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## Novice Competitors and Public Address Preparation

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### Introduction

In a time when forensics is trying to maintain traditions while not getting stuck in a performance rut, teaching incoming students competition norms can be a very sticky situation. The community is being constantly criticized for crediting students who follow the spoken and unspoken rules of competition. This can leave little room for individuality and can also make it very difficult to prepare incoming students for competition. Prepping new students in college events becomes a balancing act, trying to teach events, norms, and policies in a short amount of time to help prepare the student to be “tournament ready.” While students catch on to the rules they are asked to follow, more difficulty is found when trying to teach new students the unwritten norm they must follow.

This paper aims to discuss the balance in finding how to prepare students for competition in a manner that does not overwhelm yet adequately makes them tournament ready for competition. The goal of a coach is to make sure their students are comfortable and prepared for their first competition and their forensics career. A bad first tournament has the potential to cause a student to leave the competition for good.

### The high school college transition

The transition of a competitor to college forensics can be difficult in many ways. Former high school competitors are asked to change their views about competition in rather drastic ways. From topic selection, memorization, examples, acronyms, sources and tournament dress, choices that had previously led to success may not provide the same results. With such a severe learning curve, there is difficulty in creating the transition without overwhelming the student and also making sure they are tournament ready during the start to the competition year. In actuality, helping a student to be fully ready is nearly impossible. With only a one or two month buffer to prepare new students (not to mention they are transitioning to college life), the time is short to prepare these students for competition. While many schools hold camps before the start of the semester, this quick education cannot cover everything.

According to LaMaster (2005), rules listed for the four public address events are pretty basic –a ten minute time limit, After Dinner should make a point and be funny, and Rhetorical Criticism should use a method to analyze an artifact. In formative should inform, Persuasion should persuade (32). However, if this is what our student’s were sent out with, we would be setting them up for extreme failure. Instead, the extreme learning curve requires a whole new pattern of thought. An effective coach will create a situation of learning as well as fostering a chance for students to express themselves. Instead, we know that forensics unwritten rules

expect certain types of humor, topics, and organizational patterns.

The argument of forensics lacking originality and success depending on how well students follow the rules must be examined in the context of teaching incoming competitors. While we typically examine “canned” (prepared in advance and used over again) in a limited prep context, the same can be said for Public Address. These events are written in a fashion that follows the format of set up, pattern, and signposts. By creating this very specific format and writing choices, it can be easily seen that learning and creativity can be lost.

### Method and Results

In order to understand the process of educating incoming competitors, interviews were conducted with several students who had just finished their first year of competition. Questions surrounded issues of preparation for first tournament, student’s observations from the first tournaments, etc.

Questions were asked specifically about students who were competing in PA events. All students but one had previous PA experience in high school competition in several different high school leagues.

One of the first questions asked was what were the general differences in competition you noticed? Answers ranged from behavior, dress, formality and topics choice. While the focus was on the difference in Public Address events, it is important to notice the differences in all realms to create a true perspective. One of the biggest differences all student’s answered was in general the formality of the competition. This ranged from how “serious” competitors seemed to take competition to the formality of the topics. Students were surprised about the amount of events students carried and also the dress required in competition.

In terms of specifically relating to public address, topics, sources, and memorization were three key areas that came up over and over again as surprises when it came to competition. While most students agreed that these areas had all been discussed prior to their first tournament, what happened at the actual competition was still a surprise to them. The caliber of competition was much higher than expected. In terms of topics, students replied that after attending a tournament, they understood why so many topics had been “vetoed” or why coaches would not let them bring certain topics into competition. One student commented, “ I was surprised as how obscure the topics were...they weren’t as common as they were in high school.” There were also comments addressing the actual writing of PA events, as a few students commented written speeches came straight from the coaches in the high school competitions. While

they had written speeches for class before, this was often the first attempt at writing a speech for competition. This also incorporates the sources discussion. One comment included “ I actually didn’t believe you when you said how many sources we needed and then told me that the ones I had found weren’t good enough” This comments seems to incorporate the idea of needing to make sure we are specific about the research process not only from an ethical perspective but also from a quality standpoint. While quality of sources is always a concern when helping student’s research, it is important to remember that researching for a speech is still different than researching for classes or anything else they have done.

A second main area of topic to come up was memorization. While most students commented they had to memorize speeches in high school, the precision of the memorization was much more specific in college competition. The memorization of multiple speeches was also a huge learning curve, as most students only carried one even in high school, and never more than one PA. One student even said she wished she had been able to attend a tournament to see what it was really like before she competed so she would have been better prepared to compete.

### Discussion

A key argument to be asked out of these discussions regards how to best prepare students for their first competition. While each coach has a way to teach students, we may need to analyze where these students are coming from in order to better prepare them for the competition ahead. Knowing today’s students have a different mentality than students from even five years ago, this requires coaches to think about these practices and decide how to best reach new students. Conclusion can be drawn in a several areas, including mentality and teaching of norms.

First, we need to make sure students understand the differences from high school to college public address. From learning acronyms, to structure, to the basics of prepping a speech for competition, students have a lot of concerns to contend with. Coaches must really consider what must be taught, as students often struggle themselves with coming up with the questions to ask, as they often assume it will be similar to previous competition. Learning about the style of previous coaches and explaining the role you will provide can be key. Simply letting a student know they are responsible for writing their speech and the role of the coach is to guide and provide assistance. Common knowledge of any previous speech writing may not apply to the student depending on their competition background.

Second, when teaching norms, we must think about what is essential for students to know. Disclosing an abundance of rules can take the fun out of the activity, but not sharing with students basic standards may leave them struggling in the activity and putting in effort that will not benefit their competitive success in the future. Our goal as coaches and

educators is to provide students a learning opportunity that allows them to grow as a competitor and a person.

### Conclusion

In order to fully understand this topic, more research needs to be done on a larger scale and through all events, including Limited Prep, Interpretation, and Debate. Getting new students to their first tournament and having them tournament ready is key to their success and also with team retention. As educators, we must think about what these practices are and how to make them the most effective for our students.

### Reference

LaMaster, G. (2005). Understanding public address events. *National Forensic Journal*, 23(1), 32-36.