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## Nothing More Than a White Lie: An Examination of Ethics in Extemporaneous Speaking

Ric L. Shafer

*Texas Tech University*, [ric.shafer@ttu.edu](mailto:ric.shafer@ttu.edu)

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## **Nothing More than a Little White Lie An Examination of Ethics in Extemporaneous Speaking**

Ric L. Shafer

### **Abstract**

The majority of text books in public speaking define extemporaneous speaking as the act of delivering a speech using limited notes. Despite what we teach in our classes, however, cultural norms in competitive speech tend to reward those students that compete in the event without the use of notes. Recent research highlights erroneous source citations and outright fabrications by contestants, many of which can be attributed to the unspoken expectation that students refrain from using notes. This paper attempts to challenge that norm by questioning the educational benefits of teaching, promoting and rewarding this practice. The paper will compare what we teach in our classes to what has become the norm inside forensics.

### **Introduction**

A first year student of mine told me one semester that he had found the perfect impromptu example. He explained that the book *Mad Man*, by Robert Parks, was “applicable in virtually every round.” I cautioned the student against overusing this book, explaining that its applicability was probably the result of him stretching and manipulating the example. I later learned that although the title and author of the book stayed the same, the plot and characters were altered from round to round as needed to fit the quotation. The book, I discovered, didn’t actually exist. Although I have caught isolated students on my team cheating before, this was the first time in my coaching career that a student had volunteered that information.

As I began to further investigate this case, and as we began to discuss ethics as a team, I discovered that this wasn’t the only event that my student was cheating in, nor was he the only student on that team guilty of the same offense. Although not all of my students were involved, I discovered that a great number of individuals on my team had committed ethical violations. The event where this seemed most apparent was extemporaneous speaking. Several of my students admitted that they were careless with the accuracy of source citations. Others admitted to the outright fabrication of sources. Most argued that this practice was widespread not only on our team, but also across our national circuit. It seemed as if Burnett, Brand & Meister (2001) were correct when they argued “the educational value of forensics has been supplanted by the desire to win.” These authors continue by suggesting “the value of competition has come to outweigh the value of education in intercollegiate individual events practice” (pg. 106). Although I would disagree with this sentiment on the whole, the discovery that my own students were cheating opened my eyes to the pervasiveness of these ethical violations.

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Although there are a plethora of reasons that students cheat in extemporaneous speaking, this paper argues that this phenomenon exists partially because of our unrealistic expectations for the event. Despite the fact that the majority of our text books in public speaking define extemporaneous speaking as the act of delivering a speech using limited notes, many student choose not to use notes because of the unspoken, and many times spoken expectation that they refrain from doing so. This paper attempts to challenge that norm by questioning the educational value of teaching, promoting and rewarding this practice. I will begin with a discussion of ethics in forensics, with an emphasis placed on extemporaneous speaking. The paper will then compare what we teach in our classes to what has become the norm inside our activity. Finally, I will offer suggestions for how both coaches and student can decrease ethical violations in this event by challenging cultural norms and unwritten expectations.

### Ethical Violations in Extemporaneous Speaking

This paper is not the first to question the ethical behavior of students in both debate and individual events. As Cronn-Mills (2000) notes, the American Forensics Association has responded to similar essays by creating a comprehensive code covering both debate and individual events (pg 61). Without enforcement, however, these codes provide little incentive for student to follow ethical principles. Mason (1989) argues that without proper punishment for ethical violations these practices will continue. A message posted to the Individual Events Listserv (IE-L) concurs when it suggests that the practice of using erroneous citations and the fabrication of sources is “being taught (if only through allowing the practice to occur) as not only acceptable, but necessary for success” (IE-L, November 11, 2003, 10:28).

