

Abstract: There has long been concern in forensic circles about coaches who allegedly write original speeches for their students. This essay argues that while such overcoaches are indeed acting unethically and uneducationally, their opposing number--undercoaches--are also acting undesirably. Perhaps most critically, both sets of coaches are acting unprofessionally. After breaking down the creative speech process into seven component parts, I suggest that there is a comfortable ground in between these two extremes, where a forensic coach can legitimately--and in a truly professional manner--contribute to a student's creative efforts without endangering either the student's learning process or any ethical boundaries.

**THE GHOSTWRITER, THE LAISSEZ-FAIRE COACH,
AND THE FORENSIC PROFESSIONAL:
NEGOTIATING THE OVERCOACHING VS. UNDERCOACHING
DILEMMA IN ORIGINAL CONTEST SPEECHES**

James J. Kimble¹
Director of Forensics
George Mason University, Fairfax, VA

No one but the most unscrupulous openly defends the practice of using ghostwritten material in a contest calling for original work (p. 65).

-Faules, Rieke & Rhodes (1976)

. . . ghostwriting [is] a fact of life in most contest events (p. 9)

-Madsen (1984)

The increasing maturity of forensic activities in the United States has prompted growing attention to the development of the forensic

professional. Ziegelmueller and Parson (1984), for example, suggest that "forensic educators are required to fulfill a number of differing professional roles, among them the role of classroom teacher, program administrator, and student advisor" (p. 37). Similarly, Bartanen (1993, p. 4) relates that the Guild of American Forensic Educators believes that "forensic programs should be directed by professional educators trained in both the philosophy and practice of the activity."

As individual events coaches and directors striving to become better at what we do, most of us at this developmental conference naturally fall under this increasing focus on professionalism in forensics. Indeed, this session is evidence that at least a few people are interested in the issue. Unfortunately, while we talk about professionalism in terms of tenure, research, degrees, and departmental status, we tend to give too little attention to the mechanics of actual coaching, the activity that is at the heart of our profession.

Although the act of coaching is obviously an individualized activity in which we each utilize our gifts (and exercise our biases), I believe that there is sufficient room for discussions of professionalism in coaching. In particular, I believe that there is merit in wrestling as a group with the thorny issues involved in appropriately guiding our students through the competitive season.

The subject of coaching individual events in a professional manner could encompass several possible issues. In this essay I shall focus on the issue of originality in public address events. In particular, I contend that the individual events professional can find ample, defined middle ground between the extremes of the *Laissez-Faire* coach and the Ghostwriter. I shall advance this argument in three separate sections: 1) a discussion of the overcoaching vs. undercoaching dilemma coaches of original public events face; 2) a delineation of seven steps involved in creating an original memorized speech in competitive forensics; and 3) a suggested set of specific norms to guide coaches as they negotiate these seven steps in a professional manner.

¹ AUTHOR'S NOTE: The author thanks Matt Davis for sharing his thoughts on this issue, and Dan West for his encouragement and patience.

Overcoaching vs. Undercoaching

The rules and guidelines of organized forensics indicate that public address speeches are to be "original." Most of us interpret this word to mean that the speeches are to be written by the competitor and no one else, and we strenuously object to any coach or team violating that expectation. But there is little doubt that the practice of handing students speech scripts authored by others has appeared in forensics contests, either through the efforts of the overly helpful coach (Kalanquin, 1989) or the outright rules violator (Madsen, 1984). Many of us, in fact, have heard--or have ourselves contributed to--negative gossip about teams or individuals who may have crossed that line.

Variouly called "ghostwriting" or "overcoaching," the extreme forms of this practice (at least) are clearly against the rules, and are also poor educational practice. Previous treatments of the subject, which are relatively sparse, are often blunt in their disapproval. Ulrich (1986, p. 134), for instance, argues that "coaching efforts should supplement, not substitute for, student efforts." Madsen (1984, p. 10) agrees, adding that

. . . if we believe that students must, in fact, learn to do research, to organize materials, to present ideas with clarity and to come to appreciate historical data and good literature, then we . . . will be offended by ghostwriting, be it by a fellow student or an overly helpful coach.

