

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL
OF
PERFORMING ARTS
2025

SET POEMS
FOR VERSE SPEAKING CLASSES

Competitors in the following classes are requested to speak
EITHER the test piece (as published)

or

to choose a poem on the given theme,
offering a literary and performance challenge
commensurate with the test piece

SD01

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 1 AND UNDER

“THE WORLD IS A BOX” BY SOPHIE HANNAH

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘BEING ME’

TIME LIMIT: ONE MINUTE

THE WORLD IS A BOX

My heart is a box of affection.

My head is a box of ideas.

My room is a box of protection.

The past is a box full of years.

The future's a box full of after.

An egg is a box full of yolk.

My life is a box full of laughter.

And the world is a box full of folk.

by Sophie Hannah

Published in The Box Room

SD02

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 2

"HELLO" by BARRY BUCKINGHAM

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF 'FRIENDSHIP'

TIME LIMIT: ONE MINUTE

HELLO!

"HELLO!" I shouted in a jar,
then screwed the lid on tight.
I thought my shout
could not get out,
and left it overnight.

Alas, the jar was empty
when I opened it today.
I held it near,
but couldn't hear
"HELLO!" It's got away!

So anywhere you're wandering,
or even out at sea,
if you should hear a friendly shout
when no one seems to be about,
it might have come from me.

by Barry Buckingham

Published in A First Poetry Book

SD03

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 3

“BOBBY’S BUBBLE GUM” BY DAVE WARD

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘FOOD’

TIME LIMIT: TWO MINUTES

BOBBY’S BUBBLE GUM

Bobby blew his bubble gum
Big and fat and wide.
Bobby blew his bubble gum
Then swallowed it inside.

The bubble gum swelled up and grew
Inside Bobby's belly
Till Bobby wobbled round the room
Like a bowl of jelly.

Bobby clutched his aching guts,
His Mum began to cry;
Then Bobby sat down on a pin
And POP!
He hit the sky.

So when you blow your bubble gum
Big and fat and wide:
Let it cover up your grin,
Let it dribble down your chin,
Let it cling on to your skin –
But don't swallow it inside.

by Dave Ward

Published in Michael Rosen's A-Z

SD04

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 4

“FINDING OUT ABOUT THE FAMILY” BY RICHARD EDWARDS

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘FAMILY’

TIME LIMIT: TWO MINUTES

FINDING OUT ABOUT THE FAMILY

It was really rather scary
When my dear old Auntie Mary
Started going very hairy
When the moon was full and bright,
And went outside on the prowl
With a loud and eerie howl
Like a wild wolf on a hilltop
In the middle of the night.

It was really rather odd
When I found my Uncle Tod
Dangling from a wooden rod
Where a curtain usually hangs,
He was upside down, in black,
With his hair slicked thinly back,
And the firelight flickering fiercely
On the sharp tips of his fangs.

It was most bizarre of all
When my little brother Paul
Disappeared into the wall
In a puff of purple smoke,
Then my sister waved her wand,
And now I'm living in this pond
Eating flies and feeling slimy...
Ribbit ribbit, croak croak croak.

by Richard Edwards

Published in Michael Rosen's A-Z

SD05

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 5

“THE DENTIST AND THE CROCODILE” BY ROALD DAHL
OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘MONSTERS’

TIME LIMIT: TWO MINUTES

THE DENTIST AND THE CROCODILE

The crocodile, with cunning smile, sat in the dentist’s chair.
He said, “Right here and everywhere my teeth require repair.”
The dentist’s face was turning white. He quivered, quaked and shook.
He muttered, “I suppose I’m going to have to take a look.”
“I want you”, Crocodile declared, “to do the back ones first.
The molars at the very back are easily the worst.”
He opened wide his massive jaws. It was a fearsome sight—
At least three hundred pointed teeth, all sharp and shining white.
The dentist kept himself well clear. He stood two yards away.
He chose the longest probe he had to search out the decay.
“I said to do the *back ones* first!” the Crocodile called out.
“You’re much too far away, dear sir, to see what you’re about.
To do the back ones properly you’ve got to put your head
Deep down inside my great big mouth,” the grinning Crocky said.
The poor old dentist wrung his hands and, weeping in despair,
He cried, “No no! I see them all extremely well from here!”
Just then, in burst a lady, in her hands a golden chain.
She cried, “Oh Croc, you naughty boy, you’re playing tricks again!”
“Watch out!” the dentist shrieked and started climbing up the wall.
“He’s after me! He’s after you! He’s going to eat us all!”
“Don’t be a twit,” the lady said, and flashed a gorgeous smile.
“He’s harmless. He’s my little pet, my lovely crocodile!”

by Roald Dahl

Published in Rhyme Stew

SD06

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 6

“THE SUPPLY TEACHER” BY ALAN AHLBERG

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘SCHOOL’

TIME LIMIT: TWO MINUTES

THE SUPPLY TEACHER

Here’s the rule for what to do
If ever your teacher has the flu
Or for some other reason takes to her bed
And a different teacher comes instead.

