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Is it Prose or is it Drama? Distinguishing Events Based on Judging Criteria

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Genre distinctions have been a source of confusion and contention in the collegiate forensics community, particularly in terms of distinguishing between appropriate source material for prose and drama. As the most powerful indicators of current forensic performance evaluations, ballots help illustrate the judging paradigms shaping the community. To that end, we conducted a content analysis of preliminary-round prose and drama ballots from the 2014 NFA championship tournament to determine how judges distinguish between prose and drama. Results illustrate substantial similarities in how each event is evaluated by judges. We discuss implications for this distinction in the conclusion of this essay.

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Genre distinctions have been a source of confusion and contention in the collegiate forensics community, particularly in terms of distinguishing between appropriate source material for prose and drama. Differences in literary content and form are best encapsulated in the traditional distinctions in literary genre, which Yordon (1999) describes succinctly: prose “creates an imaginary reality in the form of a story written in sentences and paragraphs”; drama involves plays “written with characters, implied action, and dialogue, usually intended for actors to perform on a stage”; and poetry employs an approach which is “highly imagistic” and “written in condensed, heightened language, stylized syntax, and figures of speech not found in ordinary communication” (pp. 47-48). However, scholars have begun to note the difficulties in maintaining such easy distinctions in the midst of a growing reliance on the Internet to secure literature for performance. White (2010), for

example, argued that “the introduction of the Internet, the spoken word revolution, an increasing interest in alternative literary forms and the growth of unconventional performance pieces all erode our traditional notions of literary genre distinctions” (p. 91). Such arguments, though reflective of current trends in collegiate forensic competition, have reignited debates about the differences in literary genres and their implications for performance.

As literary theories and performance practices evolve, it is increasingly important for co-curricular performance communities—including collegiate forensics—to assess their procedures to ensure they reflect established learning outcomes. In 2010, the National Forensic Association (NFA) released a report on the pedagogical outcomes of forensic participation identifying, among others, the ability for students to discern “literary worth,” demonstrate the ability to analyze texts, honor literary voice, and differentiate between point of view as overarching pedagogical outcomes (Kelly, Paine, Richardson, & White, 2014, pp. 51-53). Notably, these learning outcomes are not genre-specific, enabling students who participate in any oral interpretation event to demonstrate proficiency in each of these goals. What differs is the way in which each event enables students to meet these goals through separate, observable performance skills. Since the NFA report on pedagogical outcomes, the NFA community has proposed numerous schemas to clarify the distinctions between prose and drama or re-categorize the oral interpretation events to ensure they accomplish distinct learning outcomes for our students. However, despite attempts to distinguish prose and drama, performances in each event appear to remain strikingly similar, calling our pedagogical goals into question.

In this article, we take a different approach—empirical rather than theoretical—to examine how the differences between prose and drama are conceptualized in current forensic competition. The most powerful indicators of forensic assessment criteria are ballots, which illustrate the judging paradigms influencing forensic performances. Because of the competitive nature of the activity, judges’ evaluations ultimately shape the trajectory of performance practices—and analyzing those ballots enables us as forensic scholars to understand how our event conceptualizations are enforced. This article therefore proceeds with a review of relevant literature regarding literary genres and performance and a description of the research methods employed in this study. We then present the findings of our original analysis before concluding with implications for forensic practice.

Literary Genres and Performance

Oral interpretation enjoys a rich intellectual and artistic history with numerous disciplines—including communication, performance studies, and theater—contributing to the many understandings of and approaches to performing literature. Gura and Lee (2010) articulate the practice of oral interpretation as “the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic entirety” (p. 2). This approach to oral interpretation is closely aligned with collegiate forensic practices, which commonly include crafting performances “designed to engage the audience through the development of a story . . . [or] character(s) within a dramatic context” (National Forensic Association, 2016, p. 4). Although different forensic organizations routinely offer different variations of oral interpretation events, most event distinctions (with the notable exception

of duo interpretation or dramatic duo) rely on differences in *source material* to distinguish the events.

