



Optimist Oratorical Contest Guidelines  
By  
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### **What is the Optimist Oratorical Contest?**

The Optimist Oratorical Contest is a public speaking competition that gives students an opportunity to speak to the world. More than \$150,000 in college scholarships funded by the Optimist International Foundations is awarded annually from this program.

First conducted in 1928, this is the most popular Optimist International Program. Nearly 2,000 clubs participate in this program each year. The winners at the Club level receive medallions and other optional awards determined by each club. Zone winners receive a plaque. Districts have the opportunity to provide a first-place scholarship of \$2,500, a second-place scholarship of \$1,500, and a third-place scholarship of \$1,000. Winners of the District competition qualify for the World Championships which start with Regional contests. Regional winners received \$5000 and qualified for the Championship round. First place receives \$15,000, second place receives \$10,000, and third place receives \$5000.

Each year a new topic is announced for the competition, and students write an original speech to express their views of the topic's meaning. Visit [www.optimist.org/scholarships](http://www.optimist.org/scholarships) for the **current topic and application**. To compete, a student must enter a club contest. If you do not know what clubs are in your area, you can locate a club by going to the club directory at <https://www.optimist.org/member/clubdirectory/stateprov.cfm?country=US>. Find your state, and the cities with clubs are included. Click on a club and contact information is provided. Most clubs have websites and Facebook pages with contact information, and many publicize the oratorical contest through social media or on their websites. Contact the Club president for information about the date of the club contest. If there is not a club in your community, contact a nearby club to learn if they will let you enter.

An oration is an original work—written by the contestant—with a limited amount of material quoted or paraphrased. It interprets the official topic through the use of examples, statistics, facts, anecdotes, logic, and emotion. It can have elements of both information and persuasion to make its point.

#### **Eligibility**

1. The contest is open to contestants under the age of 19 as of October 1st of the current Optimist International contest year (October 1 – September 30) and who have not yet completed secondary school or its equivalent, including CEGEP students in Québec, Canada. There is no minimum age.
2. A contestant is eligible to enter/compete in only one Optimist Oratorical contest during a contest year. Once a contestant wins first place at the Regional level of the Optimist International Oratorical World Championships, they are ineligible to compete in the Optimist International Oratorical Contest at any level again.
3. All contestants at each level of the contest must show proof of age before competing. Optimist Clubs may require a copy of birth certificate or passport if offering club scholarship separate from Optimist International. District winners must provide a copy of the birth certificate or passport with District entry documentation. For privacy reasons, the proof of age can be presented at the club contest rather than send it via email.

4. The application must be submitted prior to the competition. A printed copy of the speech must be furnished either before or after the speech to be eligible to compete. Many clubs ask students to submit the application and speech online but do not ask for proof of age to be sent electronically. Documents can be shown at the contest.

**The application and rules are found at:**

[www.optimist.org/scholarships](http://www.optimist.org/scholarships)

### **General Rules**

1. All contests are gender neutral.
2. All contestants must speak on the official topic.
3. A speech may be delivered in English or French.
4. No Zone, Regional, or District level contest shall have fewer than 3 or more than 20 contestants.
5. Optimist International has the right to edit, publish, and record any speech used in any contest without payment to the author.
6. All contestants must state the official topic exactly as written in the first sentence of the speech. A 3-point penalty is automatically assessed by the timekeeper for failure to state the official topic in the first sentence.
7. Timing begins with the first word spoken and ends with the last word. No time signals or warnings are given. Penalties are assessed for speeches under 4 minutes and over 5 minutes with 1 point for each 15 seconds or fraction under or over.
8. Any quotation, copyrighted, or largely paraphrased material used in the speech must be identified verbally during the presentation and in the written copy of the speech with the original author's name and quoted material indicated with quotation marks. Paraphrased material should also be indicated at the point that the paraphrase is given. The contestant shall be fully responsible for the use of any quoted material and Optimist International shall assume no responsibility. Failure to identify non-original material will result in up to 10 penalty points. A maximum of 15% of the oration should be quoted and/or paraphrased material (45 seconds for a 5-minute speech).
9. The use of props, special costumes, or clothing will result in 10 penalty points.
10. The use of audience prompts will result in disqualification.
11. Notes and lecterns can be used if the contestant desires. (Most contestants have their speeches memorized for contests past the Club level and do not use a podium.)
12. Students may not identify themselves by name (all students are coded A, B, C, etc.), their family, school, community, sponsoring Optimist Club or District. This will result in a deduction of 5 points.

