

What the Rules Mean: Using Defined Judging Guidelines to Augment Informal Training

J.G. Harrington
Dow, Lohnes & Albertson (Washington, D.C.)

INTRODUCTION

Informal training of judges is a fact of forensic life. Unlike intercollegiate sports, forensics depends on a pool of interested amateurs to help determine which contestants are the best. Even the professionals among us learn how to judge mostly from our own experiences. This informality has advantages and disadvantages, but there can be no question that it leads to varying judging standards, with almost no way to count on a particular standard being applied to a particular event.

I believe that, absent some unexpected change, our current system of informal training is likely to persist, largely because the characteristics of forensic competition are unlikely to encourage the creation or maintenance of more uniform standards or formal training. Once we recognize those characteristics, we can look to alternative solutions to the problems created by the lack of formal training.

This paper proposes one approach to those problems and suggests how it could improve judging, as well as giving coaches and competitors a useful tool for improving their presentations. What I propose is that tournament directors prepare simple, non-binding judging guidelines for each event at their tournaments. Judging guidelines could do more than give novice judges a set of standards to apply to each event; they could also provide a way for the forensic community to begin to agree, in a basic way, on what we expect from competitors. In light of the

generally *ad hoc* approach we now take to determine what is and isn't meritorious and praiseworthy, I believe this would be an important step in the right direction.

THE PROBLEM

The problems of informal judge training arise, at least in part, from two sources. The first source is the lack of formal, elaborated standards for each of the events. The second source is the inability of the forensic community to adopt uniform standards for who may judge these events. Taken together, these root causes create much of the relative chaos in individual events judging.

Event Standards

The lack of formal standards for each event is perhaps best exemplified by the rules of the events. For instance, the rules of all of the events at the AFA-NIET fit comfortably, albeit in small type, on a single page. This is typical. There are few, if any, tournaments that provide more than the minimum page description of the events they offer.¹ Rather than providing a paradigm or guidelines for the event, they provide only basic information. The judge is left to fill in the blanks.

For example, the AFA rules for Extemporaneous Speaking read as follows:

Contestants will be given three topics in the general area of current events, choose one, and have 30 minutes to prepare a speech that is the original work of the student. Maximum time limit for the speech is 7 minutes. Limited notes are permitted. Students will speak in listed order. Posting of the topics will be staggered.

Several elements of these rules are noteworthy. Most of the rules focus on the process of the event, not what is to be presented. Even those parts of the rules that tell the auditor what the speaker may do fail to explain the elements of a good

¹One notable exception to this rule is Seth Hawkins' Southern Connecticut tournament, which provides some elaboration. Ironically, his Great Eastern invitation offers some of the shortest event descriptions extant.

extemporaneous speech. Instead, the rules say the speech may be seven minutes long, that the speaker may use notes and that the speech must be the speaker's original work. These rules, which are typical for this event, don't even require the speaker to speak on the topic chosen.

The rules for Extemporaneous Speaking are perhaps the most glaring example of opaque rules, in part because process is so important to the event. Most other events have somewhat more illuminating rules. For instance, the AFA After Dinner Speaking rules require a speech "designed to exhibit sound speech composition, thematic coherence, direct communicative public speaking skills, and good taste." On the other hand, the AFA requires contestants in Poetry Interpretation, perhaps the most demanding of the interpretive events for judges and contestants alike, to present "[a] selection or selections of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source," adding only that plays are prohibited, manuscripts are required, and that the entire program, including the otherwise unmentioned introduction, may be up to ten minutes long. These are not useful guidelines.

Most experienced judges know that the rules do not provide useful guidelines, except in relatively rare cases of speeches or pieces in the wrong events or which run overtime. Experienced judges develop their own paradigms for the events they judge, and they use these paradigms to explain their judging decisions on comment sheets and elsewhere. A casual perusal of back editions of *Championship Debates and Speeches* yields many examples of judges, either implicitly or explicitly, explaining their judging paradigms.²

²For examples of this, see Craig Dudzick's critique of the winning Communication Analysis in *1986 Championship Debates and Speeches*, pp. 117-118; Pamela Stepp's critique of the NFA-winning Extemporaneous Speech in *1987 Championship Debates and Speeches*, p. 140; and Todd Lewis' critique of the AFA-winning Informative Speech in *1988 Championship Debates and Speeches*, p. 111. There are many more examples in these books.

Unfortunately, developing sound informal paradigms takes a long time. In the current scheme, there is little that can be done to speed the process. One reason that former competitors are often favored as judges is that they often have spent four or even eight years competing -- more than enough time to develop their own paradigms. Even when experienced competitors begin to judge, however, the best the forensic community can hope is that these new judges have developed paradigms for the events they judge.