Such distinctions between source materials are most frequently articulated in terms of literary genre. A number of scholars readily identify prose, poetry, and drama as three traditional genres of literature (Lewis, 2004; Pelias & Shaffer, 2007; Yordon, 1999). However, contemporary oral interpretation and performance scholars have begun to recognize the many ways in which traditional literary genre distinctions fail to capture or easily categorize all the forms of literature that can convey intellectual, emotional, or artistic meaning. Gura and Lee (2010), for example, note that performers “choose from an almost unlimited range of material ... [including] autobiography, letters, diaries, oral history, interviews, personal narrative, ethnographic research, concrete poetry, blogs, and even conversation” (p. 11). In light of the many possibilities for source material in oral interpretation, Pelias and Shaffer (2007) argue that traditional genre distinctions “do not offer performers much help in their efforts to stage texts” (p. 69), effectively rendering traditional literary genres insufficient to distinguish performances of literature.

In response to this challenge, a number of proposed schemas to re-categorize such performances have been developed, both within and outside of the collegiate forensic community. For example, Pelias and Shaffer (2007) argue that classifications based on “the speaker’s relationship to the audience” offer a more useful scheme, and propose classifying oral interpretation into three new “modes” (p. 69). The “lyric” mode involves “an expression of an individual speaker’s private realization or discovery”; the dramatic mode entails “a shared conversation between two or more speakers” and its primary function is to enable an audience to “listen but not to enter into the conversation”; and the epic mode involves a performance which “unfolds as a story” where “a storyteller speaks directly to an audience ... constantly shifting from telling about an event to showing the private interactions between characters” (pp. 69-71). In the context of NFA, White (2010) suggested altering the oral interpretation events to feature the “primary narrative voice” of the text, including first-person interpretation, second/third-person interpretation, and dialogue interpretation (pp. 91-92).

These different categorizations of oral interpretation performances illustrate some of the limitations of traditional genre distinctions and the ongoing conversations between and among performance communities about how to best incorporate the rapid changes in types and access to literature. The diverse perspectives among the NFA community alone suggest the need for closer examination of our own conceptualizations of oral interpretation categories. In the following section, we detail how oral interpretation events have been discussed in our own literature and tournament procedures.

Shifting Genres in Forensic Competition

The distinctions between prose and drama, as they are conceived in the forensic literature and governing documents, are less pronounced than their similarities. Overall, prose is often framed as focusing on the narration of the piece. VerLinden (1987), for example, reported that prose literature is often “chosen because one character is delivering a monologue or two (or more) characters are engaged in dialogue” (p. 62). Similarly, Olson (1989) notes that prose literature “should be a selection or selections from a short story, novel, or other *prose material*” (p. 437, emphasis added). In contrast, forensic scholars

have defined drama as “a selection from a play, screenplay, or radio play” (Olson, 1989, p. 437). VerLinden (1987) notes that dramatic interpretation most typically involves presentations of “dramatic monologue or dialogue” (p. 62). Beyond these dated, surface-level distinctions *grounded in source material*, forensic scholarship has little to offer in terms of conceptual or performative differences between prose and dramatic interpretation.

In light of the scant theoretical or conceptual distinctions between prose and drama in the forensic literature, perhaps a better way to approach the differences between the two is to compare the event descriptions at the national tournament. Considering that most individual tournaments structure their rules with various national tournaments in mind, the bylaws for the NFA provide a framework for understanding how prose and drama are structured across the country.

As recently as 2002, drama interpretation was not offered at the NFA national tournament. Then, prose interpretation was described as “a selection or selections of prose material of literary merit, which could have been drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings or poetry are prohibited” (National Forensic Association, 2002, p. 1). In 2008, the NFA National Tournament introduced dramatic interpretation as an “experimental event” for a two-year period. Following this two-year trial period, dramatic interpretation was incorporated as a permanent offering at the tournament, and the 2012 NFA bylaws contain event descriptions for both prose and drama. Prose was defined as “a selection or selections of *prose material* of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings and poetry are prohibited” (National Forensic Association, 2012, p. 4, emphasis added). Dramatic interpretation was defined as a performance of “*dramatic literature*, humorous or serious, that represents one or more characters from material of literary merit” (National Forensic Association, 2012, p. 4, emphasis added). These early conceptualizations relied on simple distinctions between *source material*, broadly defined as “prose material” and “dramatic literature.”

