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## Ballots: A New, Comprehensive and Educational Approach for Evaluating Forensic Competitors

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## Ballots: A New, Comprehensive and Educational Approach for Evaluating Forensic Competitors

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### Abstract

There has been much talk in the forensic community about frustration with events and progression of the activity. The National Forensic Association National Tournament student meeting discussed irritation with the Impromptu event saying that it has been stagnant and not providing the skills needed for application in a world outside forensics. I propose a new ballot that promotes the source and intention of the event while at the same time giving a basis for “real world” application. This would not only remind competitors and judges what the intent of the event is supposed to be but also with the constant reading of the description people will eventually have the event descriptions memorized. After a ballot analysis of every ballot that I have received from the past two years of competition, I have concluded that the notes given by most judges are certainly helpful but lack justification or reason which disregards the pedagogical value of this activity. In order to keep this activity alive we must be able to justify that this is an educational activity and this new ballot would give it additional validation. This ballot will serve as merely a guide and not a rubric.

For the two years that I have competed in collegiate forensics I have received such comments as, “Your teaser is too long,” “Your argument seems weak,” and “This is stupid.” I look at other ballots and I am thrilled with comments such as, “You were funny” but with further inspection I come to realize that “You were funny” was the only comment made on my ballot. The previous comments and others alike came with little to no explanation or elaboration. How could so many tournaments produce so many poor ballots?

The problem of ballots with little useful feedback isn’t new by any means. In fact, Kevin Jones’s 1988 essay *The Individual Events Ballot: Pedagogical Tool or Narcissistic Soap Box?* discusses the problems and consequences that come from a “useless” or poor ballot. Seeing as Jones (1988) wrote his article over twenty years ago and the quality of ballots has not significantly improved, further discussion of effective ballot writing as well as a change to the ballot format is warranted. I believe that a ballot should not only give a competitor tips for a more successful round in the future, but it should also be used as a tool to teach students the communication concepts in which critiques are grounded. In addition, in order to keep the forensics activity alive and well funded, there must be evidence that students are not only competing to win but to learn as well. In order to keep to the task at hand, however, this paper will focus on improving the ballot rather than explaining the consequences of a poor ballot. I propose that a new standardized ballot format should be created in order to fully maximize the potential of collegiate forensics.

It is important to understand the reasoning behind my proposal so instead of just stating my idea, I will explain it to

you. (See what I did there?) In order to do so, this paper will first discuss what exactly is considered a good and a poor ballot; second, the pedagogical reasoning for including the individual event description on each ballot; third, why Aristotle is still important; and finally, the appearance of the proposed ballot and what this ballot will provide for the future of forensics.

### What do good and bad ballots look like?

For the six years that I have been competing in forensics, I have heard several variations of student complaints about some judges and the ballots written by those judges. The most colorful comment was, “The judges are on crack!” I think many judges are unaware that students do not find their ballots useful and according to Daniel Cronn-Mills’s 1991 essay, *Interpreting the Oral Interpretation Judge: Content Analysis of Oral Interpretation Ballots*, he states “Judges may not have written as many comments simply because they were not sure *what* to write” (p. 38).

Before we can evaluate the quality of ballots, we must first understand what a ballot is supposed to accomplish. Jones (1988) states,

...when a student enters a room to speak at a tournament, that student should be able to assume that the judge will engage in pedagogy. Upon receiving and reading their ballots, the students should experience some type of learning process. It therefore becomes necessary for the judge to assume the role of teacher in order for this process to transpire. (pg. 49)

Essentially, based on Jones’s (1988) definition, a good ballot is one that teaches and instructs and a bad ballot is one that does neither. As forensics is first and foremost an educational activity, we can agree with Jones’s (1988) definition. Cronn-Mills (1991) elaborates how most of the comments given on a ballot are positive or neutral in nature.

After completing a ballot analysis of every ballot I have received from my two years in collegiate forensics, I have discovered the pattern Cronn-Mills (1991) describes is extremely similar to my own collegiate forensic experience. Through my ballot analysis I discovered that nearly 60% of my ballots were ones that consisted of *only* positive and neutral comments. The other 40% contained negative or constructive comments. Though many of the comments on the ballots are positive in nature, there are very few critical comments meant to help improve the performance. Furthermore, many of the ballots with low ranks (4-5) contain mostly positive comments. For example one judge wrote, “Did a great job of changing characters.” I would normally be happy that someone liked my character choices, however, I could see that they were not as please as they expressed

as I only received a 4-16 with this comment being the only comment.

