National History Day Performances

What is a performance?

The History Day performance category allows you to create a play that conveys a historical argument with dramatic appeal. Innovative performances have made this category the highlight of many History Day events.

In creating a performance, it's important to remember that entries in this category are not oral reports about a topic. You will create a script, with characters, lines and costumes in order to convey your argument to the audience. Use your imagination and have fun!

The Basic Framework

- **Time Limit**: Your performance may not be longer than 10 minutes. This does not include your performance introduction (including only the title and participant names). Timing will begin after you introduce your project. You will have five additional minutes to set up your performance and five additional minutes to take it down.
- **Media**: You are able to use media in your performance, including CD players, computers, etc. However, only group members are allowed to run this equipment and you will have to provide the equipment yourselves.
- **Costumes**: Performers can find costumes in a variety of places. You can create your own or have one produced for you. You can also rent a costume from a store or borrow one from your school drama department. No matter what you do, the choice of pieces in the costume, choice of fabrics used and choice of design of the costume must be your own. You do not have to buy or rent expensive historically accurate costumes, but you are expected to consider the appropriateness of your clothing in relation to the time period and the script. For example, a student might wear a plain grey shirt and slacks to represent a Confederate soldier in the Civil War, understanding that a dark blue shirt and slacks wouldn't be appropriate.
- **Script**: You should bring an extra copy of your script to a competition in case you want to review your lines, but you should not include your script with the other written materials presented to your judges.
- **A Live Performance**: The very nature of the performance category means that performance are not pre-recorded. You will have to perform in front of an audience of judges and other viewers. Don't be afraid! The people watching your performance will be other students, teachers or family members and will all be there to support you.
- **Be sure to check the NHD Contest Rulebook for complete category rules!**

Why Should I Choose the Performance Category?

If you enjoy being on stage and performing in front of an audience, this is the category for you! You should enjoy creative writing and producing scripts. It's also important to have access to costumes and props and have the ability to transport them to competitions.

In choosing this category, it's important to think of the appropriateness of your topic for a performance. Is there a character or event that is related to your topic that you can turn into an effective argument about your topic? Are there various types of historical evidence that you can include in your performance, such as quotes, music, photographs, maps, etc.?
Elements of a History Day Performance

The Script
Your script is the most important element of your performance. It is the culmination of all your research and conveys your argument to the audience. The script must be an original creation of the student(s) working on the project.

History Day scripts are similar to other types of performances or plays. If you've never seen a script before, check your library or ask your teacher for an example to see how scripts are formatted.

Remember, this isn't a Broadway drama! Since your performance can only be 10 minutes long, you don't have a lot of space to write your script. You will be able to include about 5 pages (double-spaced) of script in a History Day performance.

Blocking & Stage Directions
In preparing your performance, it's important to think about how you will present your words to the audience. In addition to your lines, write stage direction for the actors. How should they deliver certain lines? Is the character angry? Happy? Sad? Where should they pause for dramatic effect or to let the character's words sink in? Where should each character be on the stage while delivering their lines? How do the characters interact with each other? Thinking about these elements before will help your performance to appear polished and consistent.

The Stage
The stage you will use to present your performance will vary at different History Day competitions. Most likely, you will have a classroom to share your performance. An area will be cleared at the front of the classroom and the desks will be set into rows for the audience. At other competitions, you may find that there is a stage or a platform in a lecture hall. No matter where you are, there will be room for group members to move around comfortably. You may or may not be able to operate the lights in your performance room.

Props & Set
History Day sets don't have to be elaborate. (In fact, elaborate sets can cause problems when it comes time to move them during competitions. You only have five minutes to set-up and an additional five minutes to take down your set.)

Every prop should have a use, and you should use every prop. When you have your script written, make a list of every object that a character must use, including furniture. If your list is huge, think about whether all the props are really necessary, or whether you can get away without certain items. Let the audience use their imaginations!

Costumes
An effective costume will help your audience understand who you are as a character and the time period in which your performance takes place. You can make your costume yourself, rent your costume or have one produced for you. However, according to NHD rules, the student(s) in the performance must make all the decisions about the costume, including the selection of materials, patterns or costume selection. Look at photographs, paintings or costume design books about the time period for inspiration.