A host of reasons are offered to explain why students commit ethical violations. One message posted to the IE-L suggested that citation errors were a result of “sloppiness, a lack of defined standards, willfulness, cheating and memory problems” (IE-L, November 11,2003, 10:23). This post was in reference to an article written by Daniel Cronn-Mills and Larry G. Schnoor in the 2003 edition of the National Forensics Journal. Cronn-Mills and Schnoor (2003) examined the six final round contestants in Informative Speaking at the 1998 American Forensics Association National Individual Events Tournament. They discovered that “all six speakers appear to have violated the AFA code (198211998) in one manner or another” which they argue “clearly indicates a systemic issue within intercollegiate individual events competition” pg. 16).

When you consider that the Cronn-Mills and Schnoor article examined prepared events, it stands to reason that ethical violations and/or source citation mistakes in a limited-prep event, like extemporaneous speaking, would find similar or even more egregious results. Markstrom (1994) notes students in extemporaneous speaking often cite inaccurate or fabricated information. He found only 44 percent of sources cited “matched the general topic nature of the source” (pg. 25). This fails to account for those sources that matched the topic but failed to accurately portray the evidence being used. When commenting on these re-

sults, Cronn-Mills and Schnoor suggest “speakers were clearly misrepresenting the evidence used in extemporaneous speeches” (pg. 5).

### When Conventional Norms Contradict Scholarly Research

There are differing opinions as to why students feel compelled to commit ethical violations, as well as varying opinions as to how the community should address these violations. Some researchers argue that judges have an unrealistic expectation regarding the number of sources a speaker cite. Williams (1997) argues that too many judges are more concerned with the number of sources that a speaker cites as opposed to the quality of said sources (pg. 107). Evidence of this, a series of hash marks, can be found near the top of many ballots. Cronn-Mills & Schnoor (2003) note that despite checking numerous public speaking text books, not one references the quantity of sources, while all examine the importance of quality source citations @g 19) Kuster (2002) describes the number of sources expected in extemporaneous presentations as “stultifying” (pg. 52). He argues that “unwritten” rules create and reinforce these expectations.

One post to the I-EL dismisses these claims, arguing instead that we should raise our expectations regarding source citations. The author notes that “it may be because I’m in a business where you provide a source for nearly everything, but this study [the Cronn-Mills & Schnoor study] suggests that we ought to stop worrying about the excuses and start asking contestants to meet a higher standard” (IE-L, November 11,2003, 10:23). The same author argues that many errors are a result of memory mistakes, like “flipping citations or mixing up dates, even though the information is correct in their notes.” The author states that “I don’t consider that a real problem—the contestants generally have the right intent and just mix things up” (EL, November 11,2003, 10,23).

I respectfully disagree with two of the preceding statements. First, I agree with Cronn-Mills & Schnoor (2003) when they argue “we sincerely believe most student do not commit ethical violations” (pg. 16). I understand that students make mistakes, and it would be wrong to conclude that the majority of students intentionally cheat. However, I think we are too quick to dismiss the research. The research indicates that an overwhelming number of the sources cited in prepared speeches are cited erroneously, and the numbers are even more alarming in i extemporaneous speaking. It would be naive to suggest that all of these students mistakenly cite erroneous information, or even that the students who intentionally cheat is low.

It is also unethical and anti-educational for us to continue to allow students to cite inaccurate sources and misrepresent information, even if we believe most are simple mistakes. These mistakes, and a great deal of the intentional ethical violations, are a result of our unrealistic expectations and unwritten rules that govern the event. The AFA-NIET Description of Events page notes that students in extemporaneous speaking are allowed to use limited notes (2003- 2004 Description of Events- AFA-NIET). Ballots from a host of regional and national tournaments also indicate that notes are allowed. Despite this, judges often write that they dropped a student because he or she used notes. One recent ballot informed one of my students that “in a close round like this sometimes the only Speaker and Gavel, Vol 42 (2005)

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way you can separate competitors is based on who uses notes and who doesn't" (Student Ballot, October 2003). I recognize that despite written rules, judges are allowed to have their own evaluative standards. I ask you, however, how you would react if a ballot included as part of the "reason for decision" that a student was dropped because he or she failed to use notes?

