem is a verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas, or emotions by the use of language and literary techniques.

A sonnet contains the following elements:

- **Form:** A sonnet is a fourteen-line poem written in iambic pentameter, made up of three quatrains and a couplet. A quatrain is four lines of verse. The couplet is the final two lines of verse. The rhyme scheme is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.
- **Rhythm:** Shakespearean sonnets are written in iambic pentameter, which is a line made up of ten syllables or five iambic feet – an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.
- **Theme:** In his sonnets, Shakespeare touches on the themes of love, death, morality, art, beauty and the passage of time, to name a few.
- **Progression:** A sonnet explores and resolves a thought or an experience, and it frequently contains a "turn" or change of thought. Lines 1-12 often develop an argument or give examples. The couplet (lines 13 and 14) draws a conclusion (sometimes witty) or acts as a zinger (points out a paradox or contradicts the preceding twelve lines).

Once you select your sonnet, you should:

- Be a Textual Investigator!
 - Using textual evidence, have the student answer the following questions:

1. What is the central idea of the sonnet?
 2. How do the lines break down into an introduction, development of the theme and conclusion?
 3. Is there a turning point in the sonnet?
 4. How do the meaning and delivery of these words differ from my monologue?
 5. Can I strengthen the contrast?
 6. How should the examples and arguments be emphasized?
 7. How should the tone of the couplet be interpreted? Ironic? Witty? Contradictory?
- Summarize, summarize, summarize!
 - Make sure the student understands the sonnet's language with this exercise:
 1. Have the student summarize the sonnet in the shortest sentence possible.
 2. Have the student summarize each line of the sonnet.
 3. Have the student work on achieving this same clarity when delivering the sonnet.

Reciting the Sonnet

Your Aim: To incorporate an understanding of the sonnet's form, rhythm and content into the recitation.

You must fully understand the sonnet and its language and clearly convey that understanding to the judges.

Remember:

- Be aware of the sonnet's **form** as you study and interpret the piece.
- Keep the **rhythm** of the speech in mind as you practice.
- Always be aware of the **content** of the language.

As you work on your recitation, you should:

- **Recognize the difference:** A sonnet is not the same as a monologue; one is a dramatic text (a speech performed by a single character set within the context of a specific play) and the other is a poem (a verbal composition designed to convey experiences, ideas or emotions through the use of language and literary techniques). Thus, the monologue and sonnet should not be approached in the same way. A monologue requires a *performance* (i.e. embodying the character), but the sonnet requires a *recitation* (i.e. vocalizing the words on the page).
- **Explore the language:** Sit down and recite the language out loud (focusing on the rhythm). Articulate every word. If you are unsure of a pronunciation, ask your teacher for assistance. If there are multiple pronunciations for a word, decide which pronunciation best fits the sonnet.
- **Speed check:** Every line of a sonnet contains a line break (when the line of a poem ceases to extend, and a new line starts). Not all line breaks are the same, however. Decide if a line break requires a pause, and, if so, for how long.
 - We advise you to avoid long pauses that may detract from the recitation.
- **Stand up for sonnets:** Once you are comfortable with the language, stand up and practice!

Movement and gesture as part of the sonnet recitation are permitted if it will *enhance* your delivery of the sonnet. Excessive movement that distracts from the language and rhythm of the selection, however, is discouraged.

Judging Advice

*Judges are professionals who have expertise in Shakespeare studies, production or education. The judging panel should be diverse in background; judges may be **academic** (English teacher/professor, Shakespeare educator), **artistic** (Drama teacher/professor, director, teaching artist, actor), or otherwise familiar with Shakespeare (casting director, theater critic, administrator, etc.).*

Student Evaluations

Review the Monologue Scoring Rubric, the Sonnet Scoring Rubric and the Judges' Evaluation Form (available on our website on the Docs and Forms page) to understand the categories (below) by which the judges will evaluate your overall performance.

Understanding

- A thorough understanding of the text, including language, character and plot.
- Within this category, there are three subcategories: Meaning, Language and Character.

Expression & Communication

- An effective, interpretive delivery of the text.
- Includes the effective use of both body and voice to demonstrate an individual point-of-view.
- Within this category, there are three subcategories: Vocal, Physical and Ownership.

For examples, visit the ESU YouTube Channel.