Remember, effective costumes do not have to be elaborate. Plain clothing, with simple hats or coats can easily show an audience a change of character.

Media
You are allowed to include media in your performance, including the use of CD or tape players. Remember, you will need to provide all additional equipment to play these media elements and only group members may operate them.
Tips for Creating a Spectacular NHD Performance

Planning

Remember the NHD Criteria
Especially in the performance category, it’s easy to get caught up in telling a story through drama. It’s important to remember the purpose of your performance and the elements that the judges will be looking for:

**Argument:** A performance should clearly express an argument, just like a written paper. Incorporate it at the beginning to let your audience know what you will be proving. Make sure to incorporate it again at the end to reiterate your argument for the audience.

**Historical Context:** When researching and creating your performance, you should consider more than just the narrative of the topic. Think about what took place before or during the time period. How did these people, place or events influence your topic? This historical context is important to understanding your topic and making an argument.

**Evidence:** Just like other presentation categories, it’s important to incorporate historical evidence that supports your argument. What lines can you include in your script that will show this evidence or support? For example, let’s say that you are creating a group performance about Susan B. Anthony and the women’s voting rights movement in the United States. A pro-voting rights character might give reasons that he or she thinks women should have the right to vote. These don’t necessarily have to be quotations from the past, but should be the same arguments that women from the movement gave for demanding the right to vote.

In addition, are there quotations from primary sources, such as letters or diaries, which you can use in your script? Are there photographs or other visual elements that you can incorporate into your performance?

Putting It All Together

**Be Historically Accurate**
Your performance should appeal dramatically to the audience, but this shouldn’t be at the expense of historical accuracy. Be creative when you make up characters, imagine scenes or write dialog. However, make sure there is a historical basis for the narrative of your performance. It’s okay to imagine what Susan B. Anthony might have said to her supporters as she fought for women’s right to vote, but it’s not appropriate to contend that she fought against the vote. That wouldn’t be based on historical fact.
Focus on Certain Characters During a Moment in History Rather Than Narrating an Entire Biography or Timeline
The characters depicted in your performance can be real or fictional, as long as they're supported by evidence. Before writing your script, brainstorm a list of people – famous or unknown – who were affected in one way or another by the historical topic you are researching. Consider each person's unique perspective on events. What scenes do you imagine for them as characters in a performance? How could different characters help express your argument?

Establish the Scene Right Away
Who are you? Where are you? What time period are you in? Who is your character talking to? Communicate the "who, what, where and when" early in your script. This will not only help you give a stronger performance, but will also let the audience tune in to your argument and ideas instead of trying to identify your topic and setting.

Less Can Be More
Remember the purpose of your History Day performance before getting too involved in elaborate scenes, props, character changes and costumes. Most of your effort should be put into your research, argument and a solid script.

Look it Over
The Performance Stands Alone
When evaluating NHD performances, the judges should be able to find all the information about your topic in the performance itself. The performance has to stand on its own. Have someone who has never seen your performance watch it (a friend, teacher, neighbor, etc.). After they have seen the performance, ask them a few questions to see if you have communicated your argument clearly: What am I trying to prove in my performance? What evidence have I shown to support that argument? What do you like about my performance? What is confusing to you?
Planning Your Performance

Research First
Since your research is the basis for your performance, it’s only fitting that you should have a strong basis of research before you begin writing your script. No matter how tempting it is to dive in and begin writing a script, it’s best to have your research done to understand the full range of possibilities open to you.

Brainstorm Your Options
Having a strong foundation of research will allow you to write a brief description of your topic. Then, think about all the possible answers to the following questions:

- What events, both major and minor, are connected to my topic?
- What characters, both famous and not, are connected to my topic?
- What scenes, both real and imagined, might I use in my performance?

Get Inspired
Check out other types of historical dramas or NHD performances to get inspired about what you might do through your performance. You can borrow sample performances from the NHD in Wisconsin office, or check out samples online through the national office at http://www.nhd.org/ProjectExamples.htm

Develop Your Characters
Once you’ve decided on your characters, it’s time to “get into your character’s head,” whether you’re portraying a real or fictional person.

