

AGES 11-14
YEARS 7-9

ESU PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE COMPETITION

2025-26 Handbook



ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices

WELCOME...

...to the ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition 2025-26!

This handbook explains everything you need to know about taking part in the ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition this year, as well as guidance on how to develop and deliver a great performance, how you will be marked and what to expect throughout the competition.

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ABOUT THE ESU PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE COMPETITION

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) is an educational charity that works to give young people the speaking and listening skills they need to thrive. For over 100 years, we have championed the power of language and communication to build better understanding between people and nations. We are a non-political organisation, open to all, and we believe that debate, dialogue and the exchange of ideas are vital to creating a more connected and collaborative world.

The ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition invites students to bring the words of Shakespeare to life, combining the art of performance with the development of vital oracy skills. Open to Key Stage Three students in England and Wales, the competition encourages young people to explore Shakespeare's plays by performing a monologue or duologue of their choice, in whichever way they wish to interpret it. Through performance and by giving a short introduction to their piece, participants not only grow in confidence and creativity but also refine their public speaking, expression and engagement skills. The competition is a unique opportunity to experience Shakespeare's works not as text on a page, but as living language full of passion, power and possibility.

Each year, the competition takes students on a journey: from school-based heats in the autumn term, to regional finals in the spring, culminating in the grand final at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer. Along the way, it encourages imagination, empathy and resilience – qualities that enrich both academic learning and life beyond the classroom. At its heart, the ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition is about more than performance; it is about discovery, interpretation and self-expression. It celebrates the joy of language, the courage to take the stage and the ability to communicate ideas that can resonate across time.

ALUMNI NETWORK

By taking part in the ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition, our young competitors join a thriving global alumni community full of like-minded people. We would love to keep in touch – to enable us to do so, we ask all competitors, whatever level of the competition they reach, [to sign up to our mailing list](#) (or ask a parent/guardian to sign up on their behalf) and look out for their first alumni newsletter!

Follow and tag us on social media to let us know how your rehearsals are coming along by using the hashtag **#ESUShakespeare**



HOW IT WORKS

The competition has four stages:

Round One

- An internal school selection process in which each school selects two entries to proceed to the second round
- Schools run their own internal competitions using the ESU's judging criteria, but without the specific involvement of ESU staff and volunteers
- There is no limit to the number of students who can take part, it can be as large or as small as the school would like
- This round must be completed by mid-January (we will provide an exact deadline by email) and schools must submit up to two winning entries
- More guidance on how to run your round one heat is available on [page four](#)

Round Two

- Up to two entries per school, either monologues or duologues, progress to round two
- Schools are grouped into in person heats within their region
- Participating schools will be asked if they can provide a venue for this round
- The format of the competition, with a two-minute oracy component and three minutes for acting, will be the same as round one
- The number of performers advancing from each heat will depend on the overall numbers in the competition region

Regional finals

- The regional finals follow the same format as the earlier heats, with one important difference: only one school will be named a regional champion and progress to finals day
- Regional final dates are already set and listed here. Please make sure you have your region's date in your diary as it cannot change, and if your team cannot make it then you may have to forfeit your place in the regional final

[CLICK HERE TO VIEW THE FULL CALENDAR](#)

REGIONAL FINALS: MAY 2026

11th: East	18th: North-East
12th: East Midlands	19th: East London
12th: West Midlands	19th: South
13th: West London	20th: South-East
13th: North Wales and North West England	20th: South Wales and West England
14th: Mid-South	21th: South-West

Grand final

- Regional champions will be invited to compete at the grand final, taking place at the Sam Wannamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe in the summer
- The grand final will follow the same format as previous heats
- Three awards will be presented at the conclusion of the grand final:
 - The ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition Winner
 - The ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition Runner-Up
 - The Don Miller Audience Choice Award

Feedback and Certificates

The ESU Schools' Mace is designed to be a friendly and supportive experience for everyone who takes part. At every stage of the competition, students receive constructive feedback from the judging panel to help them develop their skills and confidence. To celebrate their achievement, all participants are also awarded certificates, which teachers can print and share with their students after each round. This ensures that every student's effort and progress is recognised, not only those who reach the later stages.