**All rules are printed on the application form at:**

[www.optimist.org/scholarships](http://www.optimist.org/scholarships)

- I. Judging criteria
  1. Poise (10 points)
    - a. Appearance and Personality

- b. **Appearance** - Your appearance can add to or detract from your message. It lets the audience know you are serious about your topic. Contestants should be dressed appropriately for the competition, the audience, and the occasion.
    - c. **Personality** - Projecting the speaker's authentic self as the speech is delivered.
- 2. Content of Speech (**40 points**)
  - a. **Subject adherence, Theme, Content, Logic, Color:**  
In this category just the material and its organization as presented by the contestant should be judged. A judge should consider the importance of adherence to the subject of the speech, the proper introduction and the logic and coherent development of the theme which brings about a successful and adequate conclusion. Figures of speech, similes, metaphors, colorful choice of words and zestful, descriptive phrases are important qualities.
- 3. Delivery and Presentation (**35 points**)
  - a. **Voice, Volume, Pronunciation, Enunciation, Gestures, Emphasis**  
Delivery and presentation shall be judged on several factors. Voice quality should be recognized in tone, pitch and volume. Delivery should be continuous without hesitation or halting. Enunciation and pronunciation are most important. Gestures should be appraised for frequency, nature and effectiveness. Your desire to be convincing should be obvious and emphasis should be well placed and dynamic.
- 4.
  - a. **Voice:** The sound that carries the message. It should be flexible, moving from one pitch level to another for emphasis, and should have a variety of rate and volume. A good voice can be clearly heard and the words easily understood.
  - b. **Volume:** The relative loudness or softness of a speaker's voice. Test your audio before your speech so that your audience can hear you without straining or wanting to cover their ears.
  - c. **Pronunciation-** Degree to which words are properly pronounced. Correct pronunciation will show that the speaker is the master of the words being used.
  - d. **Gestures-** Gestures express emotions through the movement of your hands, arms, body or head. They provide emphasis and description and should complement your vocal delivery and add life to your speech. Gestures should not contradict verbal ones. Emphatic gestures allow a speaker to provide emphasis for the spoken word: finger point, shoulder shrug, pound on the podium. Descriptive gestures help a speaker describe something: indicating the size or shape of something.
  - e. **Eye contact-** Eye contact helps your listeners feel that you are speaking to each one of them. It also enables you to watch the audience for valuable feedback.

- f. **Sincerity:** The speaker should speak with enthusiasm and assurance, showing interest in the audience and confidence in their reactions.
- g. **Emphasis** - Emphasizing different words can change the meaning of a text.

Use of pauses -A pause is an intentional or unintentional period of silence in a speaker's vocal delivery. It can allow the audience time to reflect on something you have just said. It can also heighten suspense about something you are going to say.

5. Overall Effectiveness (**15 points**)

**a. Appeal, Impression, Attitude, Effect**

In this category the overall impression created by the speaker and the speech should be rated. In this phase of scoring, the general overall impression is given actual point values.

6. Penalty Explanations

- a. **Time limits-** The time limit for speeches is not less than 4 minutes or over 5 minutes in length. Contestants going over or under the time limit will not be cautioned but will be penalized 1 point for each 15 seconds or portion thereof over or under the limits. These penalties will be determined by the timekeeper. Timing will begin at the first word spoken.
- b. **Self-identification** - To eliminate any potential bias or prejudice, no reference can be made that identifies the contestant, family, school, community, sponsoring Optimist Club or District. This will result in a deduction of **up to 5 points**.
- c. **Failure to announce the topic** - All contestants must express the official topic exactly as written in the first sentence of the speech. A 3-point penalty must be assessed by the timekeeper for failure to state the official topic.
- d. **Use of props** - The use of props, special costumes or clothing **will result in a 10-point penalty**. Notes and lecterns may be used if the speaker desires to do so.
- e. **Failure to complete the speech** - Each contestant must complete the entire speech. The penalty is disqualification.
- f. **Failure to identify non-original material**. Any quotation or copyrighted material used must be identified verbally. The failure to do so will result in **a penalty of up to 10 points**.
- g. **Use of audience prompter** - Use of audience prompters will not be permitted and will result in disqualification.

## How to Prepare

Step 1. *What does the topic mean to you?* What was your first thought when you saw the topic? Use that as a starting point. Look for keywords in the topic and define them. For example, in the topic, “Just iMagine a World without Boundaries,” you might want to look up definitions of the word “boundary” then ask yourself how one or more of the definitions can help you focus on an interpretation. Also consider what your personal experience is with words in the topic. For example, what boundaries have you encountered and why were they good or bad?