In 2013, the NFA implemented new language into the bylaws that cemented the “story vs. character” distinction that permeates the activity today. According to the 2013 bylaws, prose was framed as “an interpretive performance designed to engage the audience through the development of a *story*,” (National Forensic Association, 2013, p. 3). The 2013 bylaws also stipulated appropriate *source material* for prose, noting “short stories, novels, essays, and story-centered new media” as appropriate for the event (p. 3). In contrast, the 2013 bylaws defined dramatic interpretation as “an interpretive performance designed to engage the audience through the development of *character(s) within a dramatic context*” (National Forensic Association, 2013, p. 4, emphasis added). The bylaws also stipulated appropriate source material for drama, noting that performances must draw from “plays, material written for stage/screen/radio, documentaries, and character(s)-centered new media” (p. 4). Finally, the 2013 bylaws explained that if chosen literature is “non-genre specific,” the material should focus on the “development of story” (for prose) or the “development of character(s)” (for drama). This language persists through every iteration of the NFA bylaws through 2016.

Problem Statement

The evolution of prose and drama as evidenced by the NFA bylaws indicates changing perceptions of the events over the years. It also illustrates the uncertainty that

exists in the community's understanding of genre, performance, and the ways in which source material can be distinguished. Today we find ourselves trying to navigate this uncertainty amid discourses that uphold a seemingly simple "story vs. character" distinction—a divide based on elements that, to varying degrees, should be evident in any performance of literature. Our review of existing scholarship and national guidelines demonstrates the tensions still evident in the NFA community over the differences between prose and drama.

The changing nature of competitive oral interpretation illustrates a kind of "identity crisis" in forensic competition. With loose ties to two distinct theoretical and pedagogical approaches—oral interpretation and performance studies—forensic performance seems to be evolving into a distinct approach to the aesthetic representation of literary texts. This evolution warrants closer scrutiny of the ways we distinguish our own events and the justifications for those distinctions. Though debates about the merits of each event in their current conceptualizations have been grounded in sound theoretical perspectives, the forensic community suffers from a dearth of empirical research on how the distinction between prose and drama is conceptualized in competition and how those distinctions are upheld, reinforced, or otherwise perpetuated through judges' feedback and enforcement of those distinctions. To remedy this dilemma, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: What criteria do judges use to distinguish between prose and drama in collegiate forensic competition?

This question inquires into how judges distinguish between prose and drama based on the kinds of comments they leave, and the frequency of those comments. Although this method is an imperfect way to uncover current performance paradigms, it remains useful for gauging how judges evaluate performances in both prose and drama. A comparison of those judging criteria should provide an interesting way to understand event distinctions. In the following section, we detail the methods we used to conduct the present study.

Methods

Content Analysis

We relied on traditional methods of content analysis, which attempt to "reduce the total content of a communication . . . to a set of categories that represent some characteristic of research interest" to generate a "systematic description of either verbal or nonverbal materials" (Singleton & Straits, 2010, p. 420). Treadwell (2017) explains that, at its most basic level, content analysis involves "assigning units of content to predetermined categories and then counting the number of units in each category" (p. 218). This approach to content analysis has been widely used in forensic research because of its utility in generating meaning from ballots (Jensen, 1997; Mills, 1991). However, rather than use a pre-existing coding scheme to analyze prose and drama ballots, we engaged in an inductive, iterative, or "grounded" approach to generate codes and categories based on the data (Charmaz, 2006). Such an inductive approach to content analysis was particularly useful to our goals, as it allowed us to "characterize communication and make intriguing comparisons" (Reinard, 2008, p. 169) between meaningful categories of data—in this case, prose and drama ballots.