CREATIVE PATHS TO SHAKESPEARE: INSPIRING IDEAS FOR ROUND ONE

Round one is an internal round, allowing students to shine within a familiar environment before advancing to more public stages. This step is crucial for building their confidence and love for Shakespeare, preparing them for face-to-face heats starting in March. Let's make this experience exciting and inspiring!

We have put together a series of options for schools to use as a guide to make round one a thrilling experience.

OPTION ONE

Drama in the Classroom: Infuse Shakespeare into Daily Lessons

Shakespeare is a staple in the curriculum, so why not integrate the competition into your daily lessons? By weaving performance into your teaching, students can perform scenes they've been studying in class, providing a seamless transition from coursework to competition. This approach enriches students' understanding of Shakespeare, turning classroom learning into a dynamic performance experience.

How It Works

- Select a scene relevant to the curriculum.
- Conduct performances during regular lessons.
- Identify the most promising entries for round two.

Key Points

- **Blend with Lessons:** Seamlessly weave the competition into your curriculum. Perform scenes from the plays you're studying with your students and choose the standout performances for the next round.
- **Encourage Peer Reviews:** Foster a classroom environment where students can critique and support each other. This builds a collaborative spirit and sharpens their skills.
- **Celebrate Achievements:** Recognise every student's effort with enthusiasm. Even those not moving forward deserve applause for their hard work and dedication.

This strategy transforms classroom studies into interactive Shakespearean showcases, fostering a love for literature and performance.





OPTION TWO

Shakespeare on Film: Create a Cinematic Masterpiece

Caterham School pioneered a fantastic approach: students in Years 7–9 filmed their entries as a homework assignment and submitted them via email. This method empowers students to explore Shakespeare at their own pace, removing the pressure of an immediate live audience. It allows for creativity in filming and offers the perfect opportunity for those who are a bit stage-shy to get involved. Why not make this the year your students create captivating performances on film?

How It Works

- Assign students to select a monologue or scene from a Shakespearean play
- Students record their performances at home
- Submissions are reviewed using the ESU judging criteria, and standout performances progress to round two

Key Points

- **Unleash Creativity:** Encourage students to go wild with costumes, props and sets from the comfort of their homes – let their imagination turn their videos into mini theatrical wonders!
- **Set Clear Guidelines:** Provide easy-to-follow instructions for video submissions to keep things smooth and professional
- **Offer Inspiring Feedback:** Give constructive and enthusiastic feedback to help students elevate their performances and boost their confidence – use the ESU judging criteria to judge the performance and base your feedback on this to get students familiar with what the judges' expectations are

This option nurtures budding performers who can comfortably refine their skills before facing an audience.



OPTION THREE

Join the Club: Start Small and Dream Big

If a whole-school round seems daunting, focus on a dedicated group of passionate students. Drama clubs offer a supportive environment where students can explore Shakespeare's works in depth, receiving personalised feedback and coaching. This method is perfect for developing skills at a sustainable pace, leading to refined and polished performances.

How It Works

- Run lunchtime or after-school drama club sessions
- Encourage members to explore various Shakespearean scenes
- Choose the best performances for round two

Key Points

- **Cultivate Passion:** Set up a drama club or select a group where students can immerse themselves in rehearsals and performance preparations
- **Offer Flexibility:** Allow students to participate based on their availability to keep their excitement high and engagement strong
- **Showcase Talent:** Host smaller performances or showcases to help students build confidence and experience before the big stage

This tailored approach allows you to foster talent within a close-knit group, nurturing a genuine enthusiasm for Shakespeare.