Since the event called declamation is not offered at the college level, most of us would agree with these writers in their blunt assessments of those who overcoach and who, in the process, end up ghostwriting public address speeches for their students. Yet acting as a *laissez-faire* coach--one who gives his or her students as little direction as possible--is also problematic. Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes (1976, p. 65) agree, reminding us that a coach working with an original event speaker "need not refrain from making suggestions. If she has an idea that will improve a work, she should mention it to the student." And Derryberry argues that "the forensic educator needs to consistently monitor and scrutinize the substance of arguments within student speeches as events are created for competition" (1993, p. 7).

Unfortunately, without such assistance our students can and often will become victimized. As Faules and Rieke comment in their first edition (1968, p. 81),

to expose certain students to audiences or to competition without adequate guidance may be seriously harmful to them, for an undirected or poorly prepared student is much more likely to find the speech situation to be traumatic than is a well-instructed one.

Indeed, many of us here have had the uncomfortable experience of judging a competitor who has apparently had no coaching advice whatsoever. If you have had that experience, I suspect you'll agree with me when I contend that such undercoaching is as poor a pedagogical choice as is overcoaching.

Here lies a dilemma, then, facing the coach who hopes to act in a professional manner. On the one hand, we enjoy watching our students succeed competitively, and the professional esteem that often accompanies that success. In that spirit we can blind ourselves--or rationalize to ourselves--to the point where we cross the line into overcoaching. On the other hand, we don't want to risk cheating, or even being perceived as cheating, so we convince ourselves that a few clueless tournaments will build character in our students. Thus we gain room--with professional pride intact--to cast stones at those who we suspect are ghostwriting.

Yet that point where the speech is no longer the student's--when it is, in Bormann's (1961, p. 267) words, at the place "where the speech changes character . . . from what it would have been had the speaker prepared the speech for himself"--remains definitionally elusive, even to those of us who are paid to adjudicate such presentations. In Thomas and Hart's (1983) survey, 69.8% of judges thought that for a hypothetical coach to provide outline, research, and final editing for a contestant's original speech was a definite ethical violation. However, 20.6% thought it was only questionable behavior and 7.9% didn't think it was an ethical violation at all. Students, meanwhile, were 69.5% sure there was an ethical violation in that situation, 23.2% sure the behavior was questionable, and 6.3% sure that it was fine. Adding to this confusion, one judge responded that a "coach-written oration is 'not unethical for beginners'" (p. 93). And Thomas and Hart themselves suggest that there

is a potential gulf between what respondents feel in the abstract and how they would evaluate a specific, real-life instance.

With such a variety of viewpoints and potential exceptions it becomes easy to believe Kalanquin when she argues that "it is nearly impossible to recognize when the encouragement, suggestion, or assistance offered by an IE coach becomes too helpful" (1991, p. 91). Regrettably, the advice in our textbooks offers little help on the issue because it resorts to platitudes, as in Faules, Rieke and Rhodes' (1976, p. 82) statement that "the coach must determine the appropriate degree of assistance . . . [and] in making this determination the coach should avoid providing too much or too little assistance." Conversation among coaching and judging peers, finally, offers little help because the subject appears to be somewhat alarming as a conversation starter in the coaches' lounge.

Given this dilemma, and the little concrete guidance available to help us through it, this essay offers its own approach. I present what I believe is a relatively novel concept: not that there are sub-steps to creating an original public address speech, but that the level of coaching assistance that is professionally acceptable varies from step to step. Let me begin with the steps.

Seven Steps in Original Speech Creation

If we fail to think of the creation process involved in an original public address speech as having component steps, we mystify the process and there is thus little wonder that we have trouble telling how much coaching is too much and how much is too little. But as we know from our public speaking courses there are several steps one must take in creating a speech. By considering a forensic original event in this light it becomes possible to see that varying levels of coaching assistance are appropriate at different points in the creative process.

Although I won't claim that my version of these steps is the definitive one, I hope what follows will be useful as a starting point for the larger discussion of coaching in a professional manner. The steps are:

1. Choice of topic: selection of the speech's subject from among several possibilities.

2. Brainstorming: generating as many ideas (including concepts, potential jokes, main points, puns, and points of view) as possible about the chosen topic, and selecting some of these ideas as better than others.

