

**FORENSICS EDUCATION
AND
TOURNAMENT MANAGEMENT**

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When one thinks about managing a forensics tournament, frequently the components of that process that come to mind are the tasks of scheduling rooms, securing judges, ordering trophies and food, scheduling the rounds and getting through the awards ceremony as quickly and easily as possible. As the time draws nearer for the tournament to begin, there may be some details that escape the director's attention. At this time, the tournament director may become painfully aware of the admonitions presented by Hunsinger, Terry, and Wood (1970) when they point out that the director ". . . should not try to do everything by himself." So the resourceful director may take stock of what is left to be done and begin to assign tasks to overworked graduate students, eager undergraduate students, or reluctant but well-intentioned colleagues. Into this cauldron of last-minute-but-essential tasks falls the series of "Oh, anyone can do this" jobs: preparing ballots, writing extemp questions, setting up tab sheets, making fee sheets, preparing impromptu topics, ordering snacks for coaches and judges, making directional signs. This paper will focus on two duties that probably should be plucked from the cauldron and placed much earlier on the agenda for the tournament director: the preparation of extemp questions and impromptu topics. The management of these two events deserves greater attention than it frequently gets, and the results probably will justify the extra attention given to each.

We are reminded (Faules, Rieke & Rhodes, 1978) that "[t]he direction of a good forensics tournament can be one of the most difficult and challenging responsibilities of the director." The current experience of most tournament directors would suggest that that statement is very accurate. It is even more pertinent when we consider, along with the authors, the position of a director who has no previous experience in running a tournament. The ranks of this group seems to be growing fairly

rapidly with the increasing number of experienced tournament directors who are retiring or leaving the coaching profession. Before handing novice tournament directors a handbook explaining how to direct a tournament, it may be far more profitable to heed to more admonitions from Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes. They point out that "[t]he cardinal principle of tournament management is that a forensics tournament should be run for the educational benefit of the participants," and they indicate further that the tournament director and staff should do everything possible "to maximize the educational value of the meet" (1978). The educational value and benefits should be the driving factors behind the management of a tournament, and especially of the preparation of extemp questions and impromptu topics.

It may be appropriate to briefly review the history of extemporaneous speaking and impromptu speaking. Donald W. Klopff (1990) indicates in *Coaching and Directing Forensics* that an extemp speech was ". . . a speech prepared in advance but neither written out nor memorized." He further points out that contestants had the option of presenting speeches either to persuade or to inform, and that there was little similarity among extemp contests, other than that the subject areas were ". . . usually . . . derived from current events, especially contemporary international and national problems" (226). While topics are stated as questions "in a few contests," students have the option of taking a position either for or against the position advocated in the question (227). In their article "Impromptu and Extemporaneous Speaking," McKissick, Tannenbaum and Hoffman (1994) point out to extemporaneous speaking students that extemp topics ". . . typically concern themselves with current events, and are usually expressed as a question you are expected to answer" (70). Brent Oberg, in *Forensics: The Winner's Guide to Speech Contests* (1995), intended primarily for high school students, indicates that extemp speaking topics ". . . deal with current issues and events and are stated as questions. Students are therefore asked to answer a designated question and support their answer" (67). Most sources include extensive suggestions for the extemporaneous speakers and coaches regarding research, preparation and delivery. There are no suggestions or guidelines given for the writers of extemp questions or topics. Only Klopff makes any reference to the preparation of extemp questions with his comment that ". . . topics may have been formulated by a qualified person who is

not connected with the forensic programs of any of the participating schools" (226).

For impromptu speaking, there seems to be even less information available about the selection or preparation of topics. Klopf refers to the methods students may use to prepare for impromptu speaking and discusses the merits of impromptu speaking in general, concluding with qualifications needed by students to be successful impromptu speakers (232-233). Others (McKissick, Tannenbaum and Hoffman (1994) and Oberg (1995)) provide explanations of the rules and guidelines for the student speakers, with virtually no mention made of the types of topics to be expected or how to prepare the topics for the speakers.

It would seem that the tournament director who needs to develop extemporaneous speaking questions and impromptu speaking topics might be faced with a dilemma, especially if she/he has no experience in those areas. The novice tournament director may be left at the mercy of volunteers who may or may not have any better knowledge of developing topics. Forensics colleagues may be willing to provide topics and questions, but this probably won't help the novice director learn how to write extemp questions or develop impromptu topics. Sometimes those who have experience writing extemp questions and developing impromptu topics are not much better at the process than those with no experience. It may be important to identify some criteria, which can be used to guide tournament directors and their staff in the process of developing appropriate and effective topics for the limited preparation events.

