



# ◆ Debate

## Rethinking Judge Adaptation

By Jason Baldwin

That debaters should adapt to their judges has become almost a truism among debate coaches, especially among those concerned about the apparent indifference of many recent debaters to the clarity and persuasiveness of their speeches. I believe that judge adaptation as commonly understood is a misguided and even dangerous goal for most students. Part I of this essay attempts to say why, and Part II suggests *audience inclusion* as a better goal for speakers.

First, I should describe the view I wish to challenge. The currently popular adaptation paradigm might go something like this: “Debaters should learn to recognize different kinds of judges and should adjust their styles and arguments to appeal to those various kinds of judges. Undergraduate ex-debaters who tend to like fast, jargony, technical debate are one important audience, but experienced coaches, parents, and ‘lay judges’ are also important constituencies, each of which requires a different approach. Debate is a communication activity, and good communicators always meet their audiences where they find them.”

### I. What’s Wrong with Adaptation

Many supporters of judge adaptation hope that it will push debate toward a clearer, more publicly accessible style of speaking. In fact, such counsel may have just the opposite effect. I have three related concerns about adaptation: first, that it wrongly assumes that speakers are more flexible than they are; second, that it wrongly assumes that students are more knowledgeable than they are; and third, that it wrongly assumes that all audiences are equally worth adapting to.

Genuine audience adaptation would require that students know far more about their audiences than they actually do. To effectively adapt to an audience requires a

fair amount of knowledge about that audience, knowledge that debate students rarely have. Debaters rarely have close personal relationships with their judges, especially with the adult judges to whom they are most likely to be told to adapt. And unlike some non-debate audiences, debate judges do not usually wear their moral and political views on their sleeves.

In practice, this ignorance leads students to “adapt” by sorting judges into two categories: smart and stupid. College undergraduates, especially those who teach at summer workshops, take copious notes during rounds, and speak in debate jargon, are classified as smart. Everyone else is presumed to be stupid. I am fairly confident that this is how many student minds work both because my teammates and I thought this way and because I have heard countless conversations among more recent debaters employing essentially the same crude categories. And really, what else are students supposed to think? How could anyone be expected to have a working knowledge of just what arguments would appeal to particular strangers?

The knowledge deficit creates two problems. First, it vitiates the professed purpose of judge adaptation. If all that most students really do (and *can* do) is to sort judges into known (smart) and unknown (stupid), the quality of debate is not likely to improve. Such judgments, even if they were accurate, are not fine-grained enough to allow meaningful adaptation. But the second problem with such judgments is that they are obviously not accurate. They represent an unhealthy stereotyping of strangers that debate should discourage rather than promote. Many of the people who judge at tournaments, even those unknown to students, are capable and intelligent critics. And regardless of this or that judge’s actual ability (which students will almost never be in a position

to assess accurately), every judge should be treated with respect. Yet when adaptation is attempted in ignorance, it often comes off as condescending and insincere.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that coaches who counsel their students to adapt are thereby counseling them to treat many judges as stupid and unqualified. Rather, I am suggesting that students rarely know enough about judges to adapt in any but crude and stereotyping ways.

A second problem with judge adaptation as an educational goal is that, ignorance aside, most students are not flexible enough to adapt to widely different audiences. Most debate students develop a single style of public speech and thought that they carry from audience to audience, and they would be unable to change that style materially even if they knew that some very different style would appeal more to a given audience. Many students these days ask what preferences I have before their rounds. They then consistently ignore these preferences in their speeches—not, I believe, out of conscious disrespect, but rather because they simply cannot decide (say) to use vivid, concrete language on the spur of the moment when they have a habit of using boring, abstract language. What these students (the *vast* majority) need is to develop a *good* style of debate, not an infinitely malleable style.

Ordinary students who are advised to adapt to their judges are likely to develop precisely the clumsy, unclear style that adaptationists are usually eager to discourage, and this is for two reasons. The first is related to the ignorance problem discussed above. Students encounter a core of doggedly active and vocal college undergraduates at most tournaments, and this is an audience whose preferences they can learn. By contrast, the coaches, parents, other adults who judge a given student are likely to be a much less stable influence. A

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student may average two parent-judges at each tournament, but they are likely to be different parents each time. There is no stable set of “stupid judge” preferences to compete with the steady, known preference of many college judges for fast, obscure, self-referential debate. And so many students develop the style they know will impress their most predictable audience. But once those habits are formed, they cannot be switched off at will for other audiences.

