

**But Seriously,
(can we stop saying that)
ADS Should Be Taken More Seriously**

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Abstract

After-dinner Speaking is the most unique public speaking event within intercollegiate in that it allows students to present a serious issue to their audience while implementing non-traditional techniques. However, in the present atmosphere of After-dinner Speaking, while we are seeing more and more different topics and structural approaches to the event, there have been more and more instances of students not adhering to public speaking fundamentals. This paper will explore the ways in which ADS can be taken more seriously to be funnier, starting with introductions that are not imaginary and ending with conclusions that are not just jokes, but make the point the speaker hopes to make.

Rationale

There is a magic within an ADS final round. Regardless of room size, tournament size, or audience size, the final round of ADS is a place most people tend to make their way to when it comes time to watch an event. I like that about ADS. I think it takes an event, an event that is often considered the less influential step-child of the public speaking events, into a spotlight within which the other events can not compete. This is a uniqueness that feels taken for granted or not considered at all by speakers. After-dinner speakers are given a responsibility that they seem to shirk, causing the event to deteriorate into the lowest common denominator in terms of humor, topic selection and a lack of professionalism in terms of public speaking fundamentals, specifically in reference to introductions and conclusions. It is the opinion of this author that After-dinner Speaking can and should be taken more seriously on every level in order to make the event a center piece of our activity and one that can be a bridge to outside activities.

Introduction

As a judge and coach within this activity for the past eight years I have had an unhealthy curiosity with ADS. It all started when I first got into coaching. I wanted to judge it, I wanted to coach it, I wanted to keep doing it. Seeing that I could only do two of the three, I wept, but then I decided that that would have to do. I wanted to judge it so I could see what others were doing and start to shape my own ideas of what I wanted my students to do with the

event. My earliest memories of forensics at the college level where of ADS rounds, going to watch when teammates where competing, following the hoards at nationals once out-rounds started and generally thinking that this was the coolest event around. I watched David Lindrum from Berry College win the NFA 1997 final round with a speech that just made sense to me and my teammates (side note: My teammate, Arnie Niekamp, who was in Semis with David went up to David after the final round and said, in front of David's parents whom were there to watch, "If you don't win that round I will poke my own eyes out." It was an odd message of support, but a sentiment shared by a lot of people at the tournament.). Lindrum's speech was subtle, smart, well organized and used many different types of humor. The one problem seems to be that no matter whom I ask that was there with me that day; no one can remember the topic of the speech. While I think this is a problem that is more widespread than it should be, I do not think it is a problem from top to bottom of the event. But it is a problem that should be talked about due to the influence and power of the event.

This paper will take the stance that ADS, while a great event and one that more students should be doing on a regular basis, needs to be taken more seriously in order to see it reach the full potential of the event. To do so, we will examine three main issues with ADS in its modern state; topic selection, the over reliance on one type of humor, and the use of fictionalized introductions and conclusions. With these issues addressed, ADS will have the opportunity to be the fundamentally sound public speaking event it could be.

Topic Selection

If I had a dollar for every student that came to my office and said, "I found this great topic but I think it might be more of a persuasion and too much for ADS," I might be able to afford more trips to developmental conferences. That's not funny and neither is the notion that any topic is too serious or too heavy for ADS. The fact of the matter is that ADS is meant to challenge the speaker to help the audience learn something in a new way through the use of humor. While there have been notable exceptions, Jon Meinen in 2004 and Marlita Hill in 1999 come to mind, the current trend seems to be students se-

lecting topics based on ease of humor and little else, just hoping that a judge will not tell him or her that his or her topic is too much for ADS. It is not the students who are to blame in this situation. Judges limiting the scope of the event are doing a disservice to the event. As it was said in the rational, ADS has an audience often doubling any given persuasion or informative round at any given tournament and to have such a great opportunity passed by each week is only going to continue to erode the educational foundation of all of our events, not just ADS.

This is not to say that there is not a time and place for every topic and coaches and students should know their limitations and boundaries. The point here is that students should feel like, and then be challenged to, take genuine persuasion and critical communication analysis into After-dinner Speaking rounds. We should not reserve this event for those topics that are not good enough for the other categories.

Over-Reliance on One Type of Humor

Britney Spears/Paris Hilton/Some other blond jokes aside, speakers in ADS tend to stick to their comfort zone, and for good reason. ADS can be scary, even for the most hardened competitor on the circuit. It is an event where you are being judged on topic selection, structure choice, timing, humor writing, logic, source citation, persuasion, and, if you are lucky, good looks. So it is no wonder that students seem to favor one type of humor over the myriad other types out there in the humor world. For me it was self depreciation, for my students the past couple of years it tended to be political humor. But whatever the type, too much focus on one is a bad thing. The easiest analogy that comes to mind is taking your car to a garage only to watch the mechanic work on your dismantled engine with a mallet. Sure, things are happening, but they aren't good.

