



The 2014-15 school year marked the 10th anniversary of the Poetry Out Loud (POL) program. The NEA and Poetry Foundation are incredibly proud of the ways in which POL has grown since 2005, and we thank our state partners for making this program a success nationwide.

As we look toward the next decade of POL, it's a good time to step back and consider what is still challenging about this program. A perennial challenge is the Level of Complexity category. We have convened two separate expert panels to discuss and review this category—one in 2010 and one in 2013—and after both panels changes were made to the rubric and the Level of Complexity category based on panelist feedback. However, the category remains opaque for many, including the teachers, students, parents, SAAs, and judges that raised concerns about it this year alone. **After reviewing and discussing the notes from the 2010 and 2013 panels, we have decided to remove the Level of Complexity category from the Poetry Out Loud evaluation criteria.**

This is a substantial change, and we want to provide context for our decision. Below, you'll find a Q&A explanation of why the category was removed as well as some talking points that can be used at the state or local level when explaining this change to your POL stakeholders. In addition to this guidance, the POL team is available to take any specific questions about the change.

Q: I do not see the Level of Complexity category in the 2015-16 POL Teacher's Guide. What happened?

A: Level of Complexity is no longer a separate scoring category for Poetry Out Loud. During the summer of 2015, The NEA and Poetry Foundation made a decision to remove the category from the evaluation criteria and scoring rubric.

Q: Why was the Level of Complexity category removed?

A: This decision was made for a variety of reasons. The Level of Complexity category was originally titled "Level of Difficulty" and was created to evaluate "the difficulty of the poem, taking into account length, diction, and density of language." Although measuring a student's poem choice fits naturally within the parameters of a poetry recitation contest, the implementation of this category and its description are a continual challenge.

Consistency

The main obstacle faced with Level of Complexity (LOC) is consistency. Scores for this category are based on the poem text alone and have no connection to the student's performance. This means that judges must be consistent with themselves in scoring this category. (If two students recite the same poem, a judge should give each performance the same score for LOC.) Although we strongly encourage POL judges to consider LOC scores in advance of competition, we realize that many judges are simply too busy to carefully read every poem and assign LOC scores in advance. We also realize that it's very challenging for competition organizers to ensure that judges have been consistent with themselves when scoring this category.

Assigning Scores

Over the years, teachers, competitors, assessment experts, and others have recommended that LOC scores be assigned to each poem in the POL anthology to avoid inconsistent scoring in this category.

While that suggestion addresses one concern (consistency), it does not address the complex challenge of how these scores might be determined and explained to a wide audience, especially anthology poets and student participants. We also recognize that assigning scores discourages students from exploring the widest possible range of poems available.

Classroom Implementation

Many teachers tell us that they are not comfortable assigning LOC scores at the classroom or school level. Educators are incredibly busy individuals and most do not have the time and/or the familiarity with the genre to assign LOC scores based on our guidance. Although we have tried to better define LOC, a disconnect between the category description and the practical implementation remains for many teachers and even some judges. We've noticed that this disconnect results in teachers, students, and judges considering complexity on poem length alone.

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Six of the seven evaluation categories for POL (including accuracy) apply to the live performance of a poem. LOC is the only category based solely on the poem text. Many judges have told us that while they assigned complexity scores ahead of the competition, hearing the poems recited aloud changed their opinion regarding complexity scores. Judges struggle to separate the poem from the performance for this category, yet that is what they are asked to do. Several of our judges and panelists see LOC as an element that is implicitly reflected in other categories like Evidence of Understanding, Dramatic Appropriateness, and especially, Overall Performance.

Q: Will judges still consider Level of Complexity now that it is not a separate category?

A: Yes. Judges should still consider the poem's complexity, even though it is no longer a separate category with a point value equal to the other elements. In the same way that judges consider the student's range of poems under Overall Performance, they will now consider the poem's complexity under the Overall Performance category as well. The category description for Overall Performance reflects this new guidance. Please see page 18 of the 2015-16 Poetry Out Loud Teacher's Guide for more details.

Q: Will students still consider Level of Complexity now that it is not a separate category?

A: Yes. Students will still be evaluated on the complexity of their poem choice, but complexity will no longer have the weight it once did as a separate category. When selecting poems, students should carefully consider the complexity and range of their choices.

Q: How does the removal of Level of Complexity affect the rankings?

A: In 2013, the NEA's office of research and analysis reviewed all the data from the 2012 National semifinals and finals and found that if Level of Complexity was eliminated it would not affect the final student rankings significantly.

Q: How does the removal of Level of Complexity affect the contest evaluation sheet?

A: Removing this category changes the total number of points a student can receive for their recitation. Please see page 14 of the 2015-16 Poetry Out Loud Teacher's Guide for more details. (This change will also be reflected in the "Sample Tally Sheet" available on poetryoutloud.org.)

Q: Will you replace the Level of Complexity category with a new category?

A: No.

Talking Points

- After convening two panels on the Poetry Out Loud (POL) scoring rubric and the Level of Complexity category, the NEA and Poetry Foundation have decided that Level of Complexity will no longer be a separate evaluation category for POL. This change will be implemented during the 2015-16 program cycle.
- For the 2015-16 program cycle, POL judges will still be required to consider the poem's complexity under Overall Performance, just as they consider the student's range of poems under this category. However, Level of Complexity will no longer be a separate evaluation category for POL. Please see the 2015-16 POL Teacher's Guide for more details.
- The NEA and Poetry Foundation considered the following when making this decision:
 - Data analysis performed by the NEA's Research office shows that student rankings at the National Finals did not change significantly when the Level of Complexity score was removed from each student's score.
 - While judges are strongly encouraged to review poems and score Level of Complexity before competitions, they are not always able to do so.
 - It is very challenging for competition organizers to ensure consistency within the Level of Complexity category. Judges must be consistent with themselves for this category; however, this rule is enforced unevenly across the states.
 - Level of Complexity is intended to measure the poem text alone; however, many judges tell us that it's very difficult to separate the performance from the poem.
 - Assigning scores for the Level of Complexity category discourages students from exploring the widest possible range of poems available.