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## A Case for Limited Preparation: It's Not as Easy as You Think

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### Abstract

Limited preparation events are useful tools that offer students many transferable skills. Because of these skills, we feel that limited preparation events should be the cornerstone of any forensics program. We also believe that repeated exposure to limited preparation events leads to a reduction in communication anxiety. We will examine the current climate of limited preparation events, the many benefits of limited preparation events and the way limited preparation can be incorporated into the educational environment. We hope to convince others of the critical role limited preparation events play in creating a well-rounded speaker.

### Introduction

Every coach has had that student, the one they've thrown into impromptu with the assurance that "it'll be fine. Just talk." Many of us have been the student being told "it's just 5 minutes. Just say something. Anything." As judges, who doesn't love getting a round of impromptu—it goes so fast! Limited prep is one of the most nerve-wracking and least respected events on the circuit. There's a perception that anyone can do it with little or no coaching. Frequently it appears there's no rhyme or reason to how coaches choose which students compete in limited prep. We feel that the many benefits of doing limited prep events are not being given credence. They offer students valuable tools in combating and dealing with communication apprehension. We believe that repeated exposure to limited prep events should lead to a reduction in communication apprehension within the tournament environment and beyond.

### Definitions

To begin, we must be clear on what limited prep events encompass. For the purpose of this paper, we are talking about impromptu and extemporaneous speaking as practiced on the collegiate forensics level of competition. In limited prep, each competitor must either be prepared to speak on a myriad of world events each weekend, or interpret a wide range of different quotations (Turnipseed, 2005). There are clear delineations between the two events: "...the extemporaneous speaker should seek to answer literally a significant question about current events, the impromptu speaker should strive for an insightful, metaphorical analysis" (Preston, 1992). Extemporaneous speaking, requiring one to research and present a main thesis with sub-theses on current events and world situations, has been an aspect of forensics since the first debate clubs were formed at William and Mary College in the late 1700's (Geiger, 2000). While impromptu speaking is frequently paired with extemporaneous speaking, the event offers uniquely different challenges. Impromptu does require the same answer, major thesis, and sub-thesis structure as extemporaneous speaking, the infor-

mation provided comes from within the individual's own interests and compiled knowledge (Turnipseed, 2005).

In looking at communication anxiety, we are looking specifically at situational anxiety. Situational anxiety is an apprehension that occurs when speaking in specific settings. In this case, the apprehension felt has been defined as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey 1977). We are focusing on the apprehension one feels when having to address a group of peers, such as happens in a public speaking forum (Holbrook, 1987). The most frequent outcome of speech anxiety is avoidance of speaking situations, which in turn can limit one's involvement and effectiveness in community activities, educational pursuits, and career endeavors (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009).

### Current Climate

Impromptu and extemporaneous speaking are isolated within the forensics world with neither being regularly applied outside of forensics. Hunt (1997) warns us that "forensics is not a public enough activity" and that "we have become advocates in a private technical sphere without public sphere experience." The limited prep events have become a "test of elocution" rather than focusing on "reasoning, invention, argumentation, evaluation and other critical skills" (Davis & Dickmeyer, 1993). The current incarnation of limited prep events has become too stagnant (Rice & Mummert, 2001).

The important classroom application and value of these events is often ignored. In the hierarchy of the forensics world these two events seem to carry the least prestige. In an informal survey of several collegiate forensics teams' current students and alumni, they were asked to rank events in order of "coolest" to "least cool." The coolest ranked at the top of the scale and the least cool ranked at the bottom of the scale. Duo and after-dinner speaking ranked at the top of the results. Additionally, five of the six top ranked events were interp events. There seems to be a clear bias towards the prestige of interp events from a competitor's viewpoint. Impromptu ranked seventh out of eleven events. Extemp clearly ranked last by a wide margin. There's a strong case to be made that extemp is currently not considered "cool" or worthwhile by students.

Impromptu speaking is one of the most frequently entered events in forensic competition (Williams, Carver, & Lowery-Hart, 2002). But, "all too often impromptu speaking is treated as a 'throw away event'-an event added so that a student becomes eligible for pentathlon" (Dean, 1988). Students tend to think of impromptu speaking as "winging it" for a couple of minutes (Gracey & Moe-Lunger, 2008);

speeches are formulaic and frequently judged on form over function. Impromptu speaking requires the speaker to interpret a resolution and take a stand on it. The ideal impromptu speech should be delivered well and should directly address the quotation. Problems arise when judges reward students for their speaking style alone, not for their ability to provide a direct, metaphorical response to the quotation (Davis & Dickmeyer, 1993). Ideally we should discourage the use of “canned” or “generic” approaches to impromptu speaking—because of the way these speeches impair the development of a contestant’s ability to think on his or her feet (Preston, 1992).

