

**RETURNING TO OUR ROOTS:
A NEW DIRECTION FOR ORAL INTERPRETATION**

Trischa Knapp
Director of Forensics
Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR

The text is dead--but not in some twist of Postmodern logic. Rather, an examination of current competitive oral interpretation practices reveals that, indeed, the text is dead in competitive forensics. Many texts in oral interpretation have been sacrificed to the idea of "theme" as witnessed by the recent trend toward interweaving different pieces of literature that revolve around a central theme. This practice involves dividing multiple pieces of literature to create, essentially, a new whole since no one piece retains its sense of completeness. Interweaving literature flies in the face of traditional oral interpretation practices, not just in the realm of forensics but in the arena of oral interpretation as performance art, as well. As Catherine Zizik writes, "To the performer of oral interpretation, literature matters; performing the literature serves as a vehicle for study" (1).

Ultimately, we must ask ourselves why we engage in oral interpretation as forensics participants. This essay advocates a reworking of the definitions of events to reflect a more pedagogical perspective in directing both coaches and students to the purpose of engaging in oral interpretation. To undertake this study we'll consider how classic oral interpretation texts define oral interpretation. We'll then consider where some of the problems current practices in oral interpretation lead. Next we'll look at the rules of the American Forensics Association as well as the National Forensics Association regarding oral interpretation. Finally, we'll propose new definitions for the oral interpretation events that more closely direct students and coaches to return to the roots of oral interpretation.

Why We Engage in Oral Interpretation

We can turn to classic texts of oral interpretation to come to a greater understanding of the art of oral interpretation. Lee and Gura's Oral Interpretation posits that "Interpretation is the art of communicating to an audience a work of literary art in its intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic

entirety" (3). The authors go on to suggest that "your concern is to communicate the total effect of the literary work of art" (5). The emphasis in Lee and Gura's definitions and counsel is clearly on the body of the text. In other words, oral interpretation is about understanding the text.

Lee and Gura are joined in this emphasis on the text by Wallace Bacon and his definition of oral interpretation, "the study of literature through the medium of oral performance where the medium is itself a process of defining" (6). Indeed, Wallace goes on to suggest that "the interpreter must not deny to the body of the poem the right to exist" (38). Wallace, thus, assumes that the literature must retain its autonomy. Though the art of oral interpretation is about performance (Bacon, xvii) the performance is a *means to an end*, understanding the literature.

A more simplified definition is offered by Teri and Michael Gamble, "As an oral interpreter, your responsibility is to make the words of an author live; your task is to breathe energy into each page of a selected script" (3). The idea of making words come alive as an interpreter is common in any discussion of oral interpretation. Yet, it also raises some questions about how free the interpreter is to bring those words to life. The Ethical Use of Literature Policy provided by the American Forensics Association states that "contestants may not rewrite a prose, a poem, or a dramatic text so that the work differs from the original text" (AFA Invitation). Current practices beg the question: what is fair use?

As some of the current practices of competitive oral interpretation illustrate, the emphasis on text has been sacrificed to the idea of theme. Several practices demonstrate this shift in emphasis: the binder used as a prop, the lack of titles in the introduction, and the interweaving of texts. We can explore each of these practices to come to a greater understanding of how the text has been demoted in the practice of competitive oral interpretation to a second player rather than the star attraction.

The rules for oral interpretation by both the American Forensic Association and the National Forensic Association mandate that a manuscript be used. One can surmise that this mandate has its genesis in the idea that the text must be paramount to the performance. Yet current practices render the manuscript as devotee to text virtually useless. The issue of memorizing the script has some relevance though may not be a

direct reflection on the lack of emphasis on the text. Performers who must read from the manuscript often lose some ability to bring the literature to life since the audience loses the benefit of facial expression and some vocal variety. However, if anything, the over-reliance on the manuscript at least places some emphasis on the text. On the other hand, those performers who have the script memorized can better use facial expression and vocal variety to bring life to the words. In the end memorizing has more to do with performance style than the central issue of the relevance of text.

