



NATIONAL
SHAKESPEARE
COMPETITION

BRANCH

HANDBOOK



Branch Handbook

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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 thirty-seven years ago 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, nearly 360,000 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 Parris, 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 → ESU 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. A school-wide competition is held in the Fall/Winter semester, in which students perform a monologue from one of Shakespeare's plays and declaim a sonnet from his 154 sonnet cycle. The school competition winner advances to the ESU branch (community) competition in the winter. The branch competition winner advances to the national competition held in NYC in the spring; all of the winners perform their monologue and sonnet before our live audience and ten of those contestants are chosen for the final round of the competition. The finalists perform their selections again for a second panel of judges.

Non-Discrimination Statement

The English-Speaking Union is committed to providing an inclusive and respectful environment for all students participating in the National Shakespeare Competition. The ESU does not tolerate discrimination or unequal treatment based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, or any other aspect of a student's identity.

All students should be given an equal opportunity to participate and should be evaluated based on their preparation, interpretation, and performance. Students should be free to select a monologue of their choosing and should not be penalized or treated differently based on their choice of material.

Judges, teachers, volunteers, and Competition organizers are expected to treat all participants with professionalism, respect, and fairness.

Awards

Additional prizes at branch level vary by branch. Some branches also provide awards for the branch winners' teachers.

National Awards: The three winners of the ESU National Shakespeare Competition ordinarily receive the following scholarships or a cash awards. Exact prizes may change or may vary.

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

TENTATIVE Competition Dates and Prizes: Because of necessary planning, including hotel and restaurant reservations, we respectfully ask our branches to please keep to the dates on this timeline in order to ensure that the competition goes smoothly.

The 2027 ESU National Shakespeare Competition Branch Winner Forms will be due by **March 8, 2027**. Branch Champions must return their Winner Packets by **March 19, 2027**.

The live competition finals are tentatively scheduled for **Monday, April 26, 2027**.

(To be confirmed in early 2027.) Location to be announced.

Conditions of ESU Branch Participation

In order for a branch to participate in The English-Speaking Union National Shakespeare Competition, it must meet the criteria listed below. Only those schools whose competitions meet these criteria will be eligible to send contestants to the national competition.

Branch Eligibility

- The branch must meet all the national deadlines and pay the Branch Participation Fee of \$600. In MMOA branches unable to pay the fee, the participating schools will be charged \$75 per school to offset costs.
- The competition must be open to all high schools in the area the branch targets for the program.
- A minimum of three schools must each agree to hold a school competition from which a winner will be selected to advance to the branch competition. (Exceptions may be made for smaller communities, but requests must be approved by ESU National.)
- All stages of the competition must be judged by a panel of at least three individuals familiar with Shakespeare's works. We recommend that a branch representative be present during the judges' deliberations.
- Branches must provide a prompter (school or branch volunteer) during live via internet competitions but not in recorded competitions. See Instructions for Prompters (pg. 15) for more information.
- Branches are no longer required to share written evaluations with the students and their teachers but may invite judges to share feedback with students.

All schools in the competition must meet the following criteria. The branch should ensure school eligibility.

School/Home School Eligibility

- The school must register with the ESU via the School Participation Form available on our website.
- 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.

The branch should ensure that all students participating in the competition meet the following criteria.

Contestant Eligibility

- Contestants must be enrolled in the 9th through 12th grade or the equivalent for home school students.
- Contestants *may not* act for pay on television, the stage, or in film during the 2026-2027 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 & Sonnet

The selections that your contestants perform must meet the following criteria. The branch coordinator should check that contestants' selections meet these guidelines.

Contestants must select their monologues from this year's Monologue Packet, provided by the ESU on our website. The packet includes over 250 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 this year's Sonnet Packet and are available at folgerdigitaltexts.org. Students must declaim the complete sonnet; **no alterations are allowed.**

Branch Competition Rules

The branch must adhere to the following rules at their competition.

- Each contestant must select, memorize and perform/declaim one monologue and one sonnet.
- Contestants may perform/declaim their selections (monologue and sonnet) in whatever order they prefer.
- Contestants' order of performance should be determined by lot.
- Contestants should introduce themselves by name *only*.
- They should **not** state where they are from or which school they attend.
- Contestants should identify their selections before they begin their performance.
- Contestants *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.
- Contestants should speak naturally in their own voice (rather than affect a British accent).
- Contestants are expected to memorize their selections. If necessary, however, prompting is allowed.

