

## So Much Drama In Support of a Shift from Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation

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### Abstract

Dramatic Duo has become a poster child for the forensics world, appealing to crowds both in and out of the community, while providing its participants with challenges and opportunities not found in other interpretive events. However, the current event description contains ideas that might be viewed as contradictory, valuing interpretation over acting, yet limiting students to dramatic sources of literature (stage, screen, and radio). This paper proposes a change from Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation, allowing material of any genre to be used in competition. Implications of both a pedagogical and competitive nature will be explored. This paper does not criticize current performance-based duo trends; rather, it seeks to build on them by providing a broader range of texts for duo competitors.

### Introduction

In 2006, the Minnesota State High School League (MSHSL) changed one of its competitive speaking categories from Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation. A petty amendment to the casual observer, this shift in semantics highlights a major modification to the event as a whole, a transformation which removes the obligatory “drama” from duo and replaces it with a more encompassing, less theatrical focus on interpretation. More specifically, the former event description limited competitors to published plays, whereas the current MSHSL Speech Rules & Policies Manual defines Duo Interpretation as “two students interpreting together one or more selections from a single published source or a single anthology of prose, poetry, and/or dramatic literature serious and/or humorous, with literary merit and appropriate to the readers.” As one might expect, this change did not come without opposition; however, it quickly became evident that those who embraced the new possibilities of the category enjoyed creative freedoms that had previously been stifled by a lack of access to suitable literature. The shift opened an entire library of fresh literature for duo teams, allowing competitors and coaches to focus on the interpretation of quality material not limited by the narrow production of workable play scripts.

The MSHSL’s decision falls in line with the National Forensic League’s (NFL) event description for Duo Interpretation which allows cuttings from novels, short stories, plays, poetry, and any other

printed-published materials. Despite this, Dramatic Duo at the college level remains limited to cuttings “from a play or plays of literary merit.” This comparison demands our careful consideration as we seek to answer the following question: is duo ready for a similar facelift on the college speech circuit?

This paper proposes that the American Forensic Association and National Forensic Association follow in the footsteps of the MSHSL and NFL by changing Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation to allow material of any genre to be used in competition. I will seek to justify this modification by looking at the broader construct of oral interpretation and how it relates specifically to duo, before covering three general areas of concern: goal of performer, role of coach, and task of judge. In other words, the subject will be examined in terms of personal, educational, and competitive growth—three values at the heart of forensic involvement. This paper will draw from available literature in order to explore the implications this change would most likely have at each respective level. It is worth noting in advance that this paper does not want to criticize current performance-based duo trends; rather, it seeks to build on this progress by providing a broader range of vehicles for competitors to take on the road to the same destination.

### Related Literature

Before opening new libraries of literature to duo competitors, it is important to better understand the principles behind this push. The simple fact that Duo Interpretation is not limited to a single genre on the national high school circuit is noteworthy, but inadequate as justification for a change at the college level. Therefore, we must explore some of the theoretical building blocks which form the foundation for this argument.

### Oral Interpretation

At its core, this issue comes down to oral interpretation and the goals of the discipline. Rossi and Goodnow (2006) explain that “as one of the largest venues for the performance of oral interpretation, forensics competition has a huge influence on how oral interpretation is defined and perceived as an art form” (p. 57). Thus, it is with great care that we must approach this subject because the paths we choose as forensic scholars go well beyond our field of study. There is considerable concern, both in and out of

forensics (VerLinden, 1987), about the current state of oral interpretation as an art form. Some argue that the demands of competitive forensics are beginning to value performance over text, a practice that takes away from the uniqueness of oral interpretation while potentially limiting the educational value of the activity as a whole (Rossi & Goodnow, 2006). Endres (1988) observes that “the quality of the literature itself is a consideration, [but] the primary focus is not on ‘what the literature is,’ but rather, ‘how well is that literature conveyed’” (p. 106).