When the visiting teacher hangs up her hat
Writes the date on the board, does this or that
Always remember, you have to say this,
OUR teacher never does that, Miss!

When you want to change places or wander about
Or feel like getting the guinea pig out
Never forget, the message is this,
OUR teacher always lets us, Miss!

Then, when your teacher returns next day
And complains about the paint or clay
Remember these words, you just say this:
That OTHER teacher told us to, Miss!

Allan Ahlberg

Published in Please Mrs Butler (Penguin)

SD07

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 7

"THE HERO" BY SIEGFRIED SASSOON

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF 'CONFLICT'

TIME LIMIT: THREE MINUTES

THE HERO

"Jack feel as he'd have wished," the Mother said,
And folded up the letter that she'd read.

"The Colonel writes so nicely." Something broke
In the tired voice that quavered to a choke.
She half looked up. "We mothers are so proud
Of our dead soldiers." Then her face was bowed.

Quietly the Brother Officer went out.

He'd told the poor old dear some gallant lies
That she would nourish all her days, no doubt.
For while he coughed and mumbled, her weak eyes
Had shone with gentle triumph, brimmed with joy,
Because he'd been so brave, her glorious boy.

He thought how "Jack", cold-footed, useless swine,
Had panicked down the trench that night the mine
Went up at Wicked Corner; how he'd tried
To get sent home; and how, at last, he died,
Blown to small bits. And no one seemed to care
Except that lonely woman with white hair.

by Siegfried Sassoon

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SD08

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 8

"GIRAFFES" BY PHOEBE HESKETH

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF 'FLORA OR FAUNA'

TIME LIMIT: THREE MINUTES

GIRAFFES

Beyond the brassy sun-stare where each shade
Crouches beneath its substance at mid-noon,
The tall giraffes are gathered in a glade
Grazing the green fruit of the midday moon.
Patched with sienna shadows of the jungle,
In pencil-slender attitude they stand;
Grotesque in camouflage, each curve and angle
Is merged into the backcloth of the land.

These circus creatures of a poet's dreaming
Whose destiny on silent strings is spun,
Are patterned in design of nature's scheming
To move unseen through dappled woods and dun.
Strange genesis in which the substance seeming
The shadow, is the secret of the sun!

by Phoebe Hesketh

Published in The Leave Train

SD09

VERSE SPEAKING YEAR 9 & 10

“WILD GEESE” BY MARY OLIVER

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘IDENTITY’

TIME LIMIT: THREE MINUTES

WILD GEESE

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

by Mary Oliver

Published in ‘Dreamwork’

SD10

VERSE SPEAKING YEARS 11 - 13

“FOLLOWER” BY SEAMUS HEANEY

OR ANY OTHER POEM ON THE THEME OF ‘HERITAGE’

TIME LIMIT: THREE MINUTES

FOLLOWER

My father worked with a horse-plough,
His shoulders globed like a full sail strung
Between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing
And fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the headrig, with a single pluck

Of reins, the sweating team turned round
And back into the land. His eye
Narrowed and angled at the ground,
Mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hobnailed wake,
Fell sometimes on the polished sod;
Sometimes he rode me on his back
Dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,
To close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
In his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
Yapping always. But today
It is my father who keeps stumbling
Behind me, and will not go away

by Seamus Heaney

Published in Opened Ground: Selected Poems (MacMillan)

SD10

VERSE SPEAKING YEARS OPEN

EITHER

“ADLESTROP” BY EDWARD THOMAS

OR

“NOT ADLESTROP” BY DANNIE ABSE

ADLESTROP

Yes. I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat, the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.

The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adelstrop – only the name

And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No white less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.

And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.

by Edward Thomas

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NOT ADLESTOP

Not Adlestrop, no - besides the name
hardly matters. Nor did I languish in June heat.
Simply, I stood, too early, on the empty platform,
and the wrong train came in slowly, surprised, stopped.
Directly facing me, from a window,
a very, very pretty girl leaned out.

When I, all instinct,
stared at her, she, all instinct, inclined her head away
as if she'd divined the much married life in me,
or as if she might spot, up platform,
some unlikely familiar.

For my part, under the clock, I continued
my scrutiny with unmitigated pleasure.
And she knew it, she certainly knew it, and would
not glance at me in the silence of not Adlestrop.

Only when the train heaved noisily, only
when it jolted, when it slid away, only then,
daring and secure, she smiled back at my smile,
and I, daring and secure, waved back at her waving.
And so it was, all the way down the hurrying platform
as the train gathered atrocious speed
towards Oxfordshire or Gloucestershire.

by Dannie Abse

