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The Terrible Secret of Extemporaneous Speaking

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Coached by John Boyer and H. Scott Placke

I'm not proud of it, but I have cheated in extemporaneous speaking. It was in the second round at the State Tournament my freshman year. We didn't have any files on the questions so I answered one about our state's recent casino legislation. There had been a large debate in my hometown over this issue so I knew something about the arguments. I made up all of my citations. I falsely cited regional papers, and even asked a teammate for the name of his local paper. I knew that if I didn't cite any sources, I would immediately get tanked in the round, even if I were making the right arguments. Instead, I got the 2. What I did was wrong and I regret my decision, but the fabrication of evidence has become commonplace in the world of extemporaneous speaking. In 2003, Daniel Cronn-Mills and Larry Schnoor published a controversial article in the *National Forensics Journal*. Their analysis showed that the 1998 AFA final round of informative contained massive amounts of source deception and plagiarism. Their study highlighted and exposed unethical choices in platform speeches, and in 2005, Ric Shafer took this one step further, examining ethics in extemporaneous speaking with an article in *The Speaker and Gavel*. Even for those outside of our traditional community, honesty must play a crucial role in competitive forensics. Ultimately, we need to hold students to a high moral standard, a standard that exists in every other academic venue. Consequently, this speech is not about suffering or body counts, but forensics criticism is vital to maintaining the integrity and evolution of an activity we love.

To begin, we will uncover the problems associated with unethical behavior in extemp. Second, we must determine the underlying causes, before finally, offer solutions to improve the ethical and educational standards of extemp. The problem is two fold – the excessive citation of unverified sources and general community apathy towards this issue.

While there is little academic data to support it, a teammate of mine received a ballot in a final round that claimed 13 sources were not enough, and this situation is not unique to my team. When the number of citations becomes the reason for the rank received, competitors know that to increase their chances of doing well, they should refer to more sources. Unfortunately, once there is a perception that someone is getting an unfair advantage, the temptation to follow is too strong.

Unverified sources are used by some extempers at every level. The previously cited article by Ric Shafer refers to Robert Markstrom's 1994 thesis which explained that only 44% of the sources used in the 1993 AFA final round of extemp actually pertained to the topic of the speech. This did not evaluate whether or not the sources were cited accurately, so the problem could be even worse. We'll never know if these students didn't have enough articles during

prep time, were unable to memorize that many sources in 30 minutes or just wanted a competitive edge. Whatever the reasons, sources, information and ideas are being misrepresented by competitors.

Berry, Thornton and Baker state in a 2006 conference paper entitled “Demographics of Digital Cheating” that “to ignore cheating is to have a culture of dishonesty continue to grow and destroy our academic institutions.” A 1982 study by Thomas and Hart found that “85 percent of competitors and nearly 80 percent of judges believe fabricating evidence constitutes the worst ethical violation in the activity.” Because forensics uniquely prepares competitors for life after college, we have an obligation to protect our activity from scrutiny.

Cronn-Mills and Schnoor wrote that “Forensic scholars believe ethics is a serious issue for the activity and the discipline.” There are two reasons for the prevalence of dishonesty in extemporaneous speaking: judges demand competitors to be off the note card and they demand more and more sources. This does not remove blame from students like me who have made unethical choices, but it does shed some light on the situation competitors are in.

Students who use and rely on a note card are typically ranked lower than those who do not. This puts significant pressure on competitors to get off the note card, and be able to use their 30 minutes of prep in an attempt to organize their speech and memorize the sources they used. It is extremely difficult for many students to remember 10 or more sources and attribute them all in the correct locations. Therefore, students are going to make mistakes both intentionally and unintentionally when not using a note card.

Another prevalent judging paradigm is counting sources. Cronn-Mills and Schnoor explain, “Judges have become preoccupied with the quantity, rather than the quality [of] sources.” Daniel Cronn-Mills and Stephen Croucher explain in a 2001 issue of *Speaker Points* that “out of 142 ballots involved in their study of extemporaneous speaking, 60 judges had flowed the sources and 39 commented that the competitor needed more sources.” Cronn-Mills and Schnoor concluded in their paper “students under the intense pressure to please such judges may wander toward unethical behavior.” In combination, these practices by judges have entrenched the fabrication of sources in extemp.

Because of the difficulty in verifying violations, we must address these causes to eliminate the temptations. Fortunately, there are some solutions: judges and competitors need to alter their paradigms and the community should experiment with some wholesale changes to the event.

First, judges should evaluate the analysis and arguments made during a competitor’s speech and not the number of sources. In 1994, Audra Colvert, presented a paper on the use of sources in extemp. She argues that “participants and judges must return to focusing on the arguments and not the number and uniqueness of the sources. Emphasizing novelty in documentation at the risk of good argumentation, analysis, and communication skills would be detrimental to the philosophical purposes of the activity.” Additionally, Colvert finds that too many sources can actually take away from the speech’s persuasive potential. Yet, since Colvert’s 1994 paper, the problem has only gotten worse. The intro-

duction of Lexis Nexis and Internet sources has caused judges to raise their source bar, expecting more and more from competitors.

Cronn-Mills and Schnoor explain, “The ‘counting sources’ paradigm is not supported by the discipline.” Furthermore, they looked at “a number of public speaking textbooks and did not find a single reference indicating quantity of evidence to [be a key aspect of a good speech] ... yet all the public speaking textbooks discussed the importance of [the] quality of the evidence/source.” The expectations of coaches and judges must change. Until they do, these violations will continue.

I also urge students to take a stand. When delivering a memorized speech, only include a few, high quality sources. You should also use a note card when you are unable to memorize your sources to ensure you cite them correctly. Judges can still evaluate whether or not the use of a note card is distracting, but should reward students who use a note card well. If we encourage students to use note cards when they cannot memorize their entire speech, it would eliminate many of the temptations that lead to the misrepresentation of sources.

To truly solve, we must reevaluate the event and consider macro solutions. For instance, Bryan McCann, in an article presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Communication Association in 2002, explained that one way to alter the event is to give students topics instead of questions. If competitors were presented with prompts, such as “names of countries and leaders ... [extempers] would be given a relative degree of free reign in constructing a topic that is indicative of their own opinions” and be of a more personal and persuasive nature.

While McCann’s solution might not be perfect, forensic scholars must research and publish articles about the fabrication of sources in extemporaneous speaking. In a personal correspondence with Ric Shafer on April 3 2008, he states that he does not “believe that coaches and representatives from the national organizations have done enough to promote and/or verify that students in the event are ethical.” There is an alarming lack of research on this subject and the community must examine whether harsh penalties or random source checks would provide a deterrent. Discourse of this issue in forensic journals and at conferences like NCA is a step in the right direction. However, we must continue to use word-of-mouth in the community to advocate change.

Though my time here is almost up, the time for dialogue about the misrepresentation of evidence in extemp is just beginning. I hope you will continue this conversation within your own team - we need to challenge each other to be accountable. Extemp is a valuable event that teaches unique skills through the combination of limited preparation, research and analysis. Unfortunately, our community has become misguided by the concept that the quantity of sources and the lack of a note card are critical to success. The results have been discouraging and limit the educational value of extemporaneous speaking. Today, we have examined the problems, causes and solutions to the fabrication of sources in extemp. Hopefully, with this ‘terrible secret’ finally exposed, we can change course and steer students towards more ethical and educational conduct.

Note: This speech was presented at the 2008 Interstate Oratorical Association contest and published in the 2008 edition of *Winning Orations*. The speech is re-published in *Speaker & Gavel* with the permission of the executive secretary of the IOA.