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Suggestions for Extemp Contestants From the Judges' Point of View

Judges of extemporaneous speaking are as varied as the speakers or the topics themselves. The only thing that all judges have in common is that they have their own opinions about what makes a speech good. However, there are certain "common threads" that you will see on ballots for competitions at all levels. Although there is no magic formula you can apply to every speech to guarantee that it's good, there are some rules of thumb that will keep you headed in the right direction, no matter what your topic might be.

Content

Comments and suggestions in this section include ideas from judges that the speaker can utilize to improve the quality of the content of the material they present. This includes addressing the issue, properly using and citing supporting material, and creating effective introductions and conclusions.

Answering the Question

The most common criticism from judges of both informative and persuasive speaking is that the speaker did not answer the question. Information that provides background on the subject is useful but is often overused. Additionally, information that is related to the general topic might be interesting but has nothing to do with the question posed. As you gather your material from various sources, ask yourself of each item, "Does this support the ANSWER to the question that I've selected?" Even if it's good information, if you can't answer "yes" to that question, then you should leave it out. For example, if your topic was "*What steps has the United States taken to ensure economic growth?*" then two to three minutes on the general subject on the history of the U.S. economy might be interesting, but it does nothing to answer the question. Ensure you pay attention to modifying phrases and clauses in the question, so you answer the full question. Stay to the subject.

The Answer

Using Supporting Material

Judges also will frequently criticize a speaker's use of sources. First, avoid relying solely on the "Big Three" (*Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*). Vary your sources as much as possible and seek to incorporate sources that provide in-depth analysis, rather than only skimming the surface on current issues. For example, your files might contain articles from the *New England Journal of Medicine* for health-related topics; from the *Wall Street Journal* or *The Economist* for financial topics; *Foreign Affairs* for topics on foreign policy issues; or from *Forbes* or *Business Week* for business topics. As you build your files through the year, look for publications that specialize in the topic area for which you're compiling data. Filing some of the best articles from different publications provides a wider variety of supporting information, and consistently results in positive comments from judges. Access to the Internet and computer online sources are invaluable in providing a wide variety of expert sources. Know the sources well, though, to avoid bias.

Using Sources

Citing Sources

Another common problem with sources is the “vague citation.” Most judges like very specific citations of sources, including who said it, what publication printed it, and at least the month and year of publication. Consider phrases like “a recent *Time* article,” or “in *The Guardian* last year.” Now compare these to the power of citations such as “according to the Surgeon General as quoted in the May 2021 *New England Journal of Medicine*,” or “as President Biden said in his interview in *Foreign Affairs* October 14.” In just a couple of seconds, you’ve not only established your talents for research, you’ve also lent credibility to the point you’re making by “zeroing in” on an accepted authority on the subject. Internet sources also require specific date citation and should be cited with the name followed by “online” rather than “dot com.”

Creating Effective & Interesting Introductions & Conclusions

Another important aspect of content is what you say in your introduction and conclusion. Try to avoid “cute” introductions, as some efforts at humor tend not to be very humorous. A better idea is to use some reference or analogy (a comparison based on similarities between another kind of situation and the issue you’re addressing) that allows you to tie your introduction to your conclusion. Even during the speech, if you can refer to this similarity occasionally, it can help give your presentation unity and completeness.

For example, in one speech on the topic *What should the federal government do to ease the problems of American cities?* the introduction included an analogy about how individuals deal with illness or disease. The speaker listed three measures, including preventative medicine, treatment, and monitoring of the patient’s status during recovery. These three approaches then provided the organizational structure of the speech. The major points in the presentations included:

- 1) What the government should do to prevent problems in cities;
- 2) How the current problems should be treated; and
- 3) What steps would be necessary to monitor the ongoing effect and success of programs implemented to solve those problems.

The conclusion included a comparison of suffering cities and individuals, giving the speech a sense of closure, as the conclusion tied back to the introduction.

Organization

Tips and suggestions in this area address the way in which speakers choose to organize the information in the speech. The topics discussed below include the appropriate use of time in the introduction and conclusion and choosing topics that organize themselves.

Appropriating Time for the Introduction, Body, & Conclusion

Many of you have heard the old formula for extemporaneous speaking that says “Tell them what you’re going to say, say it, then tell them what you said.” It’s a sound idea — that is, prepare the audience by highlighting what your main points will be, deliver the body of the speech, then summarize. But be careful not to put too much emphasis on the first highlighting or the summary. These should both be brief and to the point, because the real “meat” of the speech is in the body. What is critical to highlight is justification of the topic. This means to tell the audience why the particular topic is important to their lives. Emphasize why they should care about this topic, how it impacts them personally. A good goal is 1 1/2 minutes for an introduction and 30 seconds for a conclusion.

Finding Topics That Organize Themselves

Look for “self-organizing” topics. You probably know that there are many ways to organize your main points — chronologically, geographically, socially, politically, etc. Some topics are stated in such a way that an effective method to organize will be obvious. For example, a topic that begins *What is the history of...* should be organized chronologically. A topic such as *How are European nations responding to efforts to unify Europe?* would best be organized geographically by nation, or politically by popular responses and which nations support each. Contrary to popular belief, there is no rule that says you must have three major points or categories in your speech. Some good speeches have four or more divisions, while others have only two. It’s important to note that there are no “rules” in this area. The most vital thing about organization is that it exists — a good speech is ALWAYS well-organized.