Yet, the everybody’s doing it approach falls flat when looking to even earlier research expressing the true essence of oral interpretation. Geisler (1985) explains that the primary focus should be on the literature being performed since it is through an interpreter’s performance that a text is brought to life for others. The text, then, exists first and must be re-created through interpretation. In this way, discourse is established from the inside-out, with the chosen literature serving as the respective core. “The text is significant—not the interpreter—since text is both sender and message/meaning” (Geisler, p. 8).

Swarts (1988) argues that the true value of interpretation rests on its ability to communicate an idea, to share meaning or provide insight. Rossi and Goodnow (2006) emphasize the need for interpreters to be aware of the form and content of the literature they are performing. We must not neglect the rhetorical aspect of interpretation because it is essential to both the pedagogical experience and the basic nature of the art. Swarts (1988) offers the following insight on the subject:

There is much to be gained from the oral interpretation experience when the goals are substantively oriented, and the components of the performance reflect that substantive orientation. When a total communication experience is the goal of the interpretation, then such concerns as why *this* literature has been chosen, why it is worth sharing, and what the interpreter hopes to accomplish by the presentation of the literature, can be established in the minds of the audience. (p. 41)

The ability to analyze literature is one of the key skills offered by traditional oral interpretation, and serves as an example of what Rossi and Goodnow (2006) would describe as the pedagogical goals of teaching interpretation. Interpreters should understand the value of text, what they bring to the text, and how their performance relates that text to an audience. They believe the current focus on technical elements of performance goes beyond simple artistic evolution, arguing that while art can be appreciated in many forms, traditional oral interpretation offers performers unique opportunities to share their own voices. There are a number of communicative venues

in which individuals would find performance opportunities, and while oral interpretation should not completely discount its performative nature, it should strive to hold on to the qualities that make it a one of a kind activity. “The opportunity to combine those performance skills with literary analysis, personal reflection, artistic creation, and public speaking is almost solely the realm of traditional oral interpretation” (Rossi & Goodnow, 2006, p. 56).

### **Duo**

Little pedagogical justification exists in support of duo as its own interpretive category; at best, it seems to lie somewhere on a spectrum between readers theatre and solo interpretation (Klope, 1986). While duo is unique on the competitive forensic circuit in that it is the only event requiring more than one performer, the fact remains that presently, as in the past, “duo is an art form without an explanation” (Klope, p. 1). This lack of definition has allowed duo competitors to use their imaginations in creating powerful, unique, and memorable performances of great range. One cannot watch a final round at a national tournament without noticing the wide variety of pieces present, all of which have been deemed “good enough” to reach the pinnacle of forensic accomplishment. In fact, without knowledge of the current regulations, many may find it difficult to identify which genre of literature is even being performed at a given time.

One need look no further than the AFA individual event descriptions, all 11 of which fit conveniently on one sheet of paper, to see that the guidelines offered for college forensic competitors are intentionally vague. For the category of Dramatic Duo, the following description appears:

A cutting from a play or plays of literary merit, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. The material may be drawn from stage, screen, or radio. This is not an acting event; thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc., are to be used. Presentation is from the manuscript and the focus should be off-stage and not to each other. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction. (AFA-NIET 2006-2007 Description of Events)

Despite the previously discussed focus on text in oral interpretation, the above event description offers only two sentences regarding literature selection. The same amount of writing is dedicated to reminding competitors that this is strictly an oral interpretation event, as opposed to staged acting. A fair question one might ask at this point is, “Why does the event only permit the use of scripts written for stage, screen, and radio (the first two being strict examples of acting) in seeking to promote the ideals

of oral interpretation?” This question lies at the heart of the issue, and will leak through nearly every page of this paper.