The use of the binder as a prop does, however, indicate a growing trend that moves performance away from an emphasis on text. Rules for duo interpretation, though no other event, prohibit the use of props. Yet, increasingly, the binder is used in ways that can be called nothing other than prop. For example, this author has seen binders used as steering wheels, fishing reels, dance partners, and more logical choices such as books. Often in recreating the binder as a prop, the binder is closed to give the illusion of the object. Yet, why have the manuscript if one can't read it? This strategy illustrates the devaluing of the text. Clearly, some uses of the binder as prop are done for the novelty value rather than for any real need to use the manuscript as a prop.

This author would suggest that a good interpreter need not use the binder as a prop since effective vocal and physical imaging would eliminate any need for extraneous props. In addition, the art of oral interpretation relies on the use of both bodily and vocal delivery to convey meaning. Brent C. Oberg contends that one of the differences between acting and interpreting is that in interpretation props are not used. He writes, "Interpreters must use their bodies to suggest at the presence of any objects, scenery, or characters in the performing area" (115). This author remembers Laura Gordon from Clarion State College performing poetry in an elimination round at NFA Nationals. The image of the performer resting her hand on a ballet bar and the presence Ms. Gordon created was indelible. A performer interpreting the same literature in the 1990s might use a closed binder to recreate the bar, an easier yet much less affecting gesture. The point here is that when a forensics performer engages in the art of interpretation, hoping to illuminate the text, will rely less on gimmicks and more on the words and their resonance to create meaning.

Yet, the use of props is a somewhat debatable trend in determining the viability of the text in forensics performance. An even more disturbing and more closely damning practice is the idea of leaving out the titles of pieces when delivering the introduction. Performers will list the genre and the authors, neglecting to illuminate the individual work being addressed. This practice would seemingly assert that the author had but one literary credit to their name, a highly unlikely prospect. With the advent of interwoven literature, performers commonly present a plethora of individual pieces within a ten minute time frame. It is not uncommon to hear ten to twelve different selections within one program. As a matter of convenience, performers will abbreviate the introduction by eliminating the titles of the individual pieces.

By not providing the titles of pieces performers either knowingly or not deny autonomy to the pieces that they perform. In essence what becomes important is the genre and the author. While the subject of author intention is always precariously discussed, the mention of author seems at times misleading since for many programs more than one selection from one author may be used. In this case, an announcement such as "Poetry by Edward Field," would eliminate any understanding that there were two different poems by Mr. Field being performed, say "Curse of the Catwoman" and "Frankenstein." Yet, this author is sure that Mr. Field would consider each of these works as separate, autonomous works in and of themselves. Lumping the poetry together under the phrase "poetry" denies to the author the ability to create a diverse body of work. In addition, this negligence prohibits the audience from making judgements about the efficacy of a program because they are denied full knowledge of what they are hearing.

In addition, the mention of genre seems more than likely to be a delineation of type to satisfy event criteria such as in the case of Program Oral Interpretation which demands the use of two or more different genres. Contemporary poetry as well as the use of monologues as dramatic interp also skew the boundaries of genre for the listener of these types. Accordingly, mentioning the genre is appropriate at times. However, listing the genre rather than the title indicates the superiority of the genre over the actual text, a problem for the student of oral interpretation as art. This practice indicates that the individual piece is no longer important in competitive forensics.

Yet eliminating the title from the introduction is, this author believes, merely a byproduct of the practice of interweaving various texts, the most common method of presenting multiple selections. Knapp elucidates some of the pedagogical and ethical dilemmas of interwoven literature (in press). One of the major dilemmas presented by the use of interwoven literature is the likelihood that an individual piece loses its identity, "Intertwined literature would seem to deny the literature a right to exist if that literature no longer retains its autonomy."