Note on 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 readings are chosen by ESU branch representatives.

National competition: national finalists will no longer perform a cold reading of a monologue.

ESU Branch Deadlines

- **October 30, 2026:** Branch Participation Form due
- **October 30, 2026:** Branch Participation Fee of \$600 due.
Schools in MMOA branches unable to pay the fee will be charged a \$100 fee per school.
- **October 1 - February 16, 2027:** School Participation Form and School Winner Entry Forms to be completed by participating schools and submitted online. A form for each participating branch can be found on the Shakespeare homepage of the website.
- **March 8, 2027:** DEADLINE to hold all branch competitions and submit Branch Winner Form available on the website under Branch Resources. *As soon as your competition has concluded*, please submit the Branch Winner Form. We will share the Winner Packet directly with the winning student directly.

Funding & Partnering

Funding the Competition

The ESU National Shakespeare Competition is a relatively inexpensive program for your branch to run. Most branches fund this program through their branch treasury, member contributions and in-kind donations.

Common Competition Expenses

- | | |
|----------------------------|--------------------|
| ● Branch Participation Fee | ● Judges' expenses |
| ● Branch winner prizes | ● Technology costs |
| ● Prizes for teachers | ● Printing/copying |
| ● Tech subscriptions | |

Cost-Cutting Suggestions

- Begin with your own membership. Ask members if they are involved in or have contacts with organizations and businesses that can provide discounted or pro-bono goods and services.
- Ask your venue if they offer a nonprofit rate or will donate the space.
- Talk to judges and see if they will volunteer their services or take a reduced honorarium.
- Ask local businesses to donate prizes for the students and/or teachers. Try bookstores for Shakespeare volumes and memorabilia and theater companies for tickets and discounts to student classes or camps.
- Talk to new local eateries or catering companies. Ask them to donate food for the competition.
- Ask local printing/copying stores for a nonprofit rate or to donate the printing in exchange for an ad in the program.

Remember: All donations should be acknowledged in your branch competition program.

Partnering with Other Organizations

Your branch competition is the perfect opportunity for your branch to partner with other local organizations. Partnerships may potentially offset the cost of the competition through in-kind donations. Identify and contact organizations or businesses in your community who would be interested in this program. Many branches collaborate with local arts and academic organizations (including local Shakespeare and theater companies, colleges, universities, libraries and museums).

Suggested Areas of Partnership:

- Venue
- Judges
- Prizes
- Staffing & volunteers (training)
- Publicity
- Outreach to teachers/schools
- Printing/copying
- Food & other supplies

Partnering Events:

- Reception
- Meal (brunch, luncheon, dinner)
- Teacher workshop
- Student workshop
- ESU branch meeting

Outreach to Teachers & Schools

Informing schools in your target area about the competition is essential. Email is the most convenient way to contact teachers and schools about the competition; email addresses for public schools and their teachers are easily accessible online.

Tips for Finding Teacher Contact Information (for Public Schools Only)

- Search the desired target area's Board of Education website and find a school directory.
- Identify any schools eligible for the competition and go to their individual websites.
- Search their school's online faculty directory to find email addresses for appropriate teachers (English and Drama departments as well as Speech and Debate coaches).
- Save these emails in a mass contact list.

Contact information for private, charter, parochial, and home schools may be more difficult to find. We recommend online directories like www.greatschools.org or www.privateschoolreview.com to find a list of schools in your target area. Once you have a list of eligible schools, follow the same tips as above. For home school groups, contact a home school organization(s) in your area and ask them to distribute information about the competition to their members.

We also recommend you gather email addresses for each of the eligible schools' principals and assistant or vice principals and inform them about the program and its benefits. Gaining support for the competition in these administrative offices is extremely advantageous for both the teachers in those schools and the branch itself. The Teacher Handbook includes a sample memo to teachers for teachers to share with their principals and administrators to garner support for bringing the program to their schools.

Additional Information Sources

- Existing teacher contacts: ask current teachers to forward information about the ESU National Shakespeare Competition to colleagues and suggest contacts.
- Websites of local networks: educator organizations and unions, speech and debate associations such as the National Speech and Debate Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, American Alliance for Theatre & Education, Educational Theatre Association, etc.
- State and local/district Board of Education electronic bulletin board.
- Mailing/contact lists for any organization(s) with which your branch is partnering for the competition.
- Local graduate schools/universities (for alumni currently teaching high school).