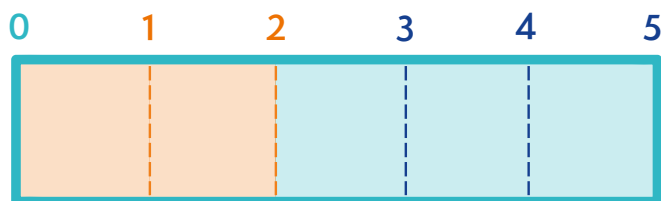
FORMAT OF THE COMPETITION

Teachers should work with pupils to select a Shakespearean monologue or duologue for the competition:

- The ESU provides some sample extracts, but these are not exhaustive; we welcome entries from any of Shakespeare's 37 plays
- Before the extract is performed, pupils should introduce their piece with their two-minute oracy component, explaining why they have chosen their piece as well as any relevant historical context and information about their interpretation
- The acting should be no longer than three minutes in duration
- The overall timing of each entry will, therefore, be a maximum of five minutes in total



INTRODUCTION TIME PERFORMANCE TIME



5 MINUTES TOTAL



'I was living my dream
on that stage'

Poppy Letting,
Don Miller Audience Choice
Award winner 2025



ESU PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE COMPETITION RULES

Age Criteria

- The ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition is open to Key Stage Three students only; years 7-9 aged 11-14

Timing

- For every 30 seconds that a performer's presentation runs over, half a point will be deducted from either the success in realising artistic intention category (for the oracy component) or the physical and technical skills category (for the performance component)
- A timekeeper will notify the judges about any presentation segment that goes over or under by 30 seconds or more

Props

- No props are allowed during a presentation, except for one straight-backed chair per performer
- The chair(s) will be provided by the host location
- One chair will be provided for monologues, and two chairs will be provided for duologues
- Please note that a performer may only use one chair during their performance (i.e. two chairs during a duologue cannot be used simultaneously by one person)
- Performers are not allowed to use items of clothing (i.e. jackets, shoes, hats etc.) as props
- Should a performer wish to evoke the presence of a prop, they may do so through mime

Costumes

- No costumes are allowed to be worn during a presentation
- The only acceptable clothing is all black (plain) or school uniform, whichever is more comfortable
- Should a performer wish to evoke the presence of a specific item of clothing, they may do so through mime

Concessions

- In the rare event that a performer is unable to physically attend their prescribed heat, concessions may be made to allow them to perform either online or in a different heat
- If a performer participates in a different heat, they will have to stay in (and travel to) heats within that region for the remainder of the competition
- This is on a case-by-case basis and must be approved by the ESU competitions team in advance

Understudies

- Should a performer in a duologue be unable to perform in a round due to unexpected circumstances, an understudy may perform in their place to prevent a school from being prematurely knocked out
- Understudies must be students from the same school who fit the age eligibility (i.e. 11-14 years old throughout the entirety of the competition)
- Understudies may use a script during their performance, but this will be reflected in their success in realising artistic intention, vocal skills and physical and technical skills scores (where applicable)
- No adjudication concessions will be made to this understudy performance – judges will mark all competitors the same, regardless of preparation
- Understudies are permitted for one performer only in a duologue if a registered performer is unable to take part; the other original competitor must still perform and the ESU must be informed of any changes to the line-up in advance of the competition
- Where an understudy has been used in a duologue, the original registered performer must return for subsequent rounds if they are available to compete – the understudy is permitted only as a substitute for the round in which they were required
- Understudies are not permitted for monologues as they are assessed on the registered competitor's individual performance and therefore only the named competitor may perform the piece

Text Selection

- Competitors are only permitted to perform excerpts from one of Shakespeare's plays as recognised by the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust: [William Shakespeare Plays](#)
- Excerpts from sonnets and narrative poems are not permitted
- Excerpts may be edited to fit the needs of the performance (i.e. number of actors and/or performance time); characters/lines may be removed as long as the piece maintains logical sense
- The actual language of the piece (i.e. vocabulary and syntax) cannot be altered

If you have a question that is not answered here, or if anything is unclear, please contact us at competition@esu.org

ESU PERFORMING SHAKESPEARE JUDGE SUMMARY SHEET

Scores are to be used as a guide during competitions. Scores should not be shared with others. The rubric is designed to help judges evaluate student performances, with a focus on both oracy (speaking skills) and performance (acting and stage presence)

Timings

- **Oracy Component:** **Two minutes** (*name and details of play, scene and characters portrayed, reason piece was chosen, highlighted themes and what they aim to show/ achieve in their delivery*)
- **Performance:** **Three minutes** (*vocal, physical and technical skills*)

SEE THE FULL MARKING SHEET HERE

Criteria is laid out for gradings one, three and five. Two and four are not described but fall in between the grades on either side.