Current norms and practices not only violate written rules that govern the activity, they also run counter to what we teach in our public speaking classrooms. Seiler and Beall (2001) argues that individuals who speak extemporaneously use "a carefully prepared and researched speech, but delivers it from notes, with a high degree of spontaneity." They note that "speakers depend on a brief presentational outlines or notes and choose the actual wording of the speech at the time of delivery" (pg. 275). Gregory (1987) argue that speakers glance at their notes occasionally to remind themselves of their next point (pg. 275). Zarefsky (2002), one of the many public speaking text book authors who coached forensics, defines extemporaneous speaking as "a speech that is prepared and rehearsed but is neither written out nor memorized (pg. 303). Devito (2002), (2003), Wood (2001), Rothwell (2004), Adler & Rodman (2003), Jaffe (2001), Pfeiffer (2002), Morreale, Spitzberg and Barge (2001), Dunn and Goodnight (2003), O'Hair and Stewart (1999), and Beebe, S. A., Beebe, S. J., & Ivy (2001) all define extemporaneous speaking in similar fashions.

Hybels and Weaver (2004) do offer some advice as to what students should memorize, if anything, when performing extemporaneous speeches. They argue that "the speaker might commit the main ideas of the speech to memory-possibly the introduction and the conclusion-but will rely on notes to remember most of the speech" (pg. 538). Out of the fifteen public speaking text books surveyed, only one even suggested the possibility of a student memorizing their outline or sources for an extemporaneous presentation. Ross (1998) suggests that "an extemporaneous speech is most effective when given from a brief but meaningful outline, which is carried in either your head or your hand and which is supported by thorough preparation" (pg 181). Although this text does inform its readers that they can carry the outline in "their heads," it doesn't advocate that students do so.

Why then do we teach one thing during the week and reward the opposite each weekend? Some argue that certain occupations "require" that speakers memorize extemporaneous speeches (IE-L, November 11,2003, 1 O:23). In the past, others have argued that some professions, like that of a lawyer, require memorized extemporaneous presentations. This, however, is not the norm. In the court cases that I have observed, including the capital murder case that I recently served as a jury, I member for, the lawyers all used notes for their presentations. Nor, I argue, was there an expectation that any of the lawyers prepare their speeches in a thirty-minute timeframe. Wood (2001) argues attorneys, politicians and others "most often use an extemporaneous style of presentation" (pg. 290). Devito (2002) reminds readers most of us in the teaching profession use this mode of presentation as well. He notes "good lecturing by college teachers is extemporaneous" (pg. 337). Even in classes I have taught a number of times

before I use notes during my extemporaneous presentations. Do you teach without notes to improve your ethos amongst your students?

### **Challenging Cultural Norms And Unwritten Expectations**

This paper highlights the contradictions between what we teach in our classrooms and how we coach our competitors. Several steps are offered that can be taken in order to challenge these cultural norms and unwritten expectations.

First, as coaches and educators we have an obligation to make our students aware of the ethical uses of evidence. Cronn-Mills & Schnoor (2003) suggest directors "reinforce and explicitly teach the AFA Code of Forensics Programs and Forensics Tournaments Standards for Colleges and Universities" (pg. 18). This is true in both limited prep and platform events. As one post to the IE-L suggests, we should all renew our commitment to "teaching students about evaluating evidence and how to engage in effective documentation of materials" (IE-L, November 10, 2003, 18:22). If judges write sources on ballots, take that as an opportunity to sit down and read through some of those articles with your students. This not only gives you as the coach a mechanism for checking your students, it may also facilitate discussions about using evidence, or promote a discussion about the topic area in general. This is also a technique that should be utilized more often during practice sessions.

Second, document your reason for rank on each ballot. Make sure that your comments are based on sound pedagogy, not on tradition, norms, or unwritten rules. As Casale (2003) notes, "there are very definite written rules which we can all reference and follow ... however, confusion is sure to abound (and conflicts arise) when ballots literally tell a student they are doing an event-such as Impromptu or Extemporaneous Speaking- wrong" (pg. 91). When you