Data Collection

We collected all data for this study at the 2014 NFA championship tournament held at Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti, Michigan. This tournament was chosen for a number of reasons. First, a tournament of this magnitude enabled us to collect a large amount of data in a short amount of time. Second, the tournament is somewhat representative of the collegiate forensic community as it draws roughly 80 teams from all over the country.

After securing approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the NFA Executive Council, the first author photocopied each preliminary round ballot for prose ($n = 1,712$) and drama ($n = 1,456$), resulting in a total sample size of 3,168 ballots. The first author created a transparency sheet to black out all identifying information for competitors and judges to ensure that all ballots were de-identified upon being copied. After the tournament, all ballots were scanned to PDF files, which were used in the analysis procedures later.

Sampling Procedures

To make comparisons between each event, the research team coded prose ballots and drama ballots independently of one another in a series of coding processes. To accomplish this, a subset of ballots for prose ($n = 35$) and drama ($n = 30$) were randomly assigned to each of the five researchers to use in initial coding, such that 175 prose ballots and 150 drama ballots were used to generate initial codes. After initial codes and categories were generated, the researchers coded another randomly selected sample of prose ballots ($n = 50$) and drama ballots ($n = 50$) together, to ensure we were coding consistently. Finally, each researcher coded a third randomly assigned subset of prose ballots ($n = 35$) and drama ballots ($n = 30$). In this final stage of coding, a total of 175 prose ballots and 150 drama ballots were assigned among the research team. This final round of coding resulted in the analysis presented in this article; any coding we conducted for preliminary analysis and coding consistency is not included. After removing ballots from this final subset that were entirely unreadable, the researchers coded a total of 164 prose ballots (9.57% of the total ballots available) containing 931 legible comments and 139 drama ballots (9.55% of the total ballots available) containing 779 legible comments.

Analysis

We began by designating our unit of analysis as a complete sentence or comment. In cases where judges clearly delineated a “comment” with a bullet point, we treated that entire comment as one incident. In cases where ballots were written in long-form paragraphs without clear distinction between ideas, we treated each *sentence* as its own incident.

We then engaged in “initial coding,” which Charmaz (2006) describes as “provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data” (p. 48). In this stage, each researcher analyzed a randomly assigned set of ballots to generate as many codes as possible, labeling each unit of analysis with a provisional code that defined the nature of the comment. After this stage of initial coding, the research team came together to discuss the codes we assigned and synthesize those codes into categories. In this “secondary-cycle coding,” we worked together to “organize, synthesize, and categorize [codes] into interpretive concepts” (Tracy, 2013, p. 194). Once we sorted our initial codes into categories, all

researchers coded the same set of 50 randomly assigned ballots from each event together to ensure we were consistent in our coding. We discussed differences in codes, resolved disagreements or uncertainties about our coding practices, and finalized our coding schemes for each event. We then engaged in a process of final coding, using our set coding schemes to count the number of recurrences for each comment in new sets of randomly assigned ballots. The findings of this project are based on this final round of coding.

Results

Our research question asked, “What criteria do judges use to distinguish between prose and drama in collegiate forensic competition?” This question is best answered by comparing the coding schemes for prose and drama generated by our analysis. These coding schemes illustrate the overall judging themes for each event, and the specific criteria for each of those themes. Initially, our analysis of prose ballots produced the following themes: commentary, affect, general delivery, characterization, literature, physical/blocking, introductions, and prose vs. drama. (Table 1 provides a list of these themes, their frequencies, and the percentage of total comments comprised by each theme.)