Storing Contact Information

Create a master list of teacher contacts (electronic preferred). Include any teachers who reach out to you about the competition. You should record their name, school name and email. School and/or home mailing address and telephone number may also be included if the information is available.

PLEASE NOTE: National will provide outreach to publicize resources and events available to competition teachers. As each branch understands and knows their community of teachers best, all initial outreach and recruitment is best received when coming from the branches.

Email Etiquette

Branch coordinators are representatives of their local ESU branch and of The English-Speaking Union. Therefore, all correspondence between teachers and the branch should adhere to the following guidelines:

- The sender's "Branch Title," their local ESU branch's name and "The English-Speaking Union" should be included at the bottom of each email.
- For mass email mailings, place all recipients in the "BCC" (blind carbon copy) section of the "To" field.
- The subject line of all emails should include "ESU National Shakespeare Competition."

We also strongly encourage branch coordinators to use their branch's ESU email account for their correspondence with the teachers and schools rather than their personal email. This allows for a smooth and constant connection between the teachers/schools and the branch throughout the years no matter who is the branch coordinator from one year to the next. Additionally, in the age of spam and hackers, teachers will delete messages from unknown addresses.

Consistent Outreach

Outreach to teachers and schools should not cease after your branch competition is complete. Stay in touch with teachers via email and in person throughout the year.

Here are some suggestions for keeping in touch with teachers:

- After the branch competition, send a thank-you email for participating in program.
- Hold a teacher reception to celebrate and recognize their support of the competition. • Add to your branch's newsletter mailing list.
- Invite them to branch events.
- Encourage them to become more involved in your branch and its programs.
- Send information on other ESU education programs, such as TLab study abroad opportunities.
- Send news and press releases from the national competition.
- Send links to local press coverage of the national competition.

Remember: Word-of-mouth is our best advertisement and outreach tool. Always encourage teachers to pass along relevant information about the ESU National Shakespeare Competition and the English-Speaking Union to interested colleagues.

Mailings to Teachers

1st Step: Recruiting and Signing Up Schools

This initial mailing should be sent to teachers/schools (preferably by email) in early fall and repeated several times prior to the registration deadline.

Necessary Materials

- Sample Memo to Teachers: Introduces teachers to the competition and includes essential information about both the school and branch competitions (to be completed and sent by the branch.) If possible, include a date for the branch competition.
- School Participation Form: Registration form for schools to participate in the competition.

Instructions

- Place the Sample Memo to Teachers in the body of an email. Please update/edit this text with information about your branch competition.
- Include a link and instructions to complete the School Participation Form in the email.
- Please keep in mind that students are eligible to participate in the school and branch competitions *even if they have previously won a school and/or branch competition.*
- Email in a mass mailing to teachers and school administrators in your target area.

2nd Step: Soliciting Information on School Winners

This follow-up mailing should be sent (preferably by email) *only* to teachers/schools who have completed the School Participation Form.

Necessary Materials

- School Winner Entry Form: Registration form for the school winner who will advance to the branch competition (to be completed by the school coordinator and the school winner).
- Photo Release Form: Permission form to participate in the branch competition (to be signed by the student and their parent and returned to the branch coordinator).

Instructions

- Write an email stating the details of your branch competition. Be sure to include the date, time, Zoom or other internet directions), and any other necessary details that the teacher and/or student may need.
- Request any additional details that the branch may need from teachers for the branch competition.
- Include links and instructions to complete the School Winner Entry Form and the Photo Release Form in the email.

Remember: Send each mailing multiples times and ask teachers to forward them to others.

Publicity

Your branch competition is meant to be seen, heard, and enjoyed by your community. Publicize the event and generate positive visibility for your branch. Advertise to local schools and educators as well as your branch members. Celebrate and share students' achievements with all!

Publicity Outlets:

- Newspaper (print and online) • Television
- Radio • Newsletters (school/community/branch)
- Social media • Websites (school/community/branch)

Prior to the School Competitions

- Visit schools and talk about the program at school/department meetings.
- Attend teacher conferences in your local area. Distribute competition materials.
- Identify educator and arts organizations in your area. Encourage them to forward competition information to their teacher contacts.
- Encourage schools to post competition information on their website as well as in newsletters and school papers.

Prior to the Branch Competition

- Send a pre-competition press release (on our website) to local media outlets (radio, newspaper, television, etc.).
- Post a reminder with any relevant details on your branch's website.
- Suggest schools announce their winner(s) on their school website, newsletter and social media.
- Ask the local Board of Education to include details of the branch competition on their website, newsletter, etc. Encourage them to announce the program at local meetings.
- Contact your local newspaper and/or radio and invite a reporter (usually in the Life/Style, Arts and City/Metro divisions) to attend the branch competition.