### **Benefits of Limited Prep**

Limited prep activities are unique within the forensics world in the way they have direct correlation to real-world communication skills in and out of the academic arena. Preston (1990) suggests that “since a great percentage of our daily speaking occurs in extemporaneous or impromptu forms, these events offer important practical experiences to prepare students to communicate intelligently on the spur of the moment beyond the classroom into society.” The effective limited prep speaker not only acquires skill in preparing areas to discuss, but in expressing ideas just as those ideas come into consciousness. This is an invaluable tool for success.

Limited prep events offer a plethora of learning opportunities. Students acquire many benefits unique to limited prep events, such as: a) their thoughts become more easily accessible, b) they learn how language shapes our conception of reality, c) they learn to conduct research on contemporary issues more thoroughly, d) they learn how to organize the information gathered, and e) they learn how to use metaphors and other figures as supports (Preston, 1990). Additionally, students are forced to develop critical thinking skills as they analyze and construct arguments. These skills are evident in the competitor’s ability to recognize the opposition between two assertions, relate supporting and refuting evidence to the assertions, and to integrate and weigh the evidence in order to evaluate the merit of the competing assertions (Davis & Dickmeyer, 1993).

Frequently, students will be placed in a situation where they have to think about a topic in a different way than they normally would. They will also be placed in a position to speak in a role with which they are not familiar. These challenges will help the student develop stronger ability and perspective taking. This ability will help students understand alternative points of view and adapt to foreign or difficult speaking situation (Williams, Carver, & Lowery-Hart, 2002).

Students can transfer these skills to any conversation where answers are required within a short time. It is a useful tool for any situation where a thoughtful response is called for. Thus, “impromptu speaking can enable a student to become more proactive—not only in competition but also in society” (Preston, 1992).

Additionally, limited prep can help to alleviate communication apprehension. Communication apprehension and the stress it produces can have a severe impact on students. Students’ with higher levels of communication apprehension suffer academically with lower cognitive performance, lower grades and lower evaluations when compared to student’s with low levels of communication apprehension; they are also more likely to drop out of college (Dwyer & Fus, 2002). Communication apprehension inhibits creativity in speech building and delivery as well. Our assertion is that by competing in limited prep events, students will see a reduction in their levels of communication apprehension. The very nature of limited prep forces one to confront fears about speaking in public. It’s especially important to have continual exposure to competition in limited prep events to make a solid impact on communication apprehension. The more frequent exposure speakers have to audiences, the more likely their public speaking state anxiety will decrease. Exposure promotes habituation as well as long term reductions in anxiety (Finn, Sawyer, & Schrodt, 2009).

### **Using Limited Prep in Education**

To help develop the critical thinking skills needed to be successful in limited prep events, students must explicitly engage in critical thinking activities. This is where the classroom comes into the picture. By utilizing a variety of critical thinking exercise with students, we can help them develop the skills needed to analyze, interpret and construct solid argumentation. By having students work on brain teasers, logic puzzles and event-specific critical thinking activities, i.e. argument analysis, argument mapping, evaluating evidence and constructing inductive reasoning, they are more likely to expand their critical thinking matrix.

One other possible classroom application for extemporaneous speaking is an “Extemp Briefing.” This is an exercise Janis Crawford uses in her classroom with business majors. Students have their course textbook. They are separated into groups of five and the textbook is divided into sets—each group is given a set of seven chapters from the book. The groups have to create topics based on those seven chapters, which are due to the professor the class period before speaking. The day of their in-class performance, students draw three topics from the set their group created. Then they must choose one of those three topics to create a speech about. They have 30 minutes to prepare the speech before giving a 5 to 7 minute presentation to the class. Students have access to a computer lab and are encouraged to use multimedia in creating their presentation. The inspiration for this exercise is the extemporaneous nature of the business world. Being prepared to speak about a current project with little to no warning is vital. Prior to completing this exercise, my students are often agitated and worried, exhibiting many symptoms of communication apprehension. Afterwards, most of them come to realize that extemporaneous speaking is a critical skill.

### Conclusion

Limited prep events offer significant benefits to the students who compete in them. There is a skill set utilized in giving limited prep speeches that does not exist on the same level in the other types of competitive speaking. Consequently, we feel it is critically important that all students of a speech team have repeated exposure to competing in limited prep events. Our plan for the upcoming school year is to require all students on our team compete in a limited prep event at every tournament they attend. We will also be administering the PRCA (the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension) and we will try to administer the STAI (State-Trait Anxiety inventory) before and after each tournament. In this way, we hope to show quantitative proof to support our hypothesis that competing in limited prep events significantly decreases communication apprehension.

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