- How does the character dress? How does the character speak?
- What is the character’s personality or mood?
- What was life like for someone like this character?
- What does the character think about events in his or her time period?
- What kinds of social behavior would someone in this character’s time or situation portray?

Outline the Basics of Your Performance
Before you begin writing your script, take the time to outline the basics of your performance. You don’t want to get too far into your writing and then realize that a certain aspect of your performance won’t work. This is also a great time to think about how you will make transitions in time and characters in your performance, if applicable.

- What sections are you going to break your performance into?
- Where are you stating your argument?
- How does each part of your performance support your argument?
- What evidence or primary source might you be able to incorporate and where?
- Where do you show how your topic is connected to the them?
- How do you address historical context through your performance?

Edit It Down
About five pages of double space script will be enough to fill 10 minutes of performance. You may have to make some difficult decisions as to what you are and are not able to include. Remember that your historical argument and evidence are the most important parts of your performance. When you have finished a draft of your script, highlight the parts that express your argument in one color and specific supporting evidence in a different color. If it looks like there’s not enough of one color on the script, it may be time for some editing! It should be easier to see what parts of your performance you may be able to edit out.

Practice, Practice, Practice!
Having a working script done is just the beginning. Keep rehearsing to learn your lines and to practice speaking at the right speed, volume and tone. As you go through your lines, take time to block out where your characters will stand, how they will move and what props they might need to use. If possible, ask someone to tape record your performance. You can watch it later to see how the performance looks from the audience’s perspective.
Presenting a project in the performance category at a History Day competition is similar to presenting projects in other categories. At your assigned time, you will have the chance to share your work with the judges. This is how a presentation in the performance category usually works:

- **Set-Up**: You have five minutes to set up your set and props for your performance. Your judges will ask for your process paper and bibliography before you set up so that they can begin looking at it. Remember, only group members should set up the props and any background. Once you are set-up, wait for the judges signal begin your performance.

- **Performance**

- **Take-Down**: Take down your set and move your props to the side of the room or into the hallway. Make sure to be as quiet as possible while you are doing this as there may be other presentations going on in the same area. You have five more minutes to take down.

- **Interview**: Don’t be afraid of the interview! This is your chance to help your judges understand your argument and highlight any cool research that you have done. Remember, the interview isn’t a memorized presentation for the judges. You will respond to the questions they ask, such as “How did you choose your topic?” or “Why do you think your topic is significant in history?” However, also do not dismiss the interview. This is the time to show off all the knowledge you gained in your research that you might not have been able to fit in your performance!

### Frequently Asked Questions About Performances

**Does my performance have to be memorized?**

There isn’t a rule that says that your performance has to be memorized, but it’s best if it is. Memorizing your script will help you focus on how you say your lines versus just reading a script to your audience. Finally, memorized lines contribute to good stage presence, which is part of clarity of presentation on the History Day evaluation sheet.

**What props might be available at the competition?**

To be safe, it’s best to bring all the props necessary to a competition. You’re likely to find a chair or table at a competition, however, these are not guaranteed. If you have questions, be sure to check with the contest coordinator.

**What happens if I go over the time limit?**

Going a few seconds over the time limit with your performance isn’t the end of the world. Judges will understand that you may be nervous and that this may happen. What isn’t appropriate is to go significantly over the time limit, as this would give you an unfair disadvantage over other projects. If you do go significantly over time, the judges will take this into consideration in your final ranking. When planning and rehearsing your performance, try to plan extra time to allow for audience response or forgotten lines at a competition.

**What do I give judges at the competition?**

Before you begin your performance, your judges will ask for copies of your process paper and annotated bibliography. You should not give them a copy of your script or copies of your research.

### A Few Final Reminders:

- **Be Confident!** You’re the expert on your topic. You’ve spent a lot of time researching and creating your performance and should be proud of all your hard work.

- **Speak Slowly and Loudly**: It’s easy to get nervous and rush through your lines, but take a breath and slow down. This is the first time your audience has seen your performance and they need to be able to hear and understand your words.