The major dilemma facing an audience viewing the interwoven text is the difficulty in gaining meaning from the individual selection when that text is interrupted by other literature. The theme of the program tells the audience what they should take from each piece. In essence both the performer and listener highlight the theme in the literature, which is not necessarily inappropriate. However, when the literature has more to offer than just what meets the needs of the theme, this literature is sacrificed to the theme.

Since many programs often use several pieces we must also question how much of a selection is represented in a program. In a ten minute program with a thirty second introduction, nine and a half minutes are left to develop several pieces. While certainly many poems can easily fit into this time frame, prose rarely fits into such constraints, thereby requiring a major cutting of the piece. In this case how much of the actual literature can actually be developed to give an essence of the WHOLE of the selection? In these programs part of the literature is performed because of what that part offers to the theme. Yet, the idea that oral interpretation should illuminate the whole of the text is obviously not the goal of this type of interpretation.

Given this cursory examination of the problems associated with the lack of emphasis on the text in contemporary competitive forensics, what can be done to reposition the text as the central subject in oral interpretation? While individual students, coaches, and judges can mount a crusade to resurrect traditional oral interpretation, perhaps the forensics community can aid in this noble crusade by offering prescriptive relief through a redrawing of the rules for oral interpretation events.

The Rules

The invitation to the American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament elucidates the rules for the engagement of oral interpretation:

Prose Interpretation: A selection or selections of prose material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings and poetry are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time is 10 minutes including introduction.

Dramatic Duo: A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. This 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 would be off-stage and not to each other. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Program Oral Interpretation: A program of thematically-linked selections of literary merit, chosen from two or three recognized genres of competitive interpretation (prose/poetry/drama) A substantial portion of the total time must be devoted to each of the genres used in the program. Different genre means the material must appear in separate pieces of literature (e.g., a poem included in a short story that appears only in that short story does not constitute a poetry genre). Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including original introduction and/or transitions.

Drama Interpretation: A cutting which represents one or more characters from a play or plays of literary merit. This material may be drawn from stage, screen or radio. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Poetry Interpretation: A selection or selections of poetry of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings and prose works are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Though the National Forensic Association offers fewer interpretation events than the American Forensic Association, the organization offers similar guidelines for the interpretation events that are offered:

Prose: The contestant will present a program of prose literature. Original introductory comments and transitional remarks are permitted. Programs may consist of single or multiple selections. Plays are not permitted. Manuscripts are required. Maximum 10 minutes.

Poetry: The contestant will present a program of poetic literature. Original introductory comments and transitional remarks are permitted. Programs may consist of single or multiple selections. Manuscripts are required. Maximum 10 minutes.

Dramatic Duo: A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. This is not an acting event. Thus, costumes, props, etc., are not permitted. Presentation must be from manuscript and focus would be off stage. Maximum 10 minutes.

What is notable in both sets of rules is the lack of a purpose for any of the events. In comparison, the public address events are clear in terms of the purpose for engaging in the event. To wit, the NFA rules prescribe that Persuasion is a "speech to convince to move to action or to inspire on a significant issue." Informative Speaking rules from the AFA invitation state, "an original, factual speech by the student on a realistic subject to fulfill the general aim to inform the audience." The NFA rules for After Dinner Speaking are to the point, "[e]ach contestant will present an original speech whose purpose is to make a serious point through the use of humor." Perhaps the most complex event of all is Communication Analysis. Yet, the AFA rules offer a succinct explanation for the purpose of the event: "An original speech by the student designed to offer an explanation and/or evaluation of a communication event such as a speech, speaker, movement, poem, poster, film campaign, etc. through the use of rhetorical principles." Given these rules, both speaker and audience are clear as to what the speaker should attempt to do in each speech type and what the audience should take from the speech.