The second reason that students who can adapt to only one audience are likely to adapt to undergraduate ex-debaters is that such “adaptation” in reality requires little effort or change. Most students find it easy to speak too quickly rather than more slowly, to speak abstractly rather than concretely, to present undeveloped half-thoughts rather than complete arguments, to use confusing pronouns rather than clear nouns, to say everything that comes to mind rather than only the few best things, to read lengthy unexplained quotations rather than their own analysis, to look at the floor rather than at their audience, to speak in a monotone rather than with variable pitch and rhythm. These and other rhetorical vices come naturally to students, so it is not surprising that if they have to choose an audience to impress, they will choose that peculiar audience of their recent peers who tolerate and sometimes even celebrate those very rhetorical vices.

I believe there is a third problem with judge adaptation, but this claim is likely to be especially controversial. Whereas the first two problems I identified were empirical hypotheses (about the abilities of students—to know what their judges want and to vary their debate styles in response), this third problem represents a clear value judgment. The problem is this: some judges are not worth adapting to. I will eventually make the even more scandalous claim that a certain currently popular sort of judge may be among those not worth adapting to. But first I had better soften up resistance to the idea that there could even be such a thing as a judge not worth adapting to, an audience not worth pleasing, a ballot not worth winning.

I think the general claim will become evident to anyone who reflects on some of

the non-verbal actions a corrupt judge might demand from students in exchange for a ballot. Suppose a judge offered to vote for a debater only if she paid him \$50 or smoked dope with him or vandalized an enemy coach’s car. I hope everyone can agree that any debate round that hung on such conditions would not be worth winning. So there are at least some conceivable (though so far quite unlikely and extreme) kinds of judge adaptation that responsible educators would not only not encourage but would actively discourage.

The cases we have considered so far have involved non-verbal behaviors, and a friend of judge adaptation may want to restrict his position thus: “It’s not that debaters should perform any kind of action to win a ballot; rather, they should perform any necessary *verbal* action to win the ballot.” But I don’t think this suggestion holds up to reflection either. Suppose a debater knew that a certain judge would be mightily entertained by jokes about the Holocaust or would appreciate crude sexual comments about a political enemy or would welcome an attack on the opposing debater’s religion. Clearly these are verbal actions that no respectable educator would counsel students to take, even if they were necessary win a given judge’s ballot (i.e., to adapt to his or her preferences). And the reason the non-verbal/verbal distinction will not save the adaptation paradigm is not far to seek: we do not want students to do anything vicious for the sake of winning a debate round, and verbal actions may be every bit as vicious as non-verbal actions.

I hope at this point I have convinced you that some ballots are not worth winning (or would not be worth winning, if a student ever encountered them). If you believe that, you must also believe that some judges are not worth adapting to. But all the cases we have examined so far have been extreme and unlikely. The more pressing practical question is, are there any actual judges students are likely to encounter whose ballots are also not worth winning? Here, too, I believe the answer is yes.

Let us begin with the thought that rhetoric is important. By “rhetoric,” I do

not mean merely decorative speech, but rather the ancient art of argument comprehending logic, ethos, pathos, and everything else that contributes to excellence in the use of language to persuade. It is rhetoric in this sense that I claim is important, and anyone who puts in the time and energy to coach debate probably agrees.

Now let us add the important thought that if good debate training can make students better rhetoricians, bad debate training can make students worse rhetoricians. Of course, making someone a worse rhetorician may not be on a moral par with making the person a drug abuser or a vandal (then again, it may, as the careers of certain lawyers and politicians strongly suggest). But it is still a serious business, in the same way that corrupting the standards of any craft or discipline is a serious business, and worth opposing.

My claim is this: If there were a type of judge who corrupted students by rewarding bad rhetoric and punishing good rhetoric, that type of judge would not be worth adapting to. It would be better to lose consistently before such judges and preserve one’s rhetorical integrity than to win by cultivating rhetorical vices. This is for both educational and ethical reasons: conforming to corrupt standards tends to corrupt, and each act of knowingly pandering to what is worse is itself a kind of moral lapse.

Are there any rhetorically corrupting judges currently active in high school debate? I believe there are, but reasonable people may disagree about the extent of the problem. Roughly, I believe that *some* of the undergraduate ex-debaters who judge on the much overrated “national circuit” may, despite their sincerity, popularity, and intelligence, be a bad rhetorical influence on students. And good prima facie evidence for this belief is that a culturally and ideologically representative cross-section of teachers, academics, professionals, and educated citizens would (indeed, *do*) concur that the practices rewarded by some such judges constitute bad rhetoric. But, as I say, reasonable people may disagree about the extent of this problem. Even if you believe undergraduate ex-debaters are uniformly excellent judges, you may still remain open to the possibility that there





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are some judges students may actually encounter who, for the students' educational and ethical welfare, should not be adapted to, even at the cost of some ballots.