- **Have Fun!** The History Day event is your opportunity to share your research with other scholars. Take the time to learn from the other projects you see, meet new people and enjoy yourself!
HANDOUT: ORGANIZING YOUR INFORMATION: PERFORMANCES

Writing a script is the essential first step in creating a performance. It will guide how you structure your acting, props, and costumes. Below are some tips for beginning to write your script.

Quick Tips for Writing Scripts:

- **Identify the key information first.** Find the quotes, speeches, characters etc. that you know you must include and work the performance around these.

- **Balance drama with historical evidence.** Using quotes, speeches, or excerpts from sources like newspapers can be an excellent way to incorporate evidence and detail that a great performance requires.

- **Prepare a performance.** Don’t prepare an oral report that simply states facts. You need characters to come alive and interact with each other and the audience. Try to engage the audience by asking questions or creating dramatic scenes.

- **Choose the type of voice you want to use.** You can use first person and third person perspectives to tell your story. In some cases you may want to use both to convey your points.

- **Choosing characters.** Select characters that can tell the most in your story. Don’t overcomplicate the storyline with too many.

- **Block.** As you write your script, include the actions and placement of your characters.

- **Avoid clutter.** Too many props, costumes, or characters will overwhelm your performance.

- **Length.** Scripts are usually 4-5 pages.

- **Your research is still central.** You want each piece to tie back to your main argument and thesis.

- **Practice, practice, practice.** You won’t use your scripts on stage, so make sure to practice your performance.
PERFORMANCE SCENE SELECTION

Using your thesis and your Performance Idea Map, think about the scenes that you might include in your performance. You can have additional scenes or fewer scenes depending on your topic—there's no magical number of scenes.

Remember: each scene change should have a purpose, such as when you change characters, time periods, or point of view. Too many scene changes takes up a lot of time and can confuse the audience. Fewer scenes is often better!

To pick the scenes for your performance, look for:
- Moments of conflict or high emotion that are exciting for the audience.
- Times when you can explain different points of view.
- An opportunity to “take a step back” and look at the topic from a bigger perspective. Often this will be your opportunity to talk about the long-term impact of your topic in history and the legacy it has left. Sometimes a narrator works for this purpose, but is there an interesting scene or “hook” you could use instead?

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Scene 1
Where? _______________________________________________________
When? _______________________________________________________
What’s going on? _______________________________________________
What parts of your idea map can the character(s) discuss in this scene? _______________________________________________________

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Scene 2
Where? _______________________________________________________
When? _______________________________________________________
What’s going on? _______________________________________________
What parts of your idea map can the character(s) discuss in this scene? _______________________________________________________

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Scene 3
Where? _______________________________________________________
When? _______________________________________________________
What’s going on? _______________________________________________
What parts of your idea map can the character(s) discuss in this scene? _______________________________________________________

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SAMPLE: “QUEEN OF THE REDS: THE REBELLION OF EMMA GOLDMAN” SCRIPT OUTLINE

i. Introduction (time and situation)
   1. Overview of anarchy, life as anarchist
   2. Brief anarchist beliefs, background in Russia

ii. Becoming a famous anarchist
   1. Black Friday
      a. Details of event
      b. Leading to Goldman’s anarchy
   2. Deportation
      a. From United States
         i. Newspaper articles
         ii. Speech from 1919

iii. Anarchist influences
   1. Johann Most
      a. Introduction
      b. Challenging Most’s beliefs
         i. Attacking with horsewhip
   2. Alexander Berkman
      a. Introduction
      b. Assassination attempt on Frick

iv. Anarchist Independence
   1. Assassination of President McKinley
      a. No support from Berkman, others
      b. Stand up for personal beliefs

v. Conclusion
   1. Influence of anarchist men
   2. Vision for an anarchist future

Bold: Primary source quotes
[Words in brackets]: Blocking on stage
Line between paragraphs: Denotes new section

(Setting: Barcelona hotel room, 1939)

No, no Mr. Newspaperman! I do not have time for you now. My train leaves Barcelona in [look at watch]… well, I suppose I have a few moments. Do you mind if I pack while I talk? All right then.