Klope (1986) speaks of virtual space in interpretation, noting that in duo, the creation of such space is based on language action rather than description. In other words, the context of the performance is based upon interaction, which typically comes through dialogue and character relations. Since most plays and films consist almost exclusively of such interaction, the demand for dialogue would seem to provide one possible answer to the question posed in the preceding paragraph. We must note, however, that dialogue is not exclusive to works of a dramatic nature. Furthermore, despite the implied necessity of dialogue in duo interpretation, research also seeks to remind us that “precise boundaries cannot and should not be formed if artistic independence is to be maintained” (Klope, p. 11).

Artistic independence seems to be a key issue in forensic pedagogy, as it demands an originality that can only be accomplished through critical thinking. This ideal seems to be in line with what many forensic educators are striving for (Rice, 1991), a system in which the performer supports critical claims through performance and in doing so, demonstrates a process in which text is of primary importance (Verlinden, 1987).

### Reflection

Since so little has been written about the current state of Dramatic Duo on the college circuit, the most relevant assessment we have to work with must come from personal accounts. My experiences are by no means exhaustive; in fact, they are relatively limited as I have only been involved with college forensics for five years. However, I feel my observations offer a fair amount of insight relevant to the subject at hand, and currently unavailable in scholarly form.

### Dramatic Duo

In my four years of undergraduate eligibility, I competed with five different duo partners, experiencing varying levels of success. Moreover, I have been privileged to watch numerous out-rounds of Dramatic Duo at the national level, including three AFA-NIET final rounds. This is significant because from a pedagogical standpoint, one would like to believe that these performances would best represent the ideals established for the specific category. Yet, rather than noticing concrete standards that are valued across the board, I have been most struck by the diversity of duo performances found at this highest level of competition.

Recent trends have seemed to favor performances that “step out of the box,” leading to pieces and programs of literature that include narration, voiceover, poetic device, and even third-person point

of view. All of these qualities have been evident in each of the three final rounds I have experienced, leading me to believe that Dramatic Duo either a) does not yet know what it wants to be, or b) truly values diversity among performances, appreciating quality communication in a multitude of forms. As a forensic educator, I would prefer to believe the latter.

The fact remains that each of these scripts have presumably come from dramatic sources—namely, they were written for radio, film, or stage. Despite this commonality, however, the performances in these final rounds had very little in common. Currently, this appears to be the trend in Dramatic Duo, where a majority of judges seem to reward competitors who take advantage of the creative liberties offered by the very nature of this partnered event. Nevertheless, the rules still limit duo interpreters to a single genre of literature. The bounds of this interpretive outlet are being pushed, and if we as audience members are unable to tell that a particular script is clearly from a play, then whether it is or not becomes irrelevant.

### Literature Demands

In striving to incorporate both the traditional expectation of a script from a dramatic source and the more modern demand for unique and stylized performance, many competitors find themselves at a loss. Finding scripts for any category is rarely easy. In my experience as both a competitor and coach, as well as through my interactions with others on the circuit, I have come to the conclusion that typically, the search for quality performable literature is even more daunting when it comes to duo. Finding new play scripts that are suitable for two performers can be a tedious and often disappointing process, as such resources are expensive or difficult to come by.

Furthermore, unwritten rules on the college circuit prevent pieces from being reused, as many judges seem to discourage this form of recycling. On one hand, we are told that judges value performance over text. While this is a novel concept, many would disagree; the simple mention of Poe or Durang in a judges’ lounge will likely prove this point. Even with less familiar authors and pieces, the “sorry, but I’ve seen this before” judging mentality is prevalent and does not seem to be disappearing any time soon (Billings, 2002).

From a judging perspective, Skinner (1986) explains that it is difficult to evaluate a performance if you have already seen the piece done exceptionally well by someone else. He continues by suggesting that “coaches have an obligation to expand materials in their files and to force students to select their material by themselves” (Skinner, p. 56). While it is easy to nod along with these ideals, experience offers us two separate critiques of this advice. First, while coaches should always be on the lookout for good

literature, it can be frustrating in an environment where everyone is searching for material published within the past several months. There is bound to be overlap, and the race to “stake claim” to a particular piece before someone else does can create unnecessary conflict. Second, many would argue that finding pieces for competition should be primarily up to the student. The “sorry, but I’ve seen this before” issue is complicated when coupled with the expectation that students find their own material. Since a college competitor has been competing on the circuit for a maximum of three years when looking for material, how are they to know which pieces have and have not been performed outside of that time frame?

