

THE USE OF NOTES IN EXTEMP SPEAKING

BY **TOMAS COSENZA**

In my 10 years of coaching experience, few things truly surprise me. While I may feign surprise when a certain speech or interpretation of literature failed to make it into finals, deep down I knew that there were fundamental flaws in the speech or interpretation which eventually lead to its demise. Yet, as a coach whose favorite event (as both a competitor and now a coach) is Extemporaneous Speaking, I must admit to more than one surprise this past season. Unfortunately, these surprises have not been pleasant in any way, but instead are indicative of a problem that needs to be corrected in the event.

The question that I must pose to my Extemp speakers is “to be or not to be” on a note card. Until this season, I would never have felt the need to ask this question, but given the current circumstance, the answer to that question could determine whether you win a conference or state championship, or not.

While the conventional wisdom in Extemporaneous Speaking has been that you must become an expert at the memorized speech as soon as possible, I have found that at least in my state, judging variations on this fundamental element of the event are dumbfounded and confused at their results at the highest-stakes competitions during the whole

year. These competitors have faced diametrically opposed judging standards from one round to the next. One judge will give preference to the memorized speech, while the next judge actually seems to use the memorization against the exact same speaker. Complicating matters is the fact that the judging pool for these high-stakes contests stays largely the same every year, meaning that the problem persists.

From conversations that I have had with other coaches, this contrast in judging standards seems to come down to one central theme – the suspicion of memorized speeches and the accuracy of the source citations within.

This is not the first time that this issue has come to me within Extemporaneous Speaking. As a collegiate competitor in the event, I saw two of my coaches – Christina Foust and Ric Shafer – take a progressive step towards addressing the accuracy of source citations when they required all Extemp speakers to use notes in their speeches at our tournament. Sadly, this experiment lasted only for one year and the rules returned to normal, with notes being optional.

But let’s be honest with ourselves, leaving notes or a note card optional allows for such a disparity in judging. We are telling our speakers that they must be memorized at almost every

contest, regardless of the outcome of the speech. If it means that you just fabricate a source on the fly, then that’s what you must do. When I was in high school, other competitors confessed to me that they would carry pocket calendars with them at tournaments so that they could know what dates corresponded to Mondays, so that if they needed to fabricate a source, they could easily cite it as a Time, Newsweek, or U.S. News and World Report article (all of which had Monday dates for citation purposes.) Using newspaper sources makes it even easier to fabricate a source – but make sure that you don’t “cite” a source as saying that something has happened by that date, when the event couldn’t have occurred by then. I’ve seen that happen in several college-level Extemp rounds.

Perhaps we have reached a point where it would be better to require that all Extemp speakers use notes in some form. Honestly, does having one hand free, as opposed to two hands free, really make that much of a difference in delivery? In our state, Poetry interpreters and presenters in Oral Interpretation of Drama are required to use and/or possess their scripts throughout their presentations. In college, all interpreters of literature are required to use their script books. What makes Extemp so different

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that we must coach our students to either subject themselves to arbitrary judging or to lie if need be?

I would advocate that allowing for a “notes optional” element to Extemp speaking is hurting the event. Either we require everyone to use notes in some fashion, or we require memorization for all. If the former is chosen, at least we can eliminate some of the source fabrication that is happening today (I stop short of saying that we would eliminate it all because there will always be someone who cheats out of convenience or sloth). If the latter is chosen, at least we can eliminate some of the arbitrary decisions being made by

judges that either have no trust in the memorized Extemp speaker, or are so entrenched in out-dated expectations of the event that they cannot appreciate the extra effort put forth by a memorized speaker.

Another important consideration is that both the NFL and the NCFL require that students in Extemp speaking deliver their speeches from memory only. By allowing invitational contests, conference contests, and state contests to leave the use of notes as an option, what service is being done to the competitors in the event? A lack of consistency can only hurt the competition.

Either way, I believe a change

in the rules regarding the use of notes is needed. Either all Extemp contests should require the use of notes or all should require memorized speeches. (Tomas Cosenza is the head coach of the SkyHawk Forensics Team at V.J. and Angela Skutt Catholic High School in Omaha, Nebraska. He has coached at both the high school and collegiate levels and has coached NFL and NCFL national qualifiers in Extemporaneous Speaking. As a competitor, he was a 4-time national qualifier for the American Forensic Association national tournament, including multiple out-rounds, and was a finalist for AFA All-American honors in 2003.)

Featured Cartoon of the Month



Each month the *Rostrum* features Yilu Zhang's cartoon of the month. Yilu is from North Allegheny High School, PA. Her NFL coach is Sharon Volpe.