[Start unpacking drawers] So, you want to speak to the infamous Red Emma Goldman, do you? There is a lot for me to tell. I am a radical, and an anarchist – a person who believes in the absence of laws in society, in case you were not certain. And I am not ashamed of it! Everything I have ever done has been against government and for anarchy. I reason, why should I, or anyone else, be forced to kneel before laws, when I could be free to love, to be creative, to be independent, if governed by my own self. It was by that I lived and spoke, from the moment I escaped the dictatorship of my unloving parents in Russia, to the moment I am now speaking to you. [Find handkerchief while unpacking]

If you want a scrap of history from my life, this is one of the most important reminders. The tears I shed on Black Friday, November 11, 1887, still stain this handkerchief. I have left them there these 52 years to remind myself and others of the bravery of the men butchered that day, and of the legacy they left behind for me to carry out. [Sit down] There were eight of them, anarchists all, who were speaking peacefully in Haymarket Square when a bomb was thrown, and of course the first people the government blamed were the anarchists. All they were trying to do was speak! Their constitutional right, or so it was supposed to be. But the government did not listen, and eventually four of them were hung on Black Friday. I cannot understand how the government can deny them this right they claim to grant to every American citizen, except for peaceful anarchists, I suppose. [Stand up, pack handkerchief]

So, an anarchist I became, devoted to eliminating the silencing laws. And I am still fighting. It is for anarchy that today I am going to Canada. I am going to raise money for some Italian anarchists. I cannot go to Italy because I was banned from there, just as I was once banished and deported from the United States. They were always looking for a way to get me out of the country, so on December 22, 1919, they sent me and 248 other anarchists to Russia, to be rid of the only people who truly understood the atrocities of the government. [Find articles in drawers, put on glasses] These are some articles that I saved that went out of their way to slay us; perhaps one of them is from your newspaper. The Cleveland Plain Dealer: “It is hoped, and expected, that many more vessels, larger, more commodious, carrying similar cargo, will follow in her wake.” The St. Paul Pioneer Press: “Banished Reds Curse America.” I did not curse America. In fact, I warned them of the inevitable turning of events. [Put down cane, straighten up, take two steps forward, as if going back in time to a younger Emma] This government has signed its death warrant with these deportations. This is the beginning of the end of the United States government, but I will not stop my work as long as life rests with me. [Slouch, step back, pick up cane, go back to older Emma] That was a long time ago; twenty years only, but it seems more like a century.

But I am off the subject and we have so little time. Now, everyone knows that the government is run by men, and oy, if I have not had problems with them both. [Find picture of Johann Most] This is one of the most important men in my new life in America, Johann Most. Aye, he was a homely man, but a brilliant speaker who taught me to speak just like him to the very souls of my comrades. [Pack picture of Johann] But one night, as I was giving a speech for Johann in Cleveland, urging the futility of the struggle for the eight-hour work day, an elderly man brought to my attention how useless my argument was. And I realized that I was nothing but a creation of Johann’s, speaking only what he told me to speak. I knew that if I were to be a true anarchist, I must speak with what came from my own heart. When I approached Johann about this, he flew into a rage and shouted at me, “Whoever is not with me is against me – I will not have it otherwise!” Now you would expect a tiny, 21-year-old girl to shrink back in fear and obedience. But you are speaking to Emma Goldman! And I told him I would not repeat his beliefs, I would not fall into the slavery of marriage, and I would not advocate violence as a
method for reinforcing my beliefs. Ironically, the one time I was forced to use violence to reinforce my beliefs was against Johann. In front of a crowd Johann verbally attacked my dear friend Alexander Berkman, my own dear Sasha, for a crime that Sasha had committed in the name of anarchy. And I, enraged that anyone should dare to sly Alexander’s name, leapt onto that stage and attacked Johann with a horsewhip, and cracked it over my knee. [Pretend to crack cane over knee] I will not allow anyone to sly me or my partner, whether it is the government or the man who gave me my start.

