

## Breaking the Formula: Integrating Performance Studies into Interpretation Preparation

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### Abstract

Forensic educators and students spend much of their time trying to perfect a new definition of “good performance” without appreciating said performance or participating in the exchange process. While many studies have examined the most common interpretation ballot comments, the results and suggestions of those studies have not changed how students perform interpretation. This is where performance studies research may come into play. The author proposes ways to incorporate performance studies research into interpretation event practice and performance. Additionally, the author also suggests several new coaching techniques to bring an educational appreciation for interpretation performances.

### Introduction

A good performance, much like the Supreme Court’s ruling on obscenity, is difficult to define – you just know it when you see it. Aesthetically, performances are meant to examine human discourse – the exchange of ideas between the interpreter and audience (Pelias & VanOosting, 1987). In forensics, we spend much of our coaching and judging time trying to perfect a new definition of “good performance” without appreciating said performance or participating in the exchange process. I am inclined to agree with Perlich (1999) when he writes, “Unfortunately, many coaches, competitors, and scholars practice intercollegiate forensics pedagogy with seemingly little concern for a greater understanding of what it is that we do” (p. 2).

Interpretation event guidelines provide little in the way of performance requirements upon which we can all agree. Thus, constant adaptation to incoming ballots and future judges in multiple locations has thrown off our focus on performance. It is my position the forensic community must return interpretation practices to a focus on creating the best performance and not on all encompassing tournament adaptation. The purpose of this essay is to examine some of the forensic research related to interpretation, reveal how performance studies research can help, and explore forensics-specific strategies to get us back on track.

Interpretation events are much more difficult to critique than platform events; there are no sources to examine, no clear cut solutions, no perfectly timed transition walks. Therefore, creating a uniform way to analyze interpretation performances is near impossible. Many researchers have spent countless hours poring over ballots, searching for common ideals or judging philosophies. Mills (1991) identified 19 unique ballot comments, Jensen (1997) found 25 different comment types, Klosa and DuBois (2001) tried to narrow down the list to the top five comment types per category, and Elmer and Van Horn (2003) identified dozens of key

words appearing in five distinct categories. Each study focusing on interpretation events only, each well researched, each providing excellent discussion for future competitors and coaches, each seemingly ignored by most programs.

One of the major themes which appeared in both Mills (1991) and Klosa and DuBois’ (2001) analysis was the material presented by the competitor. Comments focused on the proper selection of literature for the event or the activity. These comments, while probably well meaning, subtract from the analysis of the performance at hand. Does the comment “As a monologue, this is inherently less challenging than something interactive” (Klosa & DuBois, 2001, p. 8), critique the performance just observed? I would contend not.

Because judging criteria is so subjective and personal, our judging pools need to learn more about what they are actually judging. Not to create a uniform system to rank students, but to understand the performance and critique the speaker. Morris (2005) defines three unhealthy comments used by judges who evaluate the competitor versus critiquing the performance: how the event should be done, personal comments, and forensics history. These comment types, each of which appear in the above research, do little to help the student evolve as an interpreter.

This is not to say we should throw out all our personal standards in place of a checklist of accomplished goals in a speech; part of what makes forensic speaking so important is the unique insight each observer provides. But, using these insights to choose literature which “...would meet the expectations of judges in these events” (Klosa & DuBois, 2001, p. 8), may not be the answer. I do not wish to get into the dichotomy between competition and education, because I truly believe we can have a healthy mix of both. Many different strategies can be pulled from performance studies research which will both refocus interpretation events on the performance and provide judges with new types of ballot comments.

Too often a divide exists between what we teach students about interpretation and what we actually value in the round. This split leads to a formulaic approach to interpretation, wherein students lose the inherent value of interpretation in favor of what wins ballots. Allison and Mitchell (1994) identify two forms of assessment: summative and formative. Summative assessment is what we explicitly use when judging students in rounds; it is the rank, the rate, the time, and the most common ballot comments. These elements are essential to the process of the activity. However, if we combine summative assessment with formative assessment, which are items we value, but do not explicitly

use on ballots, our comments may become more well rounded. Formative assessment may even take place outside of the round, in the form of informal conversation between judge and competitor. While the rank may already be tabbed, further focus on the performance does not stop between rounds.

Judge adaptation and training only gets us so far, much of the responsibility of creating a better performance lies with the coaches and students. I have often judged and coached students who do not completely understand the literature and/or characters they are trying to interpret; performance studies research can help here too. Students should attempt a 3-part writing process which will, hopefully, increase the student's understanding of the literature. Bowman and Kistenberg (1992) outline three types of original texts the student should write: *within*, *upon*, and *against*. Bowman and Kistenberg (1992) explain,

The first text should work *within* the terms of the original text, that is, it should focus on what is named in the text and on the story's own narrative or cultural logic. The second text should work *upon* the original, that is, it should try to "thematize" the story or connect it with some larger social issue or cultural myth. The third text should operate *against* the original, that is, it should judge or evaluate the story's logic and its themes from the perspective of the student's own collectively-defined system of values. (p. 293)

Once students build upon their understanding of the literature they are attempting to interpret, it is important they, and their coaches, continue to evaluate the performance. Not to say this sort of evaluation does not already take place in coaching sessions every day, but Long (1991) provides a formal approach to evaluation. We should follow the five practices of continued evaluation: self-appraisals, individual responses, implicit endorsements, casual judgments, and institutionalized forms of evaluation.