Step 2. *Research.* Conduct research looking for examples or quotations that relate to terms in the topic or to the general idea behind it. If you want to take the position that boundaries are a good thing, find examples of how boundaries help us such as lines down the middle of a highway telling us not to pass because it is dangerous.

Step 3. *Determine your purpose.* Do you want to persuade or convince of a position such as boundaries are good? Or do you want to devote most of your speech to providing examples. Some topics want you to take a position such as this one: “Is There a Fine Line between Optimism and Reality?” Regardless of where you stand on the topic, you need to convince the judges and audience that your position makes the most sense—that is a persuasive purpose. You would use examples, facts, and statistics to make your point. You can tell stories about individuals who survived something, and their optimism made their success a reality. Other topics lend themselves to an informative purpose. The topic, “What the World Gains from Optimism” is likely to have many examples or information showing that the world does in fact gain from optimism. The topic doesn’t ask you to determine whether or not the world gains something from optimism but to tell us what it does gain. It assumes that optimism has a positive result; thus, you don’t have to spend time making the argument that it does.

Step 4. *What do your life experiences bring to the topic?* Think about your personal experiences or those of family members. Many contestants in the past have drawn on family hardships overcome or personal experiences with elements of the topic. The topic, “Where are the Roots of My Optimism?” was a topic that required introspection and then an explanation of how the speaker personally learned about optimism and used it.

Step 5. *Develop a memorable and unique approach.* Ask yourself what in your experiences sets you apart from everyone else? Take advantage of your uniqueness. As you research, don’t use the first quotation you find; dig deeper into sources that others might not use. Judges often complain that they hear basically the same speech from most of the contestants because they used the same well-worn stories of people overcoming obstacles such as Edison’s failures to invent a light bulb before he got it right or how many times Babe Ruth struck out. Don’t go with what everyone knows or that others are likely to use. Ask your history or literature teachers to suggest examples from history or literature that isn’t on the typical sophomore or junior reading lists. When you have an example or quotation, try it out on a few people of different ages and see how many are familiar. If more are unaware, then it is a good one to use. If everyone has heard it, then discard it.

## Writing the Speech

***Differences between oral and written language.*** Optimist International sponsors both oratorical and essay contests. Some years the topics are the same and others they differ. Most of us learn how to write and spend time in most classes writing but give few oral presentations. A good oration is written to sound natural. You are talking to someone and not reading to them—even if it is memorized. To hear the difference between oral and written language styles, pick up a book and read a couple paragraphs out loud. Record it. Then, explain to someone what you just read and record it. Listen to the two versions. Do you hear a difference? What is the difference? Researchers tell us that the major differences between oral and written language are the following:

1. *Written language uses more variety of words and longer words.* Oral language uses more familiar words and fewer formal words. Some of the most memorable lines from famous speeches illustrate: “We have nothing to fear but fear itself.” Only one word has two syllables. You don’t need a thesaurus to find “fancy” words for your speech. Some of those words may not be understood by the audience and some may sound strange since they aren’t spoken as much as written.
2. *Spoken language uses contractions.* English teachers tell you not to use “don’t” but to write out “do not.” There are times in oral language when contractions weaken a point so say something like “Do NOT touch that,” rather than “Don’t touch that.” Notice how much more powerful the first one is if you are trying to warn someone. For the most part, you can use contractions in your speech and no one will grade you down.
3. *Spoken language sentence structure is shorter and less formal.* When we speak, we often use sentence fragments and phrases or even single word sentences that are not verbs: “Absolutely!” Written language can have very long compound, complex sentences. Speakers need to get to the point more quickly without a complex set of adjectives and adverbs to embellish the way writers do. Keep it simple in structure and write the speech the way you talk.
4. *Spoken language uses repetition.* When reading, we can go back and read something more than once to understand it completely. When we listen to a speech, it is not possible to ask the speaker to stop and repeat something. As a result, speakers need to make a point more than once. Typically, a speech starts with what is known as a forecast of the major ideas: “To understand the roots of my optimism, I need to begin with a story from my childhood and then I will explain how that experience remains with me to today and influences what I do.” The speech then elaborates on each of those ideas. The conclusion summarizes the three points in the sentence. Speech teachers tell students to “Tell them what you are going to tell them in the introduction, tell them in the body, and then tell them what you told them in the conclusion.” Repetition also comes in the form of multiple examples to make a point. Another form of repetition is using two ways to say the same thing. If you use statistics in a speech, you can give context for the statistics. Rather than just give the number of people who die from a disease in

a year, tell us that the number will fill four football stadiums of 64,000. The audience will then have a visual image of how many people we are talking about.