The fear of performing a piece that has already been done is amplified in categories which rely solely on literature from the stage, screen, or radio; the less material available for exploration, the greater the odds of accidental reuse. Most libraries have a relatively limited number of “new” plays on the shelves, which is appropriate since very few venues outside of forensics place much importance on how recently a script was published. In the classroom setting, for instance, emphasis is typically placed on “standards”—pieces that have stood the test of time (i.e. Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*) or been lauded for social impact (i.e. Kushner’s *Angels in America*).

While the advent of inter-library loan (ILL) has given an edge to the true library searchers, the quantity of available literature still struggles to meet demands. Guessing which scripts to request from ILL or order from popular online sources based on brief synopses demands large amounts of both time and money, two of the most precious resources allotted to forensic teams. More alarming from a pedagogical standpoint is that these factors often take the search out of student hands, wasting a valuable portion of the learning process associated with interpretation events and disadvantaging those students with limited resources at either a team or personal level. While the search for new literature can be an exciting and valuable part of oral interpretation, it can also lead to excessive out-of-pocket expenses, burnout, or “settling” on pieces that the performers themselves do not even enjoy. It puts the focus on the piece, rather than on the text and subtext conveyed through an individual’s interpretation.

At this rate, it is not difficult to see why so many competitors choose to run original material, another point of consideration resulting from the current norms and event description for duo at the college level. Billings (2003) found the most common reason students write their own pieces is to avoid the complaint that it has been done before. While the event guidelines do not explicitly prohibit the use of “home writes”—scripts written by coaches, friends, alumni, or the competitors themselves—or other unpublished materials, general consensus on the circuit seems to disapprove of such scripts, as evidenced by

the common use of pen names and the occasional “tanking” of students who admittedly write one or more of the pieces for their performance. The resulting “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach makes it difficult to estimate the number of competitors running literature that would fall under this heading; however, it seems likely that a majority of coaches and competitors have seen such pieces at one time or another, even at the highest levels of competition.

While some would argue that the performance of home written material in competition is unethical, the unspoken demand for fresh scripts makes it easy to see why so many competitors choose to take matters into their own hands by writing pieces that not only fit their particular abilities and recent competitive trends, but that have most certainly never been seen in competition. Endres (1988) presents a growing concern that the use of original literature is damaging to the integrity of oral interpretation because it shifts the focus from student growth to competition, valuing intrinsic over extrinsic goals. It causes students to “write ‘pieces for interpretation’ as compared to writing ‘pieces of literature’” (Endres, p. 106). While this automatically places the focus on winning, Billings (2003) reminds us that our real concern with unpublished literature should not involve competitive success; rather, we should ask what impact it may have on the learning process. When students feel pushed to write their own material for competitive reasons, they miss out on the educational opportunities granted through research and interpretation of another’s work.

Clearly, these issues reflect a need for more fresh, quality literature that is accessible and suitable for performance. The question remains: where is all this brand new material supposed to come from? The problem is not exclusive to any particular event or even interpretation as a whole; however, it is amplified when the search for quality literature is further limited to that of a dramatic nature which is suitable for two performers. Such is the struggle facing duo competitors.

### **Discussion and Suggestions for the Future**

As coaches, mentors, and educators, we must ask ourselves what we want our students to gain from their participation and how we can best help them achieve this. In the realm of competitive forensics, we set guidelines and restrictions in order to create a forum for oral interpretation as a unified—though still diverse—performance opportunity. We view the rules as building blocks rather than barriers. Without some set of written regulations to follow, it would be difficult to know where to begin, much less observe or measure a performer’s growth. In this way, event descriptions make forensics more accessible and enjoyable. However, it is even more important that these event descriptions operate from a pedagogical perspective and can justify themselves.