- We defined *commentary* as any comment not directly suggesting, critiquing, or evaluating the performance (e.g., “Love your suit” or “tough round”).
- *Affect* referred to the emotional effect produced by the performer. Examples of specific judging criteria for affect in prose included judges commenting on the performer’s emotional depth (e.g., “this kid has demons/sadness but I’m not hearing it”), the “build” or climax development of the performance (e.g., “the tone of your piece is all at one level, not much variation in emotion”), and whether the affective characteristics were believable or felt authentic (e.g., “I feel sometimes like the emotion gets forced here”).
- *General delivery* was used to categorize any comments pertaining to delivery in a general sense. These criteria, which included such examples as presence, use of pauses, vocal patterns, enunciation, or volume, were delivery comments unrelated to specific characterizations or selection-specific performance choices (e.g., “come forward towards the audience just a tad”; “make sure your quiet parts are able to be heard”).
- We defined *characterization* as an expectation for performers to create believable and compelling character portrayals, including keeping multiple characters distinct from one another (e.g., “make sure your narrator & father don’t blur together”), committing to the established character portrayal (e.g., “I think you need more embodiment for [character]), and the believability of that character portrayal (e.g., “the father figure is convincing”).
- Comments pertaining to *literature* referred to the cutting, flow, selection, or uniqueness of the story (e.g., “abrupt ending”; “parts of the cutting feel like they flow together great”).
- *Physical/blocking* referred to comments based on gestures, movements, or the visualization of certain “stage” elements of the performance (e.g., “focal points are really lovely”; “what is her friend doing with her hand?”).

- Any comments critiquing the interest level, argumentativeness, or appropriateness of an introduction or teaser were categorized under *introductions* (e.g., “solid teaser”; “I was left wanting more from that intro”).
- Finally, *prose vs. drama* was used to capture any comments questioning the “fit” of a performance in the event (e.g., “I think this would be a better DI”).

Our analysis of drama ballots produced a remarkably similar set of themes: *commentary*, *characterization*, *affect*, *general delivery*, *literature*, *physical/blocking*, *introductions*, *environment*, and *prose vs. drama*. (Table 2 provides a list of these themes, their frequencies, and the percentage of total comments comprised by each theme.)

- Similar to the themes for prose, *commentary* referred to any comment lacking substantive suggestions or references to the performance itself (e.g., “you’ve got such a great smile”; “what a fab voice you have!”).
- We categorized comments as *characterization* if they related to establishing or maintaining clear, consistent, believable, and compelling characters (e.g., “I think you gotta push the diff. characterizations”; “character transformation is excellent”).
- *Affect* again referred to the performer’s production of an emotional effect, including “authentic” displays of emotion, emotional depth, climax development, or emotional flow (e.g., “feels almost melodramatic”; “thank you for the emotional development”).
- *General delivery* also emerged as an important theme, again referring to comments about delivery in a more general (not event-specific) sense (e.g., “you tend to upspeak, it’s awkward”; “watch rushing over your sentences”).
- *Literature* emerged as a category for comments pertaining to the effectiveness of a selection, cutting, or teaser, or the choice of interesting or “fresh” texts (e.g., “this cutting is a bit choppy”; “interesting lit choice”).
- *Physical/blocking* again referred to comments about gestures, movements, and other small physical performance choices specific to a particular selection (e.g., “that doorknob is set awfully high off the ground”; “some of the movement isn’t needed”).
- *Introductions* emerged as a category for comments regarding the interest level of an introduction or a performer’s illustration of their “own” speaking style in contrast to the character(s) (e.g., “your argument is too straight-forward”; “need to see stronger links to the intro argument”).
- Unique to drama was the theme *environment*, which involved comments about the performer’s ability to create a sense of unique “staging” or “setting” for the performance, helping the audience visualize that setting through the performer’s interaction with the space, and defining “who” the audience is (e.g., “really created the world”; “the placement of the tree keeps changing”).
- Finally, *prose vs. drama* again referred to comments about the appropriateness of that selection for the event (e.g., “I need more of this in DI”; “DI is a very different animal than prose, and this needs more rawness”).