Since oral interpretation is less obviously titled than many of the public address events, these events require more direction in their description and the rules for their engagement. Consequently, this author proposes the following wording changes (*indicated in bold italics*) for the American Forensic Association National Individual Events Championship rules¹:

Interpretation of Prose Literature: A selection or selections of prose material of literary merit *designed to illuminate an understanding of the text through the use of vocal and physical delivery. Multiple selections may be used when the illuminated texts share a common theme.* Play cuttings and poetry are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Dual Interpretation of Dramatic Literature: A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals *for the purpose of illuminating an understanding of the text.* This 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.

Program Oral Interpretation of Literature: A program of literature from two or three recognized genres of competitive interpretation (prose/poetry/drama) for the purpose of illuminating an understanding of the texts through the use of vocal and physical delivery. *Literature should be chosen because the illuminated texts share a common theme.* A substantial portion of the total time must be devoted to each of the genres used in the program. Different genre means the material must appear in separate pieces of literature (e.g., A poem included in a short story that appears only in that short story does not constitute a poetry genre). Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including original introduction and/or transitions.

¹ Since the AFA Tournament offers the most events, these are the specific rules that the author chooses to rewrite as examples. The NFA and other organizations could and should easily follow suit.

Interpretation of Dramatic Literature: A cutting which represents one or more characters from a play or plays of literary merit *designed to illuminate an understanding of the text through the use of vocal and physical delivery. Multiple selections may be used when illuminated texts share a common theme.* This material may be drawn from stage, screen or radio. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including original introduction.

Interpretation of Poetic Literature: A selection or selections of poetry of literary merit *designed to illuminate an understanding of the text through the use of vocal and physical delivery. Multiple selections may be used when illuminated texts share a common theme.* Play cuttings and prose works are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

These proposed rules do several things. First, the events are renamed to reflect the importance of the literature selection. Second, the rules place the emphasis on the text by offering a purpose for engaging in interpretation of each of the genres. In addition, these proposed rules offer a means to achieving the understanding of the literature. Finally, the proposed rules make the idea of theme subsidiary to the understanding of the text. These proposed changes refocus the direction of oral interpretation to the roots of oral interpretation as art, thus providing a sound pedagogical base for undertaking a program of oral interpretation. A more practical benefit is the parallel these offer to the public address events in terms of offering a goal to be achieved by the performer.

It is necessary to note that these rules do not preclude the possibility of interwoven texts. Rather, these proposed rules offer direction for those new to the events. In addition, the proposed rules offer both coaches and judges guidelines for helping students to engage in a pedagogically sound activity by providing goals for the activity. These goals reflect an understanding of traditional purposes for undertaking oral interpretation of literature such as those explicated by Lee and Gura, and Bacon.

Conclusion

Current practices in competitive oral interpretation reveal an alarming trend where competitors devalue the individual text for the purposes of achieving a thematically linked program. In these cases, the theme takes priority over the autonomy of individual texts. This essay advocates a return to a classical approach to understanding the text through oral interpretation whereby the text ceases to be a means to an end (the theme) but rather becomes the end in and of itself.

By first outlining definitions of oral interpretation and then discussing some of the problems with current practices in competitive oral interpretation, the essay establishes a need for the reworking of rules for competition in interpretation. The proposed rules for the various oral interpretation events offer both direction and method for achieving the illumination of literature. In addition, the proposed rules offer students, coaches, and judges a basis for approaching the interpretation events.

Refocusing the rules to place emphasis on the literature rather than on themes, can return oral interpretation to the roots from which it came. In this way the forensic community can resurrect the emphasis on literature once again.

Works Cited

Bacon, W. A. (1979). The art of interpretation. 3rd ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Gamble, T. and Gamble, M. (1994). Literature alive: The art of oral interpretation. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Goodnow Knapp, T. "Interwoven ethics: The dilemma of literature manipulation." Southern Journal of Forensics. In press.

Lee, C. I. & Gura, T. (1987). Oral interpretation. 7th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Oberg, B. C. (1995). Forensics: The winner's guide to speech contests. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing.

Zizik, C. (1994, November). Establishing a Critical Stance: Making the Poetry Introduction More than Perfunctory Puffery. Unpublished paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans, LA.