My proposal is a shift from Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation at the college level. Since the activity is rooted in oral interpretation ideologies, the semantic shift seems appropriate. Behind the term “dramatic” is the implied sense of drama found in a theatrical setting. The current event guidelines for duo at the college level seek to directly block this association in stating that “this is not an acting event.” Therefore, this change would not be “taking duo off the stage.”

Opening up the duo event description to include other genres of literature would not diminish our appreciation for a beautiful play or screenplay; rather, the change would simply create more resources for a category that already values diversity in performance. The current restrictions are far too limiting and fail to recognize the full value and uniqueness of duo as an interpretive outlet. If there is to be no eye contact and no use of props or costumes, then the event is essentially reduced to the interpretation of words on a page. Whether those words come from a play, a novel, a poem, a news article, an online literary journal, or a short story; whether they come from one source or many, is insignificant. Limiting duo teams to a single vein in this body of literature does nothing to advance the event, but much to halt it. More options for scripts will open new doors without diminishing the quality or appreciation of traditional dramatic texts.

In combating the inequality created by the use of unpublished material and the disproportionate dispersal of literary resources, it is important to keep in mind that this shift would help “level the field,” so to speak. More literature means more accessibility; more accessibility means greater creative opportunities and new challenges; and it is these challenges which offer interpreters the best chance for both learning and growth. Changing Dramatic Duo to Duo Interpretation would not put an end to home writes; however, it would open up a new world of literature for competitors who choose to find the material they perform. This expansion of available resources would increase the pedagogical benefits by providing an even broader array of material to choose from. Students would be more likely to select and consider the text they interpret, rather than simply finding a piece that “will work.”

Programs of literature would still be allowed, and even encouraged. If we are to believe that the goal of oral interpretation is to communicate a message through text, and we agree that much of the pedagogical experience comes from the finding, cutting, and preparation of that text for performance, then it is illogical to impose regulations that would say otherwise. The basic goals of literature selection are to find material that is suitable, original, and offers “performance opportunities.” The genre and number of pieces used should be a non-issue, pro-

vided ethical codes are not violated (e.g., author’s intent should still be respected).

If two competitors want to run overlapping prose monologues or alternate lines of slam poetry, who are we to say that it is a waste of time? They deserve the opportunity to experience their vision, without worrying about standards or where the words they are performing came from. They deserve our thoughtful attention because whether or not we like their approach to the event, they are communicating a message and fulfilling the only requirement of oral interpretation—giving a voice to text.

If we hear out a performance and then decide that we did not like it, we should be able to offer helpful suggestions for improvement with their message, rather than trying to make it our message. Judges and coaches should under no circumstances feel obligated to like a performance; however, justification should be offered either way, just as it should be offered in all events. I am not promoting “art for art’s sake,” but simply asking us to consider the purpose of limiting duo to dramatic texts. If we cannot find ample justification, if it does not align with our pedagogical ideals for oral interpretation, then it is time to broaden the range of acceptable practices. Only then can the true value of an engaged communicative activity come to fruition, as it is experimentation and subsequent rationalization of our art which lead to deeper understanding and enhanced critical thinking.

### Conclusion

It is true that dramatic scripts come in all styles and forms. Why, then, in a category where nontraditional pieces have become as valued as ten minutes of traditional dialogue, are we still choosing to limit students to such a narrow selection of performance material? Play scripts offer an incredible variety for performers to interpret, but the availability of these sources is limited. Other types of literature—such as novels, poetry, and short stories—offer the same variety at a much greater quantity and availability. A change in the duo event description would make available not only the most recently published material, but all published material. The learning process and pedagogical experience associated with interpretation (searching for, analyzing, cutting, and performing literature) would remain, as would the option of using dramatic scripts. This change would not impose on current norms or standards for the event; rather, it would provide competitors with a wealth of new literature for exploration, development, and growth.

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