Our analysis suggests that prose and drama are judged in remarkably similar ways. After removing those themes that were not event-specific (i.e., *commentary* and *general delivery*, which do not speak to substantive differences in performing prose or drama), the

two coding schemes shared the same two most frequent set of judging comments. *Affect* and *characterization* accounted for 33.84% of the comments we observed in prose ballots and 35.21% of the comments we observed in drama ballots. These similarities seem to undermine a commonly held belief in the forensic community that prose and drama are sufficiently distinct performance categories. To the extent that we accept the role judges play in enforcing performance expectations and shaping the performance categories, the absence of substantial differences in judges' comments suggests that prose and drama are similar enough to question why they remain distinct events.

Discussion

Despite subtle differences in judging criteria and frequencies of those criteria, our findings suggest that prose and drama performances are being judged in remarkably similar ways. These similarities suggest several implications for the conceptualization and evaluation of prose and dramatic interpretation in collegiate speech competition.

First, the forensic community might benefit from more deliberate efforts to ensure that judges evaluate events based on established event descriptions. Our earlier review of literature traced the development of prose and drama through the NFA bylaws, ending with our current distinction based on the “development of story” (for prose) or the “development of character(s)” (for drama). Although this distinction is easily embraced and articulated by coaches and judges in conversation, the judging criteria that emerged from our analysis illustrate some inconsistency with this conceptual distinction. Comments present in both events stray away from the standards illustrated by the NFA bylaws: for example, codes synthesized from prose ballots do not directly refer to audience engagement through story development whatsoever. From our analysis, the closest approximation to “story” codes were categorized under the *literature* theme, including literature cutting or flow, literature selection, and literature uniqueness—none of which fully convey the overarching purpose of the event as it is conceptualized in the bylaws. Additionally, comments pertaining to this *literature* theme appeared in relatively equal proportions in both prose and drama ballots, further blurring the “story vs. character” distinction we might have expected to see. Similarly, both prose and drama appear to rely heavily on “characterization” as a judging criterion, a characteristic emphasized only in the description for dramatic interpretation. The issue, then, is that even with this supposedly clear “story vs. character” distinction, both events appear to *not* be judged based on that distinction. The event conceptualizations are plainly presented in the bylaws, and judges presumably understand what each event should encompass—but this distinction is not articulated on their ballots. By judging the two events so similarly, the justification and relevance for each event becomes less transparent.

A related concern is whether the comments left on ballots—particularly those comments that help distinguish events like prose and drama—actually correlate with the ranks assigned in the round. Because ranks, speaker points, and other identifying markers on the ballots collected for our study were removed to ensure anonymity, we were unable to assess this connection in the present study. However, considering our activity is rooted in competition, it is important to question whether judges are rewarding performances that adhere to event descriptions through their assigned ranks in addition to specific judging comments. Such considerations could help us determine whether we reinforce event

distinctions in conversation, but award higher ranks for individual performances irrespective of the frameworks provided for each event by our national organizations.

Arguably, if our conceptualizations of each event are sufficiently distinct, then perhaps the “solution” to the prose and drama identity crisis is to think of methods to help our judges evaluate the events more closely based on the rule distinctions from the bylaws. Such a solution is, of course, somewhat contingent upon providing sufficient training or orientation to judges, including judges without forensic background and former forensic competitors who continue their forensic participation as new coaches or judges. Additionally, we encourage current coaches and judges to question their own understandings of prose and dramatic interpretation, to ensure we are all “judging on good communication practice and with a pedagogical emphasis” (Outzen, Youngvorst, & Cronn-Mills, 2013, p. 42). To the extent that our national organizations set event descriptions to achieve strategic competitive and pedagogical outcomes, it is increasingly imperative that our coaches and judges align their own evaluative paradigms to uphold those outcomes through the ballot.