Like Cronn-Mills (1991) stated, this judge may have not known what to say on a competitor's ballot. Through my personal ballot review, I also determined that not all, but many of the hired judges at tournaments are the ones writing poor ballots. Though the forensics activity would not be able to survive without the use of hired judges, these judges also must be aware that they are in control of a student's opportunity to attend a national tournament not to mention the deserved justification of the score for that student. At the 2010 Minnesota State Tournament I heard many complaints (admittedly some from myself) about the amount of hired judges judging the preliminary rounds. Of my ballots received from the State tournament, over half were from hired judges and most of the comments from those ballots were either extremely positive with little critique or were what Jones (1988) would consider a "useless" or bad ballot. Recognize that the goal is not to belittle these judges but rather to help them and students in the future.

Hired judges are not the only ones writing vague ballots. The problem is widespread among the inexperienced and the experienced, the old and the young, and what is considered the "good tournaments" and the "bad" ones. Comments such as, "Work to bring more depth into this speech" are common if not excessive. A comment such as this one is unfocused and gives no direction as to how to fix this problem in the future. An ideal ballot is one that is specific and explanatory giving the student a clear understanding of the judge's opinion. In order for every judge to write something useful and constructive for a student they must understand that the goal of the forensics activity is educational.

#### **Event Descriptions Actually Matter**

The CA that I performed my freshman year was definitely a learning experience. I spent hours upon hours trying to grasp the concept of "applying a method to an artifact." Once I finally realized that all one had to do take a theory that talked about a form of communication that matched something controversial, I wondered why more people didn't participate in CA. Then, one day, someone asked me if I knew what CA was. I told them, "You know, you talk about something cool and apply a theory to it." How very misinformed I was. Soon after I looked up the AFA-NIET description of Communication Analysis and I wondered how many other people knew the purpose of the event. Sadly, most other's descriptions of CA were only slightly better than my own. To clarify, I'm sure that my coaches informed me more than enough times what the purpose of CA was but because of my freshman ears and the desire to finish my speech rather than the desire to learn, their words of instruction slipped in one ear and out the other. This sort of mentality of the student is exactly why the opinion of the judge is so important. Students may hear the words of their coach but (as in my case) they may not listen. As a judge controls the rank and the possibility of a nationals qualification, their opinion means not necessarily something more than the coach's but clearly something different. For example, my

friends have recently been asking me to cut my hair as I had been growing it out. When someone I respected but did not know as well told me to cut my hair as it showed off my "nice bone structure," I was immediately more inclined to cut my hair as I had a compelling argument from someone whom I respected not more but differently.

I propose that the ballots always include the event description on the ballot of the event that is being judged/ performed. Many in the forensics community could benefit from the included event description for two reasons. One, there is a common lack of awareness concerning the event descriptions and a ballot would be the most universal vehicle to inform the forensics community. Two, new and hired judges would have an accessible reference tool. The event description is not for limiting the possibilities for performances but rather the opposite. The event descriptions provide an "if it doesn't say you can't, than you can" mentality. There are few rules of "cant's" in order to provide many "cans." This sort of attitude would deter people from purely following norms or the status quo and instead broaden their perspectives of judging and performing. The lack of knowledge concerning the event descriptions in the forensics activity is evident. Students in the activity are performing Prose with virtually no narrative and presenting Impromptu as though they are following an unwritten rubric. It is at this point that I must use my own personal experience (or pathos) in order to explain myself. Aristotle declares the effectiveness of using one's personal experience in his Defense of Palamedes and I believe that Aristotle's opinion is a valid one. The following information results from conversations that I have had with teammates, students, and coaches from the past two years.

A senior teammate was shocked when he learned from me that the point of Dramatic Interpretation was to emphasize the character being presented. This teammate was not the only student surprised to learn the actual description of an event. After talking to students from schools around the nation, very few could accurately describe the purpose of Impromptu Speaking. It is interesting that the most of the students that I spoke to were in at least their third year competing and competed successfully in the events that they could not define. In fact, I believe that this lack of event description awareness can be explained by a 1990 NDC-IE paper. *What the Rules Mean: Using Defined Judging Guidelines to Augment Informal Training* by J.G Harrison Dow, Lohnes, and Albertson explains,

At present, judges enter forensics in something of a state of nature. The overwhelming majority of new judges depend only on their pre-existing knowledge of forensics. In many cases, this knowledge is minimal. Even the expertise of experienced competitors most often limited to the events in which they excelled. (pg. 19)

If the event description is not known, than how can judges evaluate a student effectively? True, there are usually meetings before a tournament starts in order to inform the judges

of what their roll and responsibility is at the tournament, however, as we can see, these meetings have not been successful. An event description stated on the ballot will not only serve as a reference to experienced judges but will help as a guide for new or hired judges.