3. Research: finding authoritative or anecdotal ideas about the chosen topic, ordinarily from published sources.

4. Organization: outlining and otherwise arranging elements of the speech, including elements from both brainstorming and research.

5. Composition: writing or typing out early versions of the speech--following the organizational pattern and using ideas from brainstorming and research--to create an edit-able manuscript.

6. Editing: re-organizing, re-working, re-arranging and/or re-focusing a manuscript version of the speech.

7. Polishing: refining and/or improving an edited version of the speech; a.k.a. "tweaking."

Obviously, these steps will hardly ever take place as literally discernible units. One reason is that our approaches will vary from student to student as we go through versions of these steps for each speech we coach. Another reason is that almost all of us will find ourselves sending a student back to the library after a speech has been in competition, wanting them to re-focus the speech or even just to find more up-to-date information. The process, in other words, can at some point become cyclic, and certainly idiosyncratic.

Yet identifying and explicating these steps is useful if only in establishing a vocabulary with which we can talk about professionally responsible levels of coaching. Just looking at the list, for instance, may suggest to some that the "composition" step is where most of their concern about ghostwriting exists; to these individuals the coach who literally assigns a topic to a student is not at all objectionable, as long as he or she doesn't proceed to actually write out the speech. Others might have little problem with a coach who polishes a student-edited speech, but would be upset if the coach did the earlier editing step by themselves. In any case, using these terms in this discussion enables me to offer the following suggested

set of specific norms for coaches hoping to negotiate these steps in a professional manner.

Coaching the Seven Steps: A Proposal for Professional Educators

Jay VerLinden echoes some of my basic feelings about forensics when he says that "forensics is most negative when instructors lose sight of its role as an educational activity and perceive of it only in terms of competitive success (quoted in Schroeder, 1994, p. 12). We are, or should be, "educator-coaches" (paraphrasing Derryberry, 1993, p. 5). Being an educator-coach in forensics, I contend, involves avoiding the extremes of overcoaching and undercoaching; true educator-coaches neither write speeches for their students, nor do they throw the students into a tournament without significant guidance and advice on those events. Instead, true educator-coaches carefully negotiate the steps involved in creating original speeches, making sure that the speech is truly the student's creation, yet has had significant input from collaborative coaching sessions. Let me explicate this position using the previously-identified steps.

Let's first imagine the overcoached original speech. Taking the "most average" student and speech we can imagine, the overcoached speech, almost by definition, has had much more coaching contribution than student contribution. At each step along the creative process, for instance, the hypothetical coach at the first level of Table 1 is never doing less than seventy percent of the work, and even ninety percent of the composition and editing of the speech. The student's contribution, meanwhile, is minimal--he or she has had some input in the choice of topic and even the brainstorming phase, but the rest of the time contributes only ten percent of the effort. Even worse, the coach and student's combined effort--the time they have spent together, pooling their efforts, knowledge, and feelings about the speech--is almost nonexistent.

Arguably, this example is a paradigm case of the overcoached student; the coach has not literally ghostwritten the speech, but the student's level of involvement has been small enough to minimize most of the process's pedagogical benefits. While this student may well successfully compete with the speech, I suspect that most of us would agree that in truth its success would be empty, both educationally and ethically.

The undercoached student, on the other hand, has a different set of problems. As the second area of Table 1 suggests, this student's coach contributes almost nothing to the creative process. The coach has probably made a list of possible topics (thus, I estimate, twenty percent of the work under choice of topic) and has even spent some time with the student, talking about the choice of topics and brainstorming a few ideas. After that point, however, the student has been left largely alone to sink or swim, with the coach re-appearing to polish some of the transcript's grammar at the end of the process.

Again, not all undercoached speeches will look exactly like this one. But this student's speech serves as enough of a paradigm, I think, to accurately point out the perils of undercoaching. Not only has this coach not spent time looking over drafts of the student's efforts and making suggestions, but they've also spent almost no time with the student, contributing their knowledge about structure, source citation, word choice, or whatever else we pass along to our students when we act as professional educator-coaches.