Second, we would be remiss to not question the similarities in prose and drama evident in our findings and consider whether the two events do serve distinct pedagogical goals. Our findings suggest that prose and dramatic interpretation are both overwhelmingly judged based on how performers create a compelling character presence, and how they establish some kind of emotional effect—both in terms of creating an affective environment for the audience, and in conveying proper emotional depth for the character(s) represented in the performance. In both prose and drama, *affect* and *characterization* were the two most common criteria with which judges were concerned. On the surface, this emphasis on embodying emotion seems incredibly relevant to both events. Bodkin and Gaddis (2016) argue, “Speech teaches us empathy for fellow humans of the world: fathers of dead children, alcoholic mothers, teenagers on the brink of coming out, and so on” (p. 43). As Bodkin and Gaddis suggest, creating and portraying empathy is a significant pedagogical skill competitors gain from oral interpretation events, and is directly related to emotion and characterization. The problem with relying so heavily on the performance of empathy or emotion as a judging criterion stems from the fact that empathy is not genre-specific and is a goal of oral interpretation *as a whole*. If judging criteria for prose and drama both emphasize the evocation of emotion to the detriment of more clearly distinguished, event-specific criteria, it becomes difficult to assess how prose and drama teach students sufficiently distinct skills. This issue ultimately warrants a reconsideration of the judging criteria being utilized in forensics to evaluate the effectiveness of prose interpretation and dramatic interpretation.

These considerations lead to our final conclusion: our findings create an opportunity to (re)open conversations about re-categorizing the interpretation events. With the current conceptualizations of prose and drama being evaluated so similarly, it is worthwhile to (re)consider the elimination of prose and drama based on genre or “story vs. character” distinctions. An alternative approach might involve collapsing the existing prose and drama events into a single interpretation category, which is favored by coaches and competitors already disgruntled by the disproportionate number of interpretation events compared to public address events.

Another approach might instead pursue a reclassification of interpretation events based on some other, more clearly delineated set of criteria. White (2010) first proposed

re-categorizing the interpretation events based on “the primary narrative voice (point of view) used in the text, rather than the text’s assumed genre” (p. 91). The proposal involved distinguishing events into first-person interpretation, second and/or third-person interpretation, and dialogue interpretation in addition to the existing poetry, duo, and POI events. In 2013, the NFA Executive Committee proposed a different reclassification of the oral interpretation events based on the number of “voices” in the selection, doing away with the traditional genre distinction and instead emphasizing “how the performer interacted with their texts in preparation to performance” (unpublished proposal, p. 2). Focusing on voice characterization allows for the performance of multiple literature selections with consistent voice, while eliminating the confusion surrounding the distinction between prosaic and dramatic literature. Ultimately, neither of these proposals were accepted, and the current “story vs. character” trope was embraced and codified by the NFA membership instead. Our findings, however, illustrate the limitations of that distinction in that prose and drama are not being judged based on those qualities.

The significance of this problem depends on the community’s approach to forensic competition. If we wish to solidify our position as a purely competitive activity, then the problem of having two remarkably similar events might not be a problem at all—just another opportunity for students to compete and put their skills to practice. If, however, we wish to maintain our standing as a co-curricular activity and continue aligning our competitive practices with our self-reported pedagogical goals, the best course of action is for us to more seriously consider reclassifying the oral interpretation events based on clearer, more concrete performative accomplishments. The argument for reclassification is not an attempt to completely erase the traditional constructs of prose and drama, but to continue refining what we do to best realize our activity’s potential as a co-curricular activity. By establishing (more) distinct events grounded in sound(er) theoretical and pedagogical choices, we can ensure that our students take as much as possible from their participation in forensics, both competitively and educationally.

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Tables

Table 1

Themes, Frequencies, and Proportions for Prose Ballots

Theme	Frequency	% of Total Comments
Commentary	225	24.17
Affect	195	20.95
General delivery	168	18.05
Characterization	120	12.89
Literature	85	9.13
Physical/blocking	69	7.41
Introductions	60	6.44
Prose vs. drama	9	.97
Total comments	931	100%

Table 2

Themes, Frequencies, and Proportions for Drama Ballots

Theme	Frequency	% of Total Comments
Commentary	177	24.93
Characterization	140	19.72
Affect	110	15.49
General Delivery	99	13.94
Literature	77	10.85
Physical/blocking	40	5.63
Introductions	36	5.07
Environment	26	3.66
Prose vs. drama	5	.70
Total comments	710	100%