### The Relevance of Aristotle

The teachings of Aristotle hold significant relevance in the forensics community as forensicators are not only arguing but speaking *truth*. The activity of forensics is merely a school organized version of the “gathering of people” and these people have the opportunity to share their minds, hearts, and souls for ten minutes without interruption. The discovery of truth in the realm of suits and classrooms presents an opportunity to be recognized. This arena is created in order for free speech and protest to occur to create a more enlightened world. However, we must ask ourselves, how can we discover truth and enlighten others, without an understanding of what makes a message effective? To be more precise, the organization of one’s thoughts on a ballot is just as important as the organization of a speech. We must remember that arguments are presented in both directions in this activity and the argument on a ballot is just as important as the one being spoken.

The research done from my ballot analysis reinforced the need to solve the problem of unorganized ballots. Some ballots were filled with many comments concerning the delivery of my speech but lacked commentary on content. Others ballots showed favor towards the development of my character but completely ignored the argument presented. Several of the ballots contained hand drawn pictures, one of a particularly detailed butterfly. Though not all judges are practicing their sketching skills on student’s ballots, many are providing unorganized if not schizophrenic ballots. Though my Communication Analysis ballots are formatted in a more constructive manner, quite a few still lack detailed arguments to improve the speech. In fact, my ballot analysis showed that over 80% of the ballots did not cover the most basic and fundamental elements of a speech. Quite clearly, I am discussing Aristotle’s Five Canons of Rhetoric.

These five principles that have endured for centuries serve unarguably as the primary and universal tenets for every speech. If invention, arrangement, style, delivery, and memory are used in every speech then all five should be mentioned when evaluating an event. These common crucial elements are taught to every Communication Studies major and therefore should be held in higher esteem when evaluating forensics events. I therefore propose that the front side of a ballot be divided into the Canons minus the given of Memorization. Having a memorized speech is the first step in a public address speech or for the most part in an interpretive event and for the sake of judging limited preparation events, the tenet of memorization could be respectfully re-

membered but excluded. In order to speak truth from both sides of the classroom, a judge must also use these basics in order to present their argument effectively as well.

The new ballot will be organized in sections according to Aristotle’s Five Canons of Rhetoric, contain the event description and will hopefully, with the help of the tournament director, have an emphasis of explaining the comments made by the judge. In other words, the new ballot should teach. It is important that it is understood that judges are writing less than satisfactory ballots in order to validate the new layout of the proposed ballot. The structure organizes the ballot in a way that guides and reminds the judge what should be covered according to pedagogical roots of the forensics activity.

I do not believe that judges are “on crack.” I also do not believe that all hired judges write poor ballots or that my coaches do not effectively explain events to me. I do believe that this activity can be improved, however. Throughout this essay, I have cited several articles written over twenty years ago from the NDC-IE that have had the same concerns as have been discussed above. It is unsettling that the problems presented so long ago have been active in our community without an active solution. Forensics solves problems and creates solutions and isn’t that the purpose of the NDC-IE, to discuss the effective and ineffective of this activity? Forensics has and can still improve the world around us but in order to speak truth and take action, we must solve our problems within before we can efficiently work to progress the world around us.

### References

- Cronn-Mills, D. (1991). Interpreting the Oral Interpretation Judge: Content Analysis of Oral Interpretation Ballots. *The National Forensic Journal*, 9, 38.
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**BRW**  
Mock Ballot

**Communication Analysis:** An original speech by the student designed to offer an explanation and/or evaluation of a communication event such as a speech, speaker, movement, poem, poster, film, campaign, etc., through the use of rhetorical principles. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. Manuscripts are permitted. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes.

**Content**

**Structure**

**Delivery**

Event

Round

Section

Name

Code

<p><b>Rank</b> (1-5 with 1 being the highest)</p> <p><b>Rating</b> (1-25 with 25 being the highest)</p>
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Judge

School