I have now presented three doubts about the traditional counsel to debate students to adapt to their judges: Students rarely know enough to adapt, students are rarely able to adapt, and students sometimes ought not to adapt. Let us turn to a constructive alternative.

## II. Audience Inclusion

Imagine a two-dimensional plane populated by many scattered points. If given the task of encircling as many points as possible, you could proceed in two ways—either by drawing a tiny circle around each separate point or by drawing a single circle large enough to encompass many of the points. Perhaps this imperfect image will help to illustrate the difference between traditional judge adaptation and audience inclusion. The adaptation paradigm encourages students to treat each judge as an island that requires a unique approach. The inclusion alternative brings as many judges as possible into a single rhetorical community.

Students aiming for audience inclusion rather than elusive and ethically risky adaptation will cultivate a public style of argument that is accessible to listeners from many backgrounds. Intelligent high school students, paralegals, engineers, accountants, and homemakers would all fall within the ideal circle of inclusion (though high school students obviously will not judge debates). The circle will also have limits. Young children, slow adults, and non-English speakers are examples of people who may not find even a highly inclusive style accessible. Sadly, some people may willfully place themselves outside the circle. Despite understanding an argument as well as those inside the circle understand it, certain contemporary French “philosophers” and even some members of the debate community may find the very accessibility of the argument revolting. But (so it seems to me) that is a good reason for such people not to judge debate, not a reason for debate students to pander to their perverse preferences.

It is a telling fact that such inclusiveness is exactly what college teachers (who are as adept at professionalized obfuscation as anyone) typically demand from their students. I have *frequently* heard brilliant senior philosophy professors tell students (including yours truly) to write as clearly as possible, to develop a few points in depth rather than many points in haste, to interpret each quotation for readers, to avoid jargon of all kinds, to include examples and analogies to make arguments more accessible, and (most generally) to argue as if for an ideal reader—someone who is reasonably bright and educated but has no previous knowledge of the subject at hand. I have *never* heard a philosophy professor counsel students to use bigger or more abstract words, to make as many points as possible, to insert large unexplained quotations in a paper, or to write for only professional metaphysicians. And I don't believe philosophy professors are unique in this regard.

My high school and undergraduate English teachers encouraged similar habits, and my sense is that the practitioners of the other humane academic and professional disciplines do the same. They tend to share the conviction that in a diverse democratic culture, we need to learn to argue intelligently with our fellow citizens simply as fellow citizens. No one denies that technical disciplines have made enormous strides at the cost of public accessibility. But these scholars regard the loss of public accessibility as a genuine cost, one that should be paid only where it must be. Since there are no technical experts with the authority to answer the questions of moral and political principle that concern us all, we should fight hard to keep these discussions truly public. So audience inclusion is not a radical new idea. Instead, it is perhaps a way to save what is valuable in the theory of judge adaptation but to avoid its practical shortcomings.

Readers interested in thinking further about audience inclusion may be helped by an example of what I have in mind. To such readers, I commend the non-fiction writings of the late British literary scholar C.S. Lewis. In addition to his literary criticism and works of fiction, Lewis wrote many

popular books and essays in defense of his Christian beliefs. Even one who does not share Lewis's conclusions can learn quite a lot from him about how to make a substantive argument in clear, accessible English to a non-specialist audience. For example, in Chapter XIII of Lewis's book *Miracles*, he criticizes David Hume's famous argument against the propriety of belief in miracle reports. The objections Lewis raises are neither original nor necessarily decisive, but they have seemed powerful to many people, and (more to the present purpose) they are, unlike much of the literature on Hume's argument, eminently clear. Studying good writers like Lewis is one way to cultivate an inclusive style of one's own.

A good inclusive style should not mean “dumbing down” arguments. The point is to make the central line of thought as clear as possible to as broad an audience as possible. If contemporary American political speeches were the gold standard for successful audience inclusion, I would be the first to abandon inclusion as an educational goal. But I believe it is possible in (for example) a six-minute speech to make a clear yet substantive case for the truth of a typical LD resolution. There are probably good moral and political arguments of such sophistication that they could not be presented clearly to a public audience in a six-minute speech. But such arguments do not belong in an event with six-minute speeches. Moreover, I have not heard them in LD. What I have heard too often are simple arguments disfigured almost beyond recognition by confusing jargon, abstract diction, wordy, superfluous evidence, and clumsy delivery. So a call for inclusion is not a call for weaker arguments. It is a call for the clear and thoughtful presentation of the best arguments the various debate formats will allow.

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