Fictionalized Introductions/conclusions

You've all heard it. "So I was walking around (insert random place where this person clearly doesn't belong, ie, gay bar, straight bar, Republican National Convention?) and (insert some person or newspaper that flies out of the air to smack our intrepid narrator in the face with some knowledge). First, if we are to believe this is true, why was this student not in class the week prior to the tournament? Second, what happened and who decided that it would be appropriate for students to just make up an introduction to a speech? This is the question, truth be told, that lead me to this paper. We want our students to be seen as professionals and scholars and we are, in essence, letting them fabricate one of the more important portions of the public speech. This leads to three problems.

First, we are encouraging students to focus on a fictional narrative rather than establishing an introduction that helps the audience to understand their topics. Second, we are, through our own accord, establishing ADS as a second tier event in comparison to the other public speaking events where we would never dream of making up any part of the speech, let alone the introduction. And finally, in contradiction to every other area of forensics and college, we are telling students that fabrication is fine and sometimes even preferred.

As fundamental public speaking goes, the introduction is of paramount importance. It is the speaker's opportunity to establish credibility and to get the audience ready to listen. Once that opportunity has passed there is no chance to get it back. If the goal is to move the audience to some kind of action based on the topic and its significance, then taking the audience toward something that isn't even real will only serve to distract from the topic.

Second, the fictional narrative usage in ADS inherently makes the speeches in ADS seem less important and less substantive than those in other events. Every year students take a serious topic and hope to use it for ADS. They write their speech, work with coaches, run it at a tournament and because they have not taken the time to write a factual and interesting introduction, they feel as if the topic will not work. This starts a cycle we are seeing perpetuated currently. Student has serious topic, student has factual intro, student receives low rank, student makes up fictional intro, and student receives high rank. Then when compared to other speaking events the After-dinner speech seems less important when it may even have more social significance.

More importantly might be the third issue with the fictionalized introduction and that is the implication that, when writing speeches, it is inconsequential to fabricate information. While it may not sound like an issue with integrity, it leads to a slippery slope that college students often have a hard time dissecting for themselves. It creates a perceived gray area within the rules. We say that the event is a factual speech to be written by the student, so why let them compete with a speech that is anything less.

Conclusion

So what do we do from here? Well, it is all easier said than done. In a perfect world all the judges in rounds would be open minded to things a speaker might do (as long as it is moving the event in the right direction, no matter how open minded I may think I am, I will never pick up a speech about toilet paper.) But I am a realist. I know these things will not happen over night. It takes an effort as coaches, teachers, and students working toward being open to new and more socially conscience topics, the structures, and the types of humor that come with that

openness. We need to encourage students to think a little harder to come up with an introduction that is honest, truthful and helps bring the audience into the speech, even if that means more time in practice and at home rather than taking that speech out early. We need to educate our students to the real solutions they can find and help us understand, with humor, things that could never be brought up in a persuasion round because people's defenses are up and entrenched in a way that does not happen in ADS. We need to help students understand the history of the event and know that just because they think they are really good at sarcasm does not mean that they can not try a little slap stick. (Prate falls are still funny, I don't care who you are.) But in the end, it's about all of us being willing to take a risk and use the platform we've been given. ADS is special and should be treated as such. Students have a room of people waiting, wanting to laugh. They are warm and ready to have their minds changed, played with, and all together enhanced. The crowd in the room wants to be there (those of us who are teachers know the difference between voluntary and captive audiences and how that can make or break your entire day.) and they want to stay. So, engage them with a bit more than you think they can handle. Some days it will work, other days it will not, but you will be helping to make the event all it can be.

Well, I think this is going well, I am made my points and tried to establish arguments that made sense. There are a few feeble attempts at humor, but seriously; can we talk about ADS being more serious? Whoa, wait a minute. What have we been doing up to this point? We aren't here because Peoria smells good in August. We haven't been talking and working on some sort of revenue sharing mechanism to give us more parity in college forensics. No. We have not. I would hope that I wouldn't have to say, but seriously to get you to pay attention. And that is just the point. A wise man once said to me, "The language of ADS is like the language of poetry. You write it a certain way to illicit a certain emotion." It is a beautiful event that should be given more gravity that it is currently receiving. One way to do that is to realize the power it has and use it as the tool it was meant to be used. Make us think, make us laugh, but really, make us think.