5. *Spoken language uses more pronouns and is more personal.* Your oration needs to reveal who you are and that means that you can use “I,” “my,” “me,” and any other personal reference. Unless we are writing a novel or short story in first person, we are discouraged from using personal pronouns. In speaking, it is common and familiar to listeners.

### ***How to Write Your Speech.***

1. *Start with an outline.* After you decide what the topic means to you, conduct research, and decide on your purpose—information, persuasion, or both—write an outline. You have learned how to do that in English composition classes, and it is the same process for a speech.
2. *Give the speech from an outline and record it.* Remember that spoken and written language are different. Give the speech from your notes and listen to what you are saying and how you are saying it. Identify places where the speech needs more polish in the form of better examples or explanations or repetition. Then...
3. *Begin writing your manuscript from what you actually said when you recorded from the outline.* In other words, make a transcript of your recording or replay it a few times and then write. If you replay and then write, you can go back and listen as you read what you’ve written and make changes if what you said was better than what you wrote. Expand on your ideas with better examples or more colorful language.
4. *Practice and refine.* Read the speech from the manuscript and time it. If it is too long, find places to cut without sacrificing your point. Ask yourself if you can use shorter sentences, fewer words, more contractions. If it is too short, find more substance or explain in more detail.
5. *Have an attention getting introduction.* Be sure to get everyone’s attention once you state the topic or incorporate the topic into a memorable sentence that makes a startling statement or asks a question. Good introductions tell stories, use quotations, challenge the audience, tell a joke, or present a startling fact or statistic. Once they get attention, they have a clear thesis or purpose for the speech and a forecast of the major ideas.
6. *Organize so the speech flows.* Decide how to logically arrange your material so that each idea flows to the next. As with written essays, use transitions and summaries. Consult composition or public speaking books for examples of organizational structures and transitional phrases.
7. *Integrate quotations seamlessly while delivering your speech.* When you cite a direct quotation, do not say “quote, unquote.” Instead, pause briefly, so the audience knows where the quote ends and your words begin.

Oprah Winfrey said...

To quote Mark Twain...

As Winston Churchill said...

Another option to find quote attribution is to copy and paste a portion of the quotation into an internet search engine like Google. Make sure to use quotation marks in order to capture results featuring the exact phrase. See the example below:



As with any internet search you want to scrutinize your results to ensure the website can be trusted and the information is reliable.

If after checking resources like [The Quotations Page](#) or [Quote Investigator](#), you still cannot find the original source or the quote has been attributed to several people, you can include the quote in your speech by saying,

Someone once said ...

I'm not the first to say ...

As the saying goes ...

It's been said...

If you use supporting materials that others have developed, you must cite them in your speech by providing "oral footnotes." Citing your sources orally lets your audience know that you have researched your topic. Offer enough information to establish credibility of the source without overwhelming the listener. Instead of saying "John Doe says in his book \_\_\_\_\_." Say this: According to Michelle Obama in her book, "Becoming, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his book \_\_\_\_\_.

*Rewrite and improve.* Give the speech out loud several times until you feel that it is the best it can be. The first draft is never going to be the best you can do. That means, you need to start more than the night before the contest to write the speech!

8. *Mark your manuscript for emphasis.* Marking a typed speech manuscript can help you prepare a lively delivery. Here are a few techniques to help you develop your own system that will allow your speech to sound as natural as possible to you:

- Read through your speech to learn where you should pause or emphasize words.

- Underline words to emphasize.

Write volume and rate cues above words or in the margins.

- Use a single or double slash (/) or other mark to indicate pauses.

- Capitalize words that need to be emphasized



One morning last week when I sat down at the table for breakfast/my mother handed me the newspaper. She didn't say anything//She just looked at me/and then/walked back to the range.

On the front page of the paper was the picture of one of my best friends//the victim of a drunken driver.

As teenagers, we/think/we're going to live forever. Death is for slower old people. But I went to my friend's funeral. He was only sixteen. He wasn't old,but he was dead.

We all/like to think we are grown up enough to drink,even if we aren't legally old enough. The driver who killed my friend/was old enough to drink. And/old enough/to know better than to drink and drive.

Since my friend's death,I've given a lot of thought to drinking and driving, and I decided SOMETHING should be done about it. I don't want myself/or anyone else I know/to be the next victim. So I got involved in S.A.D.D.-/Students Against Driving Drunk-/and I want to tell you about S.A.D.D. in hopes you'll also get involved.