At this point the common fault of both the overcoacher and the undercoacher should be obvious. Both spend too little time in the actual presence of the student. The overcoacher (ironically, given the label) is content to hand the student work the coach has done and to offer memorization tips, and even perhaps to work on delivery later in the semester. The undercoacher is content to let the student labor without guidance or advice, often producing a clueless competitor who is demoralized and victimized. Each coach, then, has faults peculiar to their style of coaching. But perhaps most critically from a pedagogical standpoint, neither of these coaches spends much quality time with their student, failing to work in a cooperative, symbiotic fashion so that the student learns at the same time the student creates.

These examples of the overcoacher and the undercoacher set the stage for the final student in Table 1. This student, I contend, is neither overcoached nor undercoached. Instead, the coach contributes in significant ways to the student's speech where the coach's contribution is the most educational, and contributes much less when the student's solo work is the most educational. I believe, in short, that this is a student who has learned both from the coach and from the creative process.

Therefore--subject to the caveats I list below--I contend that this coaching effort is the only one of the three that is most likely to be working in a professional manner.

The specific contributions of coach and student are markedly different for this third pair. For the choice of topic phase, the coach has actually done most of the work, perhaps spending the summer creating a list of possible topics; the coach and student have also spent time together discussing possible topics, and the student has spent additional time alone, reflecting on the choice. Of course, the advanced student would very likely spend proportionally more time choosing their speech topic than in this example, but even for skilled students this coach doesn't seem to me to be contributing more than is educationally sound.

In the brainstorming phase the coach's solo effort dramatically decreases and the student's significantly increases, as does their time spent together. Here the coach may have appended a list of possible angles or directions to take with a given speech topic, and then worked through a coaching session with the student in which they both generated possible ideas for the speech and its direction. The student, however, has done fifty percent of the work at this stage on their own, perhaps expanding on the original, collaborative pool of ideas. Advanced students, again, would perhaps spend even more solo time at this phase of the creative process.

When the student reaches the middle steps their share of the overall responsibility increases dramatically. In the research step the coach's solo contribution time sinks to ten percent (perhaps the initial article or series of columns that sparked the original idea in the coach's mind), while the coach's and student's time together remains about the same (perhaps time spent together identifying database search words, or reading together through a pile of articles to identify likely areas of support for the speech) and the student's time alone in the library stacks or in front of the computer search terminal increases even more to around seventy percent. The organizational phase is similar, with the student present at least ninety-five percent of the on-task time, while the composition step also exhibits extremely little solo contribution from the coach while the student has significant responsibility for almost all of the work.

In the editing and polishing steps the coach's contributions again become somewhat more significant. In researching, organizing, and compiling the speech, the student has created a transcript which is now suitable for attention from the coach. I've suggested that this coach spends around thirty percent of the overall editing time working over the transcript alone (writing comments in margins, drawing arrows, crossing out word choices, etc.), and another thirty percent with the student explaining those choices, then asking the student to spend the remaining forty percent of the editing effort on their own. Once the editing phase changes into a polishing phase, the coach's share of the work load is again similar, working over the transcript alone, then working with the student before sending the student off to finish the polishing process on their own.

Throughout these seven steps, this third coach/student pair has spent a significant amount of time together, and at only one point--generating possible topics--has this coach spent more time on a step than the student has. Perhaps more importantly, the coach and the student have shared work time every step along the way. While the character of this work time is obviously important (if the student is just witnessing the coach work without comment or contribution, then that time's educational value is much more in question), this time together is a critical component of the educational process I'm advocating.

In comparison with the other students, then, this third student has successfully balanced their own creative work with the coach's contributions, as well as their time together. The first two coaches have acted irresponsibly and unethically; this third coach has carefully negotiated the extremes of student guidance, acting in a responsible, and ethical manner. In short, the first two coaches have acted unprofessionally and the third, presumably, has acted in a professional manner. I say "presumably" in the last sentence because the third coach still has the potential to be acting unprofessionally. I've suggested these percentage allocations are indicative of professional behavior, but I don't believe they're causal. In fact, along with my proposed coaching norms, embodied in the bottom of Table 1, I now add several caveats to help make the negotiation of the seven steps clearer:

1. No matter what percentages of effort apply in a given case, the student must always be able to honestly believe that the speech's authorship is indeed the student's.
2. Following Derryberry (1993), the educational value of the time spent by student and coach together is likely to be proportional to the level of Platonic-style instruction the coach uses (i.e., the coach's instruction should be more interrogatory than directive).
3. The coaching process should always aim for educational value over competitive success. (Note, however, that these two goals can and often are compatible.)
4. The percentages of effort in Table 1 are intended more as paradigmatic examples of a hypothetical "average" coaching session than as rule-bound dicta; real-life coaching of specific speeches will obviously diverge to greater or lesser extents from my example, based on the student's level of experience, the coach's technique in coaching, the topic chosen, and so on.