Then there is my Sasha, my anarchist partner until his death three years ago. [Find Sasha’s picture] Together we fought the evils of law and brought many new lost souls to the beauty of anarchy. Our greatest stand against authoritative unfairness was when he sought to murder the industrialist Henry Clay Frick, who in collaboration with Andrew Carnegie sought to initiate and 18 percent wage cut – 18 percent! – to the workers of the Carnegie Steel Company. The Homestead Strike incited from this, and the union was destroyed. [Pack picture of Sasha] We felt it was our duty to these people to do away with Frick. Sasha shot him twice but Frick did not die, and Sasha was sentenced to prison for his pains, 21 years. [Find letters in drawer] These letters are a painful reminder of the nine years he spent in prison, and a painful journal of the one time I was forced to turn my back on my partner for something I believed in. [Sit down with letters]

You are probably too young to remember the assassination of President William McKinley in 1901, but it is fresh in my mind, as is the sad face of his assassin, a young Polish man named Leon Czolgosz. Leon was an aspiring anarchist, listened to my speeches religiously, occasionally offering his own interpretation. He did what he thought he had to do for the good of the people, and how was I to turn my back on him when my own Sasha had committed the same sort of violence. [Stand up, pack letters] Sasha, from where he waited in prison, wrote that he felt it not to be a proper stand against the government; he and my fellow anarchists felt that the assassination had done the movement more harm than good. So there I was, caught between my partner and fellow anarchists, and my true opinions and beliefs, frustrated, confused as to where I should go. But my dedication to my cause overrides everyone and everything, and I chose to stand by him and offer him the support of a woman who understands the need to do what one thinks is right.

But now they are all gone, and I am alone. Do you see what the men in my life have done to me? They have angered me, inspired me, challenged me, into living and breathing my cause so that it will never leave me, even when society says that a seven-decade old woman should be planting flowers and doing cross-stitch. Never will you find Emma Goldman in idle retirement. My body is old, but my heart is still young with the hope for a peaceful society.

Now I am all done and you must go. I have many more stories to tell you, but you could not fill your whole newspaper with all of my protests and riots. But just remember this – one day the Queen of the Reds will be victorious in banishing government and establishing a society without laws, without war, and at peace.
6.2. Performance

A performance is a dramatic portrayal of your historical argument, research, and interpretation of your topic’s significance in history.

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<th>PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS</th>
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<td>▶ Your performance must be an original production and must be presented live.</td>
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<td>▶ Your performance must be scripted based on your research and should have dramatic appeal.</td>
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<td>▶ Your performance must conform to all general and category rules.</td>
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<th>TIME REQUIREMENTS</th>
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<td>▶ Performances may not exceed ten minutes in length. Timing starts at the beginning of the performance following the performance introduction (Rule B3, p. 26).</td>
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<td>▶ You will be allowed five minutes to set up before your performance.</td>
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<td>▶ You will have five minutes following your performance to remove props and to participate in an interview with the judges.</td>
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**NOTE:** You should allow several empty seconds in your performance to account for unplanned pauses (e.g., audience reaction, forgotten lines).
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<th>PERFORMANCE INTRODUCTION</th>
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<td>You must state only your title and name(s) before the start of your performance.</td>
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<th>MEDIA DEVICES</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Use of projection, mp3 players, computers, or other media within your performance is permitted.</td>
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<td>You must provide and run all equipment, including extension cords, and carry out any special lighting or sound effects.</td>
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<td>Only you and/or your group members may be involved in the production of any media included in your performance.</td>
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<th>SCRIPT AND INTERACTION</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Scripts must not be given to judges or attached to your required written materials.</td>
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<td>During your performance, you may not interact with or require participation by the audience.</td>
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<th>COSTUMES AND PROPS</th>
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<td>You may have assistance in producing your costume or props, but the design, choice of fabrics, etc. must be your own. Or, you may buy or rent a costume. See Rule 10 (p. 16) for more information regarding reasonable help.</td>
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<th>REQUIRED WRITTEN MATERIALS</th>
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<td>Provide your required written materials for judging.</td>
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<td>Bring additional copies to contests, as they may be needed.</td>
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<td>Refer to your Contest Coordinator for submission instructions.</td>
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