Klopf (1990) identified two questions initially intended to guide the student in choosing his/her topic. Those questions can be helpful in guiding the writer of extemp questions: "Is the topic significant, interesting to the speaker and the audience, and suitable for the contest? Is pertinent information available in the student's files?" (228). Two aspects of these questions deserve closer scrutiny. "Is the topic . . . suitable for the contest?" This may be an important factor to consider. Topics appropriate for collegiate competition may not be appropriate for high school students. Topics appropriate for novice competitors may not be suitable for more experienced speakers. Topics written at the beginning of the competition year may not be appropriate for competition at the end of the year. Suitability may be dictated by the level of competition and by

the amount of experience of the competitors. The challenge for the tournament director is determining which of the speakers are novices and which are more experienced. In an open division, that may be impossible and impractical. The director then will need to develop questions that will be appropriate for novices, and at the same time allow more experienced speakers opportunities to develop speeches that are more complex and more appropriate for their level of experience. It may be even more important for the tournament director to consider the time in the academic year that the tournament is held. Tournaments held earlier in the year may be better served with topics that are more appropriate for beginning speakers. As the competitive year progresses, the questions could become progressively more challenging. It is important to realize, however, that there will be students who are beginning their competition throughout the year. Second semester topics need to allow those beginning speakers the option of selecting topics or developing speeches that are consistent with their level of experience.

Another aspect of Klopf's question deserves discussion. "Is pertinent information available in the student's files?" In theory, extemp speakers should have similar files of information. Some sources may vary, but the amount of material should be similar. In reality, this is rarely true. Novice speakers may have limited material in their files. New programs may have limited resources available to them. Students coming from a classroom setting may have even more limited resources. Students from programs with large budgets and a large number of returning students may have more extensive resources available to them, including the use of electronic retrieval systems. The tournament director needs to be aware of these factors and attempt to write topics that will allow students in each of the categories to develop appropriate speeches, utilizing the experience and resources available to them. Knowing something about the programs that will be attending the tournament will help the tournament director determine the most effective way to approach topic development. It would seem to be inappropriate to assume that all students will have access to electronic retrieval systems if the schools attending the tournament are two-year schools, or schools with budget problems, or schools who use the tournament setting as an extension of the classroom experience for their students.

Thus far, this discussion has focused primarily on the development of topics/questions for extemporaneous speaking, with little attention given to the development of impromptu speaking topics. That lack of discussion here is a reflection of the lack of discussion found in much of the forensics literature. It is possible to find detailed suggestions for the impromptu speaker about structure, preparation, delivery, and topic analysis. It is possible to find some hints for the coach of the impromptu speaker about structure, preparation, delivery, topic analysis, and practice. But it is very difficult to locate suggestions for the tournament director that will provide help in developing topics. The director may be able to glean some hints from the advice given to speakers and coaches, and draw some conclusions from the sample topics provided, but little help is available about where to look to find topics, or how to develop a variety of topics for speakers with varying levels of proficiency. Discussions about impromptu speaking at least include some samples of possible topics; discussions about extemporaneous speaking generally do not. The prevailing attitude seems to be that the tournament director will be able to read the event description and intuitively know how to write appropriate questions or develop effective topics. For a novice tournament director, or a willing but untrained assistant or staff member, the whole experience can be very frustrating and discouraging.

In finding solutions to the dilemma of developing high quality, appropriate extemporaneous and impromptu topics, it may be essential to take a step back, although not a step backward. In stepping back and looking at the broad picture of forensics, we must be reminded frequently that we are considered forensic educators, that we are in the field of education, and that we use forensics competition as a tool to educate our students. Those are the arguments that Directors of Forensics frequently use with departmental administrators and funding organizations. Faules, Rieke and Rhodes, as mentioned earlier, are explicit in their admonition to the tournament director. "The cardinal principle of tournament management is that a forensics tournament should be run for the educational benefit of the participants" (1978). This position is supported by Hunsinger, Terry and Wood in *Managing Forensic Tournaments*. They point out that the tournament director ". . . is a teacher, first and foremost." They go on to indicate that the tournament itself is a larger educational experience, and indicate that the tournament director ". . . should take the educator's point

of view in all his work. His purpose should be primarily the education of students" (22).