Self-appraisals are common in forensics, and almost subconscious by a competitor; knowing if a performance went well or poorly, understanding if a character stood out as it should, or analyzing how it felt, just to name a few. Individual responses take place when students observe other speeches, categories, or activities – these observations add to a student's understanding of performance. Implicit evaluations involve expanding the performances to outside your average tournament. To my knowledge, interpretation events are rarely, if ever, recorded at tournaments. While mostly due to rights and royalty regulations, these performances should be shared with the outside world. Perhaps more public showcases would help forensics spread past the average empty college campus.

Casual judgments take place quite often at tournaments, but could occur even more – discuss performances with other students, coaches, or judges. These discussions create con-

tinued discourse about the activity and lead to positive changes. The final evaluation technique outlined by Long (1991) needs little description – institutionalized forms are the ballots we write and receive each week. These various forms of evaluation not only help students and coaches create better performances, but help forensics expand its ground.

Bowman and Kistenberg (1992) also believe students should debrief after each performance, allowing for further growth as an interpreter. When possible, students should immediately write down their thoughts and feelings about their just completed performance; a performance journal, so to speak. These journals would go in tandem with the ballots from each round, leading to a deeper understanding of both the ballot comments and the performance. Coaching is a two-way street; therefore coaches should incorporate student performance journals with their own coaching journals/sessions and allow students to develop as performers.

Performance studies also reminds us of two important lessons; acting and interpreting are different and all critiques are contextual. A fine line exists between the actor and the interpreter. So fine, the line is usually quite blurry for both competitors and judges, but a line nonetheless. Actors have the means to fully become each character, costuming, lighting, props, sets – these all allow the actor to recreate a piece of literature. The interpreter, however, has fewer means than the actor, but maintains the ability to become a character just as efficiently as the actor (Frederickson, 1983). Just as a United Nations interpreter takes one language and attempts to make another understand what has been said, the forensics interpreter takes a piece of literature and attempts to make an audience understand what the literature means.

Scholars such as Koeppel and Morman (1991) and Glauner (1992) have argued for a more message-based system of interpretation, performances which have an argument. Introductions provide a great means of addressing the significance behind literature – but we should not rely on an argument to win a round. Messages are important, they set us apart from most actors, but a healthy balance of argumentation and embracing the total performance will lead to better interpreters.

We should also remember an audience's interest in any performance is highly contextual (Long, 1991). All the preparation and practice in the world cannot account for the subjective nature of the activity. Students and coaches alike should remember this when analyzing ballots and scores – sometimes the cards just fall as they do and nothing can change them. Incorporating performance studies techniques into forensics is a great step, but there are also other strategies we, as forensic educators, can take to help students become better performers.

To reference the realm of college football, coaches may try "red shirting" new interpreters. Not to say we should pro-

hibit new members from competing in favor of saving a year of eligibility; but to focus these students on learning performance techniques and gaining experience over winning ballots. I am reminded of a student who performed a piece which completely bombed competitively. This piece was not good for competition and the student could not embrace the character. However, it was a perfect “learning piece” for the student; examining who the character was, what the story was about, and identifying the message. I believe by continuing to perform this piece throughout the majority of the season the student evolved as an interpreter. Results pay out over time with these students, not only will they understand what a good performance is, but their scores will naturally improve.

Competitors should also have the opportunity to judge others while maintaining eligibility for future competition. While competing in college forensics, I remember gaining quite a bit of insight into what judges are looking for when I was able to judge high school speech competitions. Reaching out to the high school speech community is one important way to learn about judging, but it may not be available to every student. I suggest an experimental tournament for collegiate competitors, one where students are the judges. The tournament would be for novices – first and second year competitors only; but with third and fourth year competitors acting as the judges. While such a tournament would likely not count for any sort of national tournament qualification system, it would provide a new opportunity for students to learn about the judging process.

Finally, we as forensic educators must let students fail. Failure is an important aspect of evolution, often when we learn the most. We must not be afraid to simply let competitors go down in flames – no hand holding or cursing the “dumb judge”, let the students learn. If we always pick them back up after they fall, they will never learn to get up themselves. Forensics is not a simple activity—we cannot determine a winner by counting the number of baskets made in 60 minutes; and we should pride ourselves on this fact. Each performance is different and should be appreciated as such. If we can attempt to implement some of the strategies listed above, not only will our students become better performers, and not only will our judges and ballots become a stronger form of criticism, but our activity will truly value performance. Something we can all agree on – when we see it.

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