Publicity Etiquette:

Every contestant in your branch competition must sign a Photo Release Form. A parental signature is required for anyone under the age of 18. Without this release form, you may not publish or distribute any photos or videos of the contestants. You should distribute the Photo Release Form via email ahead of time. Before the start of your branch competition, remember to collect any remaining, completed photo release forms (if applicable).

Following the Branch Competition

- Send a post-competition press release (available on our website) and photos to local media outlets. Highlight any stories unique to your branch competition.
- Encourage members and participating students and teachers to post about the competition on social media outlets (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Instagram, etc.).
- The official hashtag for this year is **#ESUNSC2024** - please include it in all of your social media posts!
- Invite students to perform for members/donors at other ESU branch events.
- Encourage the branch winner to perform their selections at other community events/locations (such as Shakespeare festivals, libraries, public spaces, etc.).
- Send any press coverage, as well as photos and videos, to ESU National.

Following the National Competition

- A national press release will be sent from ESU National directly to the branch winner (national semi-finalist), their parent(s), teacher(s), branch coordinator and branch president.
- Send the national press release to local media outlets (radio, newspaper, television, etc.) Also send to the national semifinalist's school, guardians, and any other interested local organizations.

Staffing the Branch Competition

The branch competition is a wonderful example of the English-Speaking Union's mission in action. Therefore, we encourage the entire branch to be involved in the program. Send out information to all branch officers and members informing them about the competition and the different volunteer positions. Solicit your Shakespeare and TLab teachers and scholars to take on leadership roles as well.

Staff Positions

- **Branch Coordinator** (1): An active ESU branch member familiar with the local education system or a current/retired teacher familiar with the ESU. This person acts as a liaison between the branch and the local teachers/schools, so good communication and computer skills are required. The coordinator is responsible for outreach to local teachers and schools and running the branch competition. The branch coordinator is also responsible for sending in the appropriate paperwork to ESU National. We recommend that each branch coordinator have at least one co-coordinator.
 - **(Optional) Branch Co-Coordinator(s)**: Other ESU branch members or members of an affiliate organization partnering with the ESU for the competition. Co-coordinators are responsible for assisting the branch coordinator with all planning of the competition. Some branches decide to have a Shakespeare committee made up of ESU members fill this role.
- **Master of Ceremonies** (at least 1): An ESU branch officer or a prominent member of the community familiar with the ESU. The MC will narrate the branch competition to the audience (provide introductory remarks, introduce judges and announce the winners).
- **Judges** (at least 3, more if qualifying round(s) are needed): Judges should be professionals with expertise in Shakespeare studies, production or education. We recommend local members of the community (such as actors, directors, theater educators, professors and teachers). The ideal judging panel is comprised of a diverse group of professionals.
- **Judges' Liaison** (1): This person should be familiar with the judges and the Judge Handbook. This role may be filled by the branch coordinator or one of the co-coordinators.
- **Prompter** (1): Responsible for prompting the contestants during the branch competition. The prompter follows along with the text as the contestants perform/declaim their selections.
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Instructions for Prompters

As the contestants perform/declaim their selections, follow along in the prompting book. Please be aware that contestants may perform/declaim their selections in any order. We suggest having highlighters and sticky notes onhand. Alert the judges' liaison to any issues as the judges move to deliberate.

- Do not give a line prompt unless the contestant says "Line." Sometimes contestants take very, very long and dramatic pauses; do not be fooled into thinking they want a prompt.
- If a contestant **adds lines to their monologue** that are not in the prompting book, quickly try and mark the added lines. **Do not interrupt the competition in any way.** At the end of the prompting session, put a sticky note with the note "added lines" on the appropriate page. This is particularly important; contestants must perform their monologues as they are written in the Monologue Packet.
- If a contestant **drops lines from their monologue and/or sonnet**, cross out the sections that they did not speak. **Do not interrupt the competition in any way.** At the end of the prompting session, put a sticky note with the note "dropped lines" on the appropriate page. This is very important; contestants who drop lines from their monologue and/or sonnet will be penalized by the judges.