At the First Developmental Conference on Individual Events in 1988, Sheryl Friedley, in her article "Ethical Considerations for Forensic Educators," indicated another perspective to be considered. "Forensic educators must strive to treat all students fairly and promote equality of opportunity for all participants regardless of sex, race, physical handicaps, or other potentially discriminating variables" (85). Sound ethical practices, and federal laws, tend to prevent discriminatory behavior based on sex, race, or physical considerations. But some students may feel disadvantaged when they encounter extemporaneous questions or impromptu topics that are beyond the scope of their experience or capability as a novice speaker. Students who participate in a tournament as part of a classroom experience may be discouraged and feel demeaned because they are not privy to the meaning of some of the terminology or the implied expectations inherent in some extemp questions or impromptu topics. There are far too many writers of questions and developers of topics who seem to take pleasure in watching students struggle with obscure impromptu topics or complex and difficult extemp questions. While it may be appropriate to challenge students to accomplish more difficult tasks, it is not appropriate to provide them with obstacles that will diminish them as a person. It is not possible for a coach to prepare all students in advance of every tournament to expect all of the idiosyncrasies that may appear in extemp questions and impromptu topics. A positive learning experience has not been provided when the coach must spend several hours after a tournament trying to make the students feel better about themselves and the efforts they have expended in trying to deal with capriciously developed topics.

Current research and information about learning styles and multiple intelligences indicate that more careful attention should be given to the development of extemp and impromptu topics. Friedley's ". . . other potentially discriminating variables" (85) could easily include students with various learning styles that are not accommodated by poorly developed topics. It would seem to be appropriate to develop a greater variety of types of questions in extemp or topics in impromptu in order to allow students greater flexibility in developing their speeches.

Some of the steps to be taken by tournament directors to improve the opportunities for students in extemp and impromptu may seem fairly obvious. Each of the following suggestions can be expanded and developed further. Each also implies some additional work on the part of the tournament director or the writers of extemp questions and developers of impromptu topics.

Assigning the task of developing topics should not be taken lightly or capriciously. Those who write questions or develop topics need to be given some guidance by the tournament director, so that topics will reinforce the educational aspects of the tournament experience. It may be necessary for the tournament director to identify those educational goals, so that all members of the tournament staff are working toward the same end.

Care must be taken in word choice, especially in extemp questions, in order to allow students greater opportunities to utilize their own particular abilities, experience, and resources. There is little or no positive educational value in using language that student speakers cannot understand.

The tournament director needs to proofread the topics developed for both extemp and impromptu. In reality, the final responsibility for a rewarding educational tournament experience rests with the director. Proofreading the topics will help the director feel more comfortable in accepting that responsibility.

In extemporaneous speaking, simpler questions may be better than more complex ones. Less experienced speakers, or those with limited resources, will not be disadvantaged by the complexity of the question or the implied expected approach. Experienced speakers, or those with more extensive resources, will be able to utilize their experience and their sources. In fact, they probably should be expected to do that.

In impromptu speaking, topics that move away from the more traditional proverbs or quotations, whether they are cartoons, objects or other stimuli, need to carry with them some explanation of what is expected of the student. That information will also provide the judges with some guidelines for evaluating the students' efforts.

These suggestions may seem fairly conservative and traditional. They are intended to be reminders that progress should not be made at the expense of the educational experience of the students involved in the activity. As improvements are made in tournament management practices and procedures, we must not lose sight of the educational goals and benefits of the activity. A closer look at the educational roots of this activity may be in order.

Friedley points out that ". . . forensic educators must preserve the educational goals of the activity" (85). It will be helpful to identify the educational goals of not only the activity but also of individual tournaments. Each tournament director needs to identify those goals for her or his own tournament, and then take steps to ensure that those goals are met. Forensic educators and the activity can benefit from greater utilization of information about learning styles and multiple intelligences. If we are willing to promote forensics as an extension of a traditional classroom, then we must be willing to utilize in forensics practice the educational techniques implemented in that classroom.

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Supplemental Resources

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Information about learning styles can be obtained from a number of sources, many available from most college and university Education Divisions.