

# JUDGE ADAPTATION FROM A DEBATER'S PERSPECTIVE

by Jennifer Eichenberg

Over the lifespan of debate it is not surprising to discover numerous topics that have been discussed, analyzed and theorized. Yet, of all the topic areas, one important topic is consistently ignored: judge adaptation. This leads me to wonder why such a topic has been overlooked. Is it because we do not deem this an important issue? Admittedly, judge adaptation is not like topicality, where theory has established that a violation will cause the team to be dropped. Yet, the team that does not adapt to a judge's characteristics and philosophies will most likely lose the round. Most lay judges do not have any comprehension of debate beyond what they think and believe the two teams are presenting. This is when debate rounds can be lost, not necessarily because of the team's inability to debate properly, but rather the team lacked the comprehension to communicate to the judge properly. However, we should not simply be worried about lay judges. Many coaches judging have different philosophies as to what they look for in debaters and debate rounds.

## Issues

To accomplish a thorough discussion on judge adaptation some important issues need to be addressed. The first issue is the underlying goal of hiring lay judges for tournaments. There appears to be contradicting purposes for using these judges. The next issue is judging philosophies. Many debaters ask for a judging philosophy prior to the start of the round. Usually these vary drastically from one judge to another. The lack of a [universal] judging paradigm in debate has led to erratic debate records. By having consistency in the judging process, debaters will find it easier to adapt to each judge and

coaches will find it easier to determine which teams need to be strengthened. Lastly, lay judges need to be consistent when determining which team receives a winning ballot. Some ideas will be proposed that will allow this to happen.

## Lay Judges

Lay judges normally do not have any comprehension of the debate process. To many debaters these are the most difficult judges to adapt to. What debaters have to rely on is their communication and persuasive skills to convince a lay judge that their position is superior to their opponent's. This seems simple and straightforward, but at the same time it can be the most frustrating experience for a debater, especially the novice debater. This brings about a question of purpose. Is the first year debater to concentrate on strengthening debate structure and theory skills, or build upon persuasion and communication skills? Hiring lay judges indicates that the debate process is to be purely communicative, whereas experienced judges want to hear more structured advanced arguments. Because this question is not clearly defined, it is difficult for the debater to know exactly what is needed to win the round. Should we just leave it as persuasion and communication skills for lay judges and structure and theory for experienced judges?

A closer look will indicate further why it is difficult to debate in front of lay judges.

With the lay judge's lack of comprehension for the debate process comes further concerns. Few lay judges are able to flow properly. Most do, however, take primitive notes as a record of the debate round. As important as it is for the debaters to flow the round properly, so to is it for the

judge. Without taking proper notes, judges have no way to compare, measure or weigh arguments. When a round is close, or when the round has evolved into a round of quality versus quantity of evidence, this is when proper note taking is essential to determine the winner. This is another frustration for a debater. Not only does a debater have to worry about the judge recording new arguments in rebuttals, but also about the judge giving weight to arguments that have no impact.

The biggest problem from using lay judges has to be the lack of a predetermined criteria to determine the winner of the round. Often times the lay judge will admit that s/he has no debate experience. To one judge the criteria for winning the round may be the team that confused him/her the least--to another it might be the team that gives the best presentation. What are we expecting from the lay judges we hire? Do we give them a specific criteria with which to determine the winner? If the lay judge does have a criteria it is often not communicated to the debaters. This then leaves the debaters relying on the old faithful persuasion skills to get them through the round. Yet, debaters deserve more. They deserve a specific criteria in which they understand how they can win the round, rather than trying to guess what the judge really wants to hear.

Adapting to lay judges, or any judge for that matter, is not impossible. It is no different from adapting yourself to be in a professional manner one moment, and then being with your best friend the next. The one thing that separates this example from what debaters face is that we know our friends well, and know exactly how to act to please them when we are with them. Because

debaters do not know lay judges, and because lay judges have no specific criteria, it is often frustrating trying to please them enough to receive a winning ballot.

## Judging Philosophies

A judging philosophy should be specific and well defined. Yet, as simple as some judges' philosophies are, they don't tell the whole picture. Some judges view topicality as the main voting issue in the round, others will only see it as one of many voting issues. Some judges will weigh the round purely on-balance, while others will weigh the round according to the weighing mechanism argued in the round. This inconsistency in judging philosophies is not a new phenomenon. It is largely responsible for the inconsistent records of debate teams.

A 1984 article James Hallmark wrote (James Hallmark, "Towards a Paradigm for CEDA," CEDA Yearbook, 1984, p. 89-92.) addressed the issue of judging paradigms. It is time that the issue is addressed again. What Hallmark was proposing was that judges be consistent when handing out winning ballots. This would certainly make judge adaptation much easier for all debaters. If everyone stood on the same ground on such topics as jurisdictional arguments, criteria, off-case and quantity of evidence, rounds would be less stressful, more focused, and more beneficial to all.

To review that 1984 article, Hallmark created a seven question survey and mailed it to various debate coaches in the midsection of the country. To demonstrate judging inconsistency, one question asked for either an affirmative win or negative win based upon this question: "Negative ignores case structure and spends both constructives giving off-case arguments. Affirmative does not defeat these arguments. From the information given, I would be most inclined to vote for..." 62% of the respondents

agreed that the negative team deserves the winning ballot. It would follow that from debate's many rules and its structure that 100% agreement would be made with this question and any other question of its type.

This judging inconsistency makes judge adaptation for the debater nearly impossible. The only way a debater could compensate for this inconsistency is to drill the judge with scenario type questions. Only then could a debater truly know how to win the round and what to expect from the judge.

## Tabula Rasa

Some judges have an 'anything goes' attitude towards judging debate rounds. These judges, often referred to as tabula rasa, should rethink their ways. The debater does not benefit in any way by arguing in front of a tabula rasa judge. There are four points that need to be addressed regarding this type of judging.

Tabula rasa indicates that one does not have any predetermined criteria for determining the winner of the round. This is similar to the situation discussed with lay judges. Without any proper criteria, the debaters of the round are forced to do what they feel is necessary to win the round. This then will end in an unstructured and unfocused round. Voting issues will be weak. What possible benefit could come from this?

Tabula rasa judges gives the debaters the freedom to be undisciplined. This is a contradiction, for the debate process is a communication discipline in itself. By establishing rules and theory, debate can not be undisciplined. This is much like the analogy of an undisciplined child. If a parent allows complete freedom for that child, often times the end result is pure chaos. Society has established proper conduct, parents establish proper conduct, why then should the debate process not be disciplined for a specific conduct?

Someone who claims that they are tabula rasa needs to explore exactly what they mean. To be truly tabula rasa, to allow 'anything goes', one would have to forego all and every bias in that round, against the debaters, and for the debate topic. Surely, no one could possibly accomplish this. To be completely bias free, one would have to have no frame of reference for the debate process or for the resolution. But once one heard a round on the resolution, they have already started a frame of reference of the debate process and the resolution.

The final point to be made regarding tabula rasa judges is that it makes other rounds more difficult for debaters to adapt to judges. It is quite an extreme for a debater to argue for a tabula rasa judge, and then the next round to debate in front of a [debate official]. It is much like that undisciplined child going to grandma's house where s/he is expected to very disciplined. It is going to be rather difficult for that child to adapt, much like it will be for the debater.

## Out Rounds

Debaters face a more difficult challenge when they break to out rounds. Here they not only realize that their competition is stronger, but also that they have three judges to try to please, or a least two of the three. Debaters face a nightmare when they get one judge from each philosophy-- one lay judge, one tabula rasa, and one traditionalist. This puts the debater in quite a dilemma. Whom do they try to please?

The normal scenario in out rounds is that debaters try to appeal to two judges, leaving the other judge out of the round. When this happens, the debate process has turned away from the communication process. By focusing on two judges, hoping for their ballots, debaters make the third judge feel inferior to the other judges, which should not be the case.

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## Proposal

There is an old saying, "If you are going to complain, you volunteer yourself to find a solution." In this case, discussion replaces complaining, and a few ideas will start the process of finding a solution to judging inconsistency. This proposal is purely from a debater's point of view of what could possibly be done to solve the inconsistency. It is to act as a tool for discussion. The impacts from finding a solution will result in fewer random bullet ballots, more focused and structured rounds, easier judge adaptation for debaters, an enhance of the educational function of debate, and less frustration and more enjoyment from both debaters and judges. It would be imperative then, that a solution be created.

We should recognize that a solution will not come easy or quickly. Because [NFL] has not yet established hard and fast rules regarding theory arguments and structure, we must argue among ourselves what is an absolute voting issue, when the affirmative team wins or the negative to reach a high percentage of agreement on these topics.

For now there is a way for everyone to have a well-defined philosophy, one that debaters can know exactly how to address the judge properly. It consists of the creation of a questionnaire that lets debaters know exactly where a judge stands on a wide range of debate topics and issues. This should be in written form so that the debater can have it all times,

and that nothing is left out from a verbal interpretation. The questionnaire would address such topic as what the judge considers a voting issue, what s/he is looking for in a debate round and from debaters, and where they stand on specific topics.

## Lay Judge Proposal

Lay judges are going to be an inevitable part of the debate tournament process. They serve the dual purpose of filling the need for hired tournament judges, and to act as a check and balance on the debate process. Sometimes debaters forget that the debate process is a communication process. Often times the debate becomes too focused on debate structure and theory issues and away from the act of communicating. Lay judges focus our attention back towards the communication process of debate.

However, this does not solve a frustration from a debater's perspective of having a lay judge vote for a team that did not present a prima facie case. The negative team pointing this out should win the round, however, a lay judge normally would not recognize it as a negative ballot. Because of the lay judge's lack of comprehension of debate, they do not know the rules that govern debate. If we equipped lay judges with basic vocabulary, structure and a brief background of debate we would be better off than where we are now. This will give lay judges enough knowledge to feel confident about voting for the winning team. This will also ease

the debater. They no longer will be dropped because of the lay judge's lack of knowledge, and also they will spend less time in constructive speeches explaining the debate process to the judge.

The most important thing that lay judges need is a clear criteria to determine the winner of the round. As discussed earlier, lay judges may have a criteria all their own. Establishing a universal criteria for lay judges will solve two concerns. First, it will give a consistent criteria for determining the winner. Since it will be an universal criteria, it will not vary form one tournament to another. This will solve the second concern. This will give debaters one criteria that they have to adapt to, not many different ones.

## Conclusion

As stated earlier, judge adaptation is not an impossible concept to grasp. What does make it difficult, however, is [judge] inconsistency. From this debater's perspective, when we decide to address this phenomenon and try to correct it, judge adaptation will be simple and straightforward. This proposal appears as if it is proposing that all judges be exactly alike. It does establish conformity as guidelines for determining the winner is concerned, but each judge's personality and characteristics will still play a role in distributing speaker points.

*(Jennifer Eichenberg debates at Ferris State College (MI). This paper was presented at SCA.)*

### DEBATE JUDGE QUESTIONNAIRE

What are you looking for in a debate round?	How much weight do you give to the following?			
List a hierarchy of voting issues.	Topicality	Most	Consideration	Little
	Criteria	Most	Consideration	Little
	Weighing Mechanisms	Most	Consideration	Little
	Off-Case	Most	Consideration	Little
	Definitions	Most	Consideration	Little
	Quantity of Evedence	Most	Consideration	Little
	Impacts	Most	Consideration	Little
	Other jurisdictionals	Most	Consideration	Little
	Stock Issues	Most	Consideration	Little
	How do you distribute speaker points?			
How do you view this debate topic?				