Conclusion

By combining the hypothetical coaching example in Table 1 with the above caveats, I hope that I've made a clear case for responsible coaching by professional educator-coaches. It may well be that my argument here is controversial. In fact, I hope it is, for it is time we started talking about these issues, rather than watching a few colleagues over the years raise them in the face of polite silence.

The mistake of those writers, in my opinion, was their focus on ethics. While most of us would agree that ethics in forensics is a good idea, when it comes time to adapt them to an issue we falter. And yet we keep clamoring for that elusive code (Kalanquin, 1989, Madsen, 1984, Ulrich, 1984).

My approach has been to focus not on the ethical but on the professional. If we think of the issues surrounding overcoaching vs. undercoaching as ethical concerns we will inevitably get caught up in a "whose ethics?" debate. But to see this issue as one in which we can behave

professionally, or not . . . well, if it doesn't avoid the debate at least it will get us talking.

References

- Bartanen, M. D. (1993). Coaches corner: The educational objectives of the Guild of American Forensic Educators. The Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta, 78(2), 1-11.
- Beetham, P. C. (1985). Are debate handbooks proper educational materials for high school debates-con?. Paper presented at the National Forensic League Conference on the State of High School Debate, Kansas City, MO. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 267 470)
- Bormann, E. G. (1961). Ethics of ghostwritten speeches. Quarterly Journal of Speech, 48, 262-267.
- Derryberry, B. R. (1993, November). Developing ideas through forensics. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, Miami, FL. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 366 999)
- Faules, D. F., & Rieke, R. D. (1968). Directing forensics: Debate and contest speaking. Scranton, PA: International Textbook.
- Faules, D. F., Rieke, R. D., & Rhodes, J. (1976). Directing forensics: Debate & contest & debate speaking (2nd ed.). Denver: Morton.
- Kalanquin, P. (1989). Have we been offering too much help? In L. Schnoor & V. Karns (Eds.), Perspective on individual events: Proceedings of the first developmental conference on individual events (pp. 90-93). Mankato, MN: Mankato State.
- Madsen, S. (1984). Ethical considerations in building a forensic program. Storm Lake, IA: Buena Vista College. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 244 318)

Schroeder, A. B. (1994, November). The administrative view of the educational perspectives in forensics activities for the 21st century. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans, LA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 381 823)

Ulrich, W. (1984). The ethics of forensics. In D. Parson (Ed.), American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics (pp. 13-22). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Ziegelmueller, G., & Parson, D. W. (1984). Strengthening educational goals and programs. In D. Parson (Ed.), American Forensics in Perspective: Papers from the Second National Conference on Forensics (pp. 37-48). Annandale, VA: Speech Communication Association.

Table 1

Percent of Student, Coach, and Combined Work on an Original Speech, Varying by Coach Input (Paradigm Examples)

<u>Steps in creative process</u>							
Contributor	TOP	BRN	RCH	ORG	CMP	EDT	PSH
<i>Overcoached student</i>							
Student	.20	.20	.10	.10	.10	.10	.10
Coach	.70	.70	.80	.80	.90	.90	.90
Combined	.10	.10	.10	.10	.00	.00	.00
<i>Undercoached student</i>							
Student	.70	.80	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	.90
Coach	.20	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.10
Combined	.10	.20	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
<i>Coach guides student through steps</i>							
Student	.15	.50	.70	.75	.75	.40	.40
Coach	.75	.30	.10	.05	.05	.30	.30
Combined	.10	.20	.20	.20	.20	.30	.30

Note. The seven stages abbreviated above are: choice of topic; brainstorming; research; organization; composition; editing; polishing.