### ***Practicing and Memorizing the Speech***

The rules allow you to use your manuscript or notes when giving your speech and to put them on a podium. Many speakers at the Club level do not have the speech memorized. After the Club level, ask judges for advice on how to improve and revise. It is permissible to revise the speech at each level, but you must submit a new draft of the speech. You are advised to memorize the speech as most speeches are given without notes for Zone, District, and the World Championship. While you can use notes, the use of a teleprompter or the speech on a computer that someone is scrolling when doing a virtual presentation is not allowed. If you are going to use notes, use paper notes.

There is no single best way to memorize a speech, but if you start with the outline and listen to a recording several times before you write, you are already starting the process. The best approach is to memorize one paragraph at a time. Once you have the first one down, start on the second, but when you speak the second one out loud, be sure to include the first as well. As you memorize additional sections of the speech, always go back and start at the beginning and add the new section. Have the manuscript next to you in case you forget as you are practicing. Once you can get through the speech without too many lapses, repeat it to yourself when you are alone—in the shower, walking down a hallway, riding (not driving) in a car. Keep recording to see where you can pause or emphasize more. REMEMBER, no one is following the speech when you are giving it. When you do give it and you use a different word or phrase, that is perfectly all right. In fact, it might be a better way to say it than what you wrote. John Kennedy's famous line,

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” was not written that way on his speaking notes or on the copy of the speech given to the press before he delivered it. It was written: “And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country will do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” He said it the way it should have been written and how it had more emphasis with a parallel or repeated verb—can: “And so my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.” An earlier version was even less effective: “So ask not what your country is going to do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Read all three of these versions out loud and you will hear the difference in the effectiveness.

- a. Vocal delivery techniques (give examples with video links)
  - i. Volume – The relative loudness or softness of a speaker’s voice. Test your audio before your speech so that your audience can hear you without straining or wanting to cover their ears.
  - ii. Articulation – The mechanical process of forming the sounds necessary to communicate a particular language.
  - iii. Pacing- The rate at which you speak.
  - iv. Emphasis- Emphasizing different words can change the meaning of a text.
  - v. Use of pauses -A pause is an intentional or unintentional period of silence in a speaker’s vocal delivery. It can allow the audience time to reflect on something you have just said. It can also heighten suspense about something you are going to say.
  - vi. Vocal variety – The use of tone, speed, and volume
- b. Nonverbal delivery techniques
  - i. Eye contact - Eye contact helps your listeners feel that you are speaking to each one of them. It also enables you to watch the audience for valuable feedback.
  - ii. Gestures - Gestures express emotions through the movement of your hands, arms, body or head. They provide emphasis and description and should complement your vocal delivery and add life to your speech. Gestures should not contradict verbal ones.

Emphatic gestures allow a speaker to provide emphasis for the spoken word: finger point, shoulder shrug, pound on the podium.

Descriptive gestures help a speaker describe something: indicating the size or shape of something. Practicing your speech allows gestures to come naturally.
  - iii. Movement can signal transition points in your speech and can place you closer to your face-to-face audience. Many contestants record their speech in a room that allows a wide enough shot to show movement.
  - iv. Facial expressions – Your facial expressions should match what you are saying. A smile throughout a speech would be inappropriate if your topic on crime.

A dramatic presentation is not acceptable. A dramatic presentation is considered anything that is read or performed that has been previously written by another author; a short story, a poem, etc.

Speech content may not be significantly changed as a contestant advances. Fine-tuning for minor corrections or to adjust time is allowed and encouraged.

**More emphasis is on speech content and delivery than on grammar and pronunciation, so non-native English speakers have a high chance of winning the contest.**

Effectiveness: Achievement of purpose, listener appeal, reception. Listeners should ask: "Was I able to see the purpose of the speaker?" "Did the speaker make it clear to me?" "Did the speaker succeed in affecting my thoughts and feelings as he/she desired?" "Was the effect on me similar to that of others?" "Could I follow the line of thinking?"

### **Examples:**

**Gestures:** <https://youtu.be/OV8R0k8GeuI>

**Pauses:** <https://youtu.be/DsawRAqcPOQ>

**Vocal Variety:** <https://youtu.be/tZhpXpoEt54>

**Pacing:** <https://youtu.be/v0saf7N4c7g>

**Quotes:** <https://youtu.be/9g3PTb3zPUA>

**Emphasis:** <https://youtu.be/xsQNIncBdXA>