Moreover, the paradigms adopted by judges vary widely. Returning to Extemporaneous Speaking, even within the rules judges set many different standards. There are judges who penalize students for using notes, and there are judges who penalize students for failing to use notes.³ There are judges who want a citation for every fact, and judges who merely want to know that the contestant consulted one or two general sources. Even these relatively minor variations make it difficult for competitors to assess their progress, or to be certain they are judged fairly.

While, as discussed below, some of the variations in how an event is judged arise from a lack of judge education, much of it also arises from a failure of the forensic community to articulate or elaborate basic standards for each event. The net results are inconsistent judging and an inability to explain, with certainty, exactly what we mean by Impromptu Speaking or Prose Interpretation. For that matter, what judging uniformity we have is hard won and made more precarious by the community's inability to create basic judging standards. This suggests some sort of new approach is necessary.

³Competitors who are aware of this standard occasionally "refer" to blank note cards when speaking in front of these judges.

Judge Standards

In the absence of defined standards for events, one possible ameliorative device would be standards for judges themselves. Other competitive activities, ranging from baseball to figure skating, have defined hierarchies of their arbiters, and specific requirements for judging different levels of competition. Unfortunately, forensics does not, and there does not appear to be any significant likelihood that any formal judge training will emerge in the near future.

At present, judges enter forensics in something of a state of nature. The overwhelming majority of new judges depend only on their pre-existing knowledge of forensics. In many cases, this knowledge is minimal. Even the expertise of experienced competitors is most often limited to the events in which they excelled.

At the same time, there are no programs in place to fill the knowledge vacuum. The best instructions many judges get are the injunctions on the top of comment sheets to make comments that justify their ranks. There are no formalized training seminars or programs, and no official or unofficial guides to judging from the national organizations.⁴

There is little likelihood that this situation will remedy itself, or that forensic organizations will take the steps necessary to create a highly-trained judging pool. It would be difficult to imagine even weekend-long judging seminars being put into place, let alone the more extensive training that would be necessary to teach a judge every event. More importantly, given the chronic shortage of judges, it is even more difficult to imagine that a requirement for meaningful formal judge training could be imposed on any tournament, even at the national level. At the local or regional level, training requirements would appear an impossible ideal.

⁴A few local tournaments provide basic judging information. However, this information is often limited to the basic mechanics of judging. The Green Sheet distributed by Seth Hawkins, actually a four-page compilation, is an example of such a guide.

Adoption of a formal training requirement also would be made more difficult by the existing variations in judging standards for individual events. There is little point to teaching a judge the mechanical aspects of judging without also teaching what is meant, for instance, by such phrases as "literary merit" or "communication event."

The result of this training vacuum can be seen at every speech tournament. Judges fall back on their own experiences and on the almost-always inadequate rules. In many or even most cases, this is enough to produce both a fair result in the round being judged and a meaningful, accurate critique for the student. At the same time, there are far too many times when the judge fails to produce either a fair result or a meaningful critique. These failures hurt the educational process and the students' confidence in the forensic community's ability to evaluate the quality of their performances accurately.

Thus, the lack of specific, substantive event descriptions and the inability of the forensic community to train its judges in any formal way are very real phenomena. These phenomena result not only in widely varying approaches to the events, but in very real frustration for competitors and coaches alike. Moreover, it is apparent that it is unlikely that the forensic community will be able to create or enforce any formalized training requirements for judges. For that reason, it seems that the best approach is to begin to define the requirements of each event more specifically. The remainder of this paper is devoted to a proposal to do just that.

THE EVENT GUIDELINE SHEET

The essential problem of defining what we mean by "Persuasive Speaking" or "Dual Interpretation of Drama" can be approached in many ways. Most judges learn by example: they watch performances and define what each event is by

seeing what they like and don't like. This definition by example may be visceral or intellectualized, but the process is much the same either way.

Alternatively, it is possible to learn through explanations. Many novice judges and competitors are given brief thumbnail sketches of events: "An Informative is a speech that tells you about something without attempting to persuade you to do something about it." Competitors often learn this way by reading judges' explanations of ranks.

As commonly practiced, these are both piecemeal methods of learning. A judge is unlikely to develop a paradigm for an event from watching a single round, even a national-level final. Even the most extensive explanation leaves out many important essentials, like the function of organization or the importance of source citation. There is rarely any sense of an integrated whole, of putting all the pieces together, in either of these approaches.

There is, however, an alternative that will allow a new judge or, for that matter, competitor, to understand the whole of an event. That alternative is a formal guideline to the event, or what will be referred to in this paper as an Event Guideline Sheet.

The purpose of an Event Guideline Sheet would be to provide a brief explanation of all of the important elements of a successful performance in a particular event. An Event Guideline Sheet would bring together on a single page the rules for the event, a precis of what the judge should expect and short explanations of the individual elements of an event. There would be no "national" standard for Event Guideline Sheets, though national tournaments might choose to prepare them. Rather, each tournament director would prepare them for any event offered at his or her tournament. An example of an Event Guideline Sheet for Extemporaneous Speaking is attached to this paper.