Judges

*Judges are obviously essential elements of your branch competition. **You require at least 3 judges. Please be mindful and sensitive to any conflicts of interest (actual or perceived) within your judging panel.** This may include (but is not limited to) judges who are past or present teachers at participating schools, relatives or friends of participating students/teachers or anyone who is otherwise familiar with the students (coach, director, etc.).*

Soliciting Judges

- Your judging panel should be diverse. Try to strike a balance between judges with an **academic** background (English teacher/professor, Shakespeare educator), **artistic** background (Drama teacher/professor, director, teaching artist, actor), and another person familiar with Shakespeare (casting director, theater critic, administrator, etc.) Try to not have a panel of only artists/actors.
- Select appropriate candidates from local organizations with which your branch has worked in the past, or use the competition as an opportunity to work with new organizations and individuals.
- **Judges must not have previous experience with any of the contestants that they will be judging.**
- Contact prospective judges and describe the program. Mention other judges who will be on the panel (if known) or people who have judged in the past.
- Inform them of the details of the branch competition (date, time, place and time commitment).
- Select a follow-up date to discuss judging criteria.
- Request a short biography to include in the branch competition program.

Preparing Judges

- Send your judges the Judge Handbook, which includes competition rules/guidelines and instructions for judging at the branch level. Copies of the Monologue Scoring Rubric, Sonnet Scoring Rubric and Judges' Evaluation Form are included in this handbook.
- Familiarize yourself with the Judge Handbook so that you may better answer any questions.
- Schedule an orientation or conference call prior to the competition, so that your judges may ask questions and receive consistent scoring advice.
- Encourage your judges to view videos of the national competition finalists' performances online at www.YouTube.com/EnglishSpeakingUnion. Suggest that your judges practice scoring these performances in order to prepare themselves for the actual branch competition.
- Send the contestants' selections to your judges prior to the competition, so that they may familiarize themselves with any unusual pieces.

Guidelines for Judges during the Competition

- Judges should not interact with the contestants or with the audience until the winners are announced at the end of program.
- Judges should not see a copy of the branch competition program until the winners are announced.
- Judges should be made aware of the fact that the rubrics and evaluation forms will be shared with the contestants and their teachers.
- If possible, separate the judges from the rest of the audience, so that they are not distracted by anyone.
- Do not allow audience members to sit behind the judges. This ensures that no audience member can see the judges' evaluations as they score and take notes on contestants' performances.
- Judges should be informed by the judges' liaison of any issues with a contestant's performance (i.e. an ineligible monologue, added or dropped lines from a sonnet and/or monologue or use of a prop).
- Have a Judge Handbook on hand during the competition, for reference.

After the Competition

- Some judges like to speak to the contestants after the competition. They are welcome to offer constructive feedback.
- Thank the judges. Acknowledge them in the branch newsletter, etc.
- Invite them to join the ESU (if they are not already members) and/or participate in other ESU events and programs.

Branch Competition Supplies

The following supplies are necessary for your branch competition. All documents will be made available online at www.esuus.org in the ESU National Shakespeare Competition section.

For Contestants/Teachers

Awards: You may choose to award the top contestants and their teachers. Some suggestions for contestant awards include:

- Books
- Tickets
- T-shirts
- Trophies/medals
- Workshop/camp scholarships
- Other Shakespeare memorabilia

Some suggestions for teacher awards include all of the above, and teaching materials.

We encourage you to use your branch's funds for teacher education and TLab Scholarships rather than large monetary awards for contestants.

For Contestants

- **Certificate of Participation (1:Contestant)**
 - Available upon request, to be signed by the branch president
- **Winner Packet (branch winner only)**
 - This document will be emailed by National upon receipt of the branch winner form.

For Judges

- **Scoring Book (1:Judge)**
 - Email or otherwise provide copies of the Scoring Rubric and Judges' Evaluation Form for each contestant in the order of performance.
- **Judge Handbook (1:Judge, 1:Judges' Liaison)**
 - A copy of this handbook (available for download online) should be emailed or otherwise provided to all judges. Please point out the sections on rules, rubrics and evaluations.

For the General Audience

- **ESU Promotional and Membership Materials**
 - Your branch competition is a great place to distribute membership, TLab brochures and other promotional materials.
- Create an email **program** for the branch competition. It should contain the following:
 - Contestants' names
 - Participating teachers
 - Participating schools
 - List of contestants' selections (monologues and sonnets)
 - Judges' names and biographies
 - Awards
 - Local funders/donors
 - Volunteers' names

List the contestants' names separate from their teachers and schools in the program. By keeping the contestants' affiliations unknown, you reduce bias and help maintain the integrity of the competition.