Category	1 (Emerging Talent)	2	3 (Class Act)	4	5 (Show Stopping)
ORACY Interpretation of Text How well the performer understands and presents the text. <i>themes, personalisation, time management</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic understanding of the text with little creativity. They interpret the text with limited inventiveness and analysis. No connection of the piece to outside sources (i.e. art, history, current/personal events, etc.) or explanation of its relevance. Short and basic introduction of the piece. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative and thoughtful understanding and interpretation. They interpret the text with a degree of inventiveness and some analysis. Moderate connection of the piece to outside sources (i.e. art, history, current/personal events, etc.) and brief explanation of its relevance. Thorough introduction that sets up the performance well. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exceptionally creative and deeply thoughtful understanding and interpretation. They interpret the text with great inventiveness and in-depth analysis. Seamless connection of the piece to outside sources (i.e. art, history, current/personal events, etc.) and clear explanation of its relevance. Compelling introduction that grabs attention and sets the stage perfectly.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judging Tip: Focus on how well the performer understands the text and if they can relate it to broader themes or personal experiences. A strong introduction and clear connection to other ideas are key. 				
Success in Realising Artistic Intention How well the performer expresses the intended message and emotions of the piece. <i>continuity, connection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited connection between what they say and how they act. Rarely display /connect/ relate to the intention and analysis outlined in the oracy element when delivering the piece. Basic performance and understanding that displays an incohesive piece of theatre. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear and frequent alignment between the performer's intentions and their actions. Occasionally display /connect/ relate to the intention and analysis outlined in the oracy element when delivering the piece. Well-connected performance and understanding that leaves a noticeable impact and displays a standard piece of theatre. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exceptional alignment between intentions and actions, with everything working together perfectly. Displays /connects/ relates to the intention and analysis outlined in the oracy element when delivering the piece. Advanced performance connected to thorough understanding that generates an impactful piece of theatre.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judging Tip: Look for how well the performer connects their words and actions. A strong performance will feel unified, with every element working together to convey the message. 				

Category	1 (Emerging Talent)	2	3 (Class Act)	4	5 (Show Stopping)
PERFORMANCE Vocal Skills How effectively the performer uses their voice to enhance the performance. <i>pace, inflection, intonation, pitch, projection</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of vocal projection throughout the space and no use of volume for artistic effect. Little to no variation in tone, pitch, or inflection. Use of pauses in a way which is at odds with the piece; no variation of rhythm. Creation and demonstration of a basic vocal response to character mood and developing situation. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good vocal projection that adds to the performance and effective use volume for artistic effect. Occasional variation in tone, pitch, and inflection. Use of pauses at one or more significant moments; slight variation of rhythm. Creation and demonstration of a secure vocal response to character mood and developing situation. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outstanding vocal control that fully commands the space. Successful vocal projection that fills the space and astute use of volume for artistic effect. Masterful variation in tone, pitch, and inflection, creating a dynamic and engaging performance. Use of pauses to structure the performance; noticeable change of rhythm. Creation and demonstration of a confident and imaginative vocal response to character mood and developing situation.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judging Tip: Pay attention to how the performer uses their voice. Effective vocal skills can make the performance more engaging and help convey the emotions of the piece. Oracy and Performance Connection: Oracy is just as crucial in this section as it is in the oracy-specific section. The way a performer speaks, projects and uses vocal techniques must enhance their physical performance. Judges should look for how well the performer's voice complements their movements, facial expressions and use of space. 				
Physical & Technical Skills How the performer uses their body and the space to enhance their performance. <i>movement, body language, facial expression, gesture, space</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited movement and physical expression, often awkward or mismatched with the piece. Use of stillness in a way which is at odds with the piece. Use of space in a static way, orienting most of the performance 'audience out.' <p><i>Duologue only:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal support for each other. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A wide range of performance choices with purpose to affect a clear, confident and consistent interpretation of character and situation. Stillness and movement are used to structure the performance effectively. Use of space in a dynamic way, orienting entire performance 'audience out.' <p><i>Duologue only:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong collaboration that enhances both performances. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exceptional physicality that transforms the performance space, fully immersing the audience. An extensive range of performance choices to bring nuance, purpose and add resonance to the interpretation of character and situation. Stillness and movement are integral features that structure the performance. Use of space in a compelling and inventive way, orientating the entire performance 'audience out.' <p><i>Duologue only:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creative, seamless collaboration, with each performer enhancing the other's strengths.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Judging Tip: Observe how the performer uses their body and space. Effective physical expression should enhance the emotional and narrative impact of the performance. Oracy and Performance Connection: In this section, oracy continues to play a vital role. The way a performer speaks should align with their body language and movements. Judges should observe whether the vocal delivery complements physical actions, creating a unified and powerful performance. 				

ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE AND RESOURCES

GET INSPIRED


Watching past performances can be particularly helpful. You can find these on our ESU Performing Shakespeare Competition playlist located on the ESU YouTube channel:



EXPLORE MORE FROM THE ESU

For more resources, to read our equity policy or to learn about your fellow alumni, head to our website:

- [Resources](#)
- [Equity policy](#)
- [Safeguarding policy](#)
- [Alumni network](#)



‘When I perform, I can become a totally different person. I can be whoever and whatever I wish, and I live in a world where anxiety doesn’t exist. It makes me feel that I can have an amazing life’

[Adam, Shakespeare finalist 2022](#)



CELEBRATE THE TEACHERS WHO MAKE IT POSSIBLE...

EXPLORE THE ESU-RUTLAND ORACY AWARDS!

None of our competitions would be possible without the dedication of the amazing educators who inspire and support students every step of the way.

The English-Speaking Union and The Rutland Foundation are recognising educators who champion speaking and listening in schools. If you're helping young people find their voice, we want to hear from you!

The ESU-Rutland Oracy Culture Award celebrates schools that have created a vibrant culture of oracy, where speaking and listening are central to learning and daily life.

The ESU-Rutland Oracy Teacher Award honours educators leading powerful oracy initiatives that make a real impact.

Winners and runners-up will receive £500 and £250 respectively, and all applicants are invited to the ESU-Rutland Oracy Teacher Conference in the autumn – a valuable CPD opportunity to connect with fellow educators, share best practice and deepen your oracy expertise. Award winners will also be celebrated at the ESU's prestigious Evelyn Wrench Lecture.

Applications open in the spring and close at the end of summer. Keep an eye on our awards page and social media platforms for updates on the nomination window!

Visit www.esu.org/awards to find out more



The ESU's programmes equipped me for life – they gave me the confidence to get in to Oxford and build my businesses thereafter - and individual teachers are vital to enabling that process. It is teachers who believe in us and who give up their lunchtimes to prepare us for the competitions. It is teachers who rent the minibuses, drive us all over the country and put in so much of their own time, above and beyond their existing commitments which we all know are huge and becoming greater by the year. These awards are to recognise these teachers, so often unsung, who go the extra mile for their students, so that they can gain the skills that will carry them through life.'

Chris Byrne,
founder of the
Rutland Foundation
and Sponsor of
the ESU-Rutland
Oracy Awards



IT DOESN'T HAVE TO STOP HERE...

Enhance your teaching with expert-led CPD workshops from the English-Speaking Union! Our interactive sessions help you integrate oracy into your classroom, building students' essential skills in communication, confidence and resilience. Whether it's a half-day, full-day or twilight session, our training offers practical tools and resources for immediate use. Empower your students and boost your teaching skills today. For more details, visit esu.org/cpd to enquire and book your session!

STAY IN TOUCH

By taking part in today's competition, you're part of a worldwide network that values the power of communication. Join us to meet new people, get support from other alumni, mentor the next generation and share your journey as you become part of the next generation of speakers and leaders. Stay connected with the international community of ESU alumni at esu.org/alumni.



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