Event Guideline Sheets would be available for judges to use at a tournament. The tournament director could make a point of giving the sheets to new judges and could make the sheets available to any interested judge or competitor. While ambitious tournament directors might include them in their tournament invitations, the intent of the Event Guideline Sheet is not to replace the rules but to supplement them.⁵

Adoption of Event Guideline Sheets would be likely to have several beneficial effects. At a minimum, they would provide novice judges with basic guidelines for the events they judge early in their careers. Event Guideline Sheets also could be important coaching tools for beginning competitors.⁶ While the level of detail on an Event Guideline Sheet would not approach the subtleties that often separate the very best competitors, it would certainly provide a good base on which to build judging and competitive expertise.

Event Guideline Sheets also would help to foster more uniform approaches to the various events. While a certain amount of variation and experimentation is certainly a good thing, widely varying regional standards serve only to frustrate contestants and coaches. Writing down explanations of the standards for individual events will also force those involved in the "codification" process to understand the reasons for those standards, which can only increase the sophistication of the

⁵It would be particularly useful to include Event Guideline Sheets in invitations to tournaments with unusual events. The 1990 edition of *Intercollegiate Speech Tournament Results* (ISTR) indicates that there were 34 events offered at five or fewer tournaments in 1989-90. 1990 ISTR at 25. Event Guideline Sheets might have increased entries in these unusual events, and certainly would have improved the likelihood that the performances in these events would meet the tournament organizers' expectations.

⁶In fact, Event Guideline Sheets could, in many cases, be adapted from materials that coaches already have prepared to explain events to novices.

forensic community's approaches to performance, coaching and judging. At the same time, the voluntary nature of the guidelines will permit both innovation and a certain level of idiosyncrasy.

There are certain dangers in the widespread adoption of Event Guideline Sheets. The most important of these is that, if improperly designed, Event Guideline Sheets could become overly technical and, consequently, as useless to beginners as the current rules. Forensics constantly runs the risk of creating standards divorced from the real world, and Event Guideline Sheets could reinforce that tendency. However, a focus on the purpose of Event Guideline Sheets -- educating those who are not already trained to evaluate performances effectively -- would likely prevent this from happening.

CONCLUSION

This paper has outlined some of the implications of the current system of informal judge training, notably a wide variation in judging criteria. It also has explored elements of the causes of this variation, focusing on how the current rules force judges to develop event paradigms and the current and future inability of the forensic community to provide formal training. Because it is unlikely that formal judge training will be widespread in the foreseeable future, this paper proposes adoption, by individual tournament directors, of Event Guideline Sheets detailing the basic criteria for each event. Using Event Guideline Sheets has many potential benefits for judges, competitors and coaches, and the risks of using them are small. For these reasons, it seems likely that the adoption of Event Guidelines Sheets would benefit the forensic community and help to ameliorate some of the problems caused by the current regime of informal judge training.

Event Guideline Sheet Extemporaneous Speaking

Event Rules

Contestants will be given three topics in the general area of current events, choose one, and have 30 minutes to prepare a speech that is the original work of the student. Maximum time limit for the speech is 7 minutes. Limited notes are permitted. Students will speak in the listed order. Posting of the topics will be staggered.

What the Event Requires

In this event, contestants are expected to prepare a speech on a current events topic in a half hour. The topic will usually, but not always, be in the form of a question that the speech answers. The information in the speech should be documented from reliable sources. The speech may be up to seven minutes long. Contestants may use notes, but they are not required to do so. Because the contestants have only seven minutes to speak, they must be given time signals so they know how much of their time they have used.

What to Look For

1. **Attention Step:** The speech should begin in a way that catches your attention. Anecdotes, metaphors and descriptions of the importance of the subject are among the ways to do this.
2. **Introduction:** The speaker should connect the attention step to the topic in some way. The introduction may blend with the attention step.
3. **The Topic:** The speaker should tell you the topic, word for word. This is important because the topic is the driving force behind the rest of the speech.
4. **Thesis:** The speaker should tell you the central theme of the speech. Usually this will be his or her response to the topic. The thesis statement may also include reasons for that response.
5. **Preview:** A brief outline of what will be said during the body of the speech. This may be part of the thesis statement.
6. **Analysis:** The speaker should justify the conclusions reached in the thesis statement. This may be done by citing facts, by analogy or by any reasonable method of proof.
7. **Evidence:** The speech should include sufficient facts to back up the analysis. The speaker should tell you the sources of those facts, including dates and publications. The quality of the sources is also important. For instance, the *New York Times* is a better source than the *National Enquirer*.
8. **Delivery:** A clear and pleasant tone of voice is a plus. You should also look for good diction, good grammar and intelligent word choice.
9. **Topic Choice:** The speakers each choose one topic from among three. All other things being equal, a speaker who chooses a more difficult or unusual topic should be proportionately rewarded.