Presentation/Delivery

In the presentation/delivery category, judging criteria on the ballot addresses those issues that a speaker faces while delivering the speech they have prepared. The most common suggestions judges offer include pronouncing words correctly, choosing effective words, utilizing proper grammar, speaking at an appropriate pace, signposting, effectively using gestures and movement, rehearsing the conclusion, and dressing appropriately.

Pronouncing Words Correctly

Equally important to what you say is how you say it. There are many things you should pay attention to when dealing with delivery. First, focus on proper pronunciation. It’s very distracting to a judge or audience to hear a speaker say “git” for get, or “minny” for many. Competitors should practice speaking with proper pronunciation as often as possible, so it doesn’t feel too “foreign” in the actual contest. This may seem very minor, but judges frequently comment on enunciation. Remember, you want judges to hear the *content* of your speech, not listen to your *accent*. Even more critical is knowing the correct pronunciation of names and countries included in your topic and referenced in your speech.

Choosing Effective Words & Utilizing Proper Grammar

Another important part of delivery is the proper use of formal language. Grammatical errors are extremely distracting, and if made during an important point, the audience may miss that point altogether, focusing instead on the error. Avoid the use of slang unless you’re quoting some source directly. Choose policeman over cop, prison over slammer, etc. Also, avoid terms like stuff, messed up, blew it, and other such colloquialisms. Even though these are perfectly acceptable terms in everyday speech among you and your peers, they have no place in a formal extemporaneous speech. Elevated vocabulary lends to an impression of intelligence.

Speaking at an Appropriate Pace

Tempo is something else you can practice to give your speech that truly “polished” feel. By not speaking too quickly, you can actually learn to “think ahead” as you talk, giving you more control over how you construct your sentences. Don’t be afraid of silence. Real pauses are a natural part of speech, and much less distracting than “and, uh”, “now”, etc., which are often referred to as vocal pauses. You can also use tempo to give emphasis to those points you think are most important. A slow, deliberate delivery of a main point can make your audience perceive its importance without you having to beat them over the head with it.

Self-Organizing

Pronunciation

Grammar

Tempo

Signposting

Letting the Audience Know Where You Are

Signposting is the term used to let your audience know where you are and where you're going. It's an important part of a good speech, but it's equally important to do it well. Before ending a main point, be sure to include an internal summary, a brief sentence summarizing the main point just discussed. Then move to the transition. Transitions are those parts of a speech that lead the audience from one section into another. Try to avoid overused transitions such as "my next area of analysis," or "now let's look at," or "this leads me (us) to." These tend to be weak and serve more as distractions than good transitions. Instead, try to tie the last section to the next one smoothly. For example, suppose your topic is *Should the U.S. ban the sale of assault weapons?* and your speech has three main divisions: the history of destruction caused by assault weapons, the lack of a legitimate need for such weapons, and the benefit to law enforcement officers of being allowed to enforce such a ban. When moving from the first to the second area, avoid the "cliché" type of transitions mentioned above and consider something smoother, such as "In addition to the long history of destruction these weapons have caused, the legitimate need for such weapons is at best questionable." Then move on to your sources and citations in that area.

Movement

Using Movements & Gestures Naturally

Don't use "canned" gestures or movements. The more natural you look in your presentation, the better. Make your judge feel like you're confident in what you're saying, and he or she will be more likely to be convinced by it. If you use a notecard, don't pretend you don't have one! As you become more experienced, you'll find less and less need to rely on notes, but it's perfectly all right to refer to your card during your speech. It's much more distracting if you try to "sneak a peek" at the card as if you didn't want the judge to know it was there. Hold the card up at your waist and out from the waist slightly so you don't have to drop your head to read it.

The End

Remembering the Conclusion

Don't forget to allow yourself enough time during preparation to practice the conclusion. Speakers often spend too much time on the introduction and the body of the speech, then deliver conclusions that can seem awkward because they haven't been practiced enough. The conclusion is the last thing the judge hears and can affect what the judge remembers about your overall presentation. It will need to have impact, rather than seem like an abrupt ending with your listeners left hanging, wondering what you forgot to say. The final clincher sentence is critical.

Clothing

Looking Your Best

Dress appropriately. As simple as this sounds, many competitors overlook it. Flashy jewelry, dangling earrings, outrageous clothing or hairstyles, even hair that falls into your eyes can all be distracting to a judge. If, after you've spoken, a judge can remember little of what you said, it is most likely for one of two reasons: one, your speech was not that memorable; or two, something was distracting the judge. Controlling the first reason is the essence of the entire event, and something you never stop working on. Controlling the second reason is very easy, and failure to do so is unnecessary and often costly. Dress conservatively in business attire, make sure your hair looks good and stays out of your face, and avoid flashy accessories.

Summary

In summary, a good extemporaneous speech is a balance of what you say and how you say it. Those who master both aspects of the event consistently place high among a great number of judges, even though those judges may have quite dissimilar opinions on many aspects of the event. Most importantly, enjoy what you do and take pride in your efforts. This is an activity through which you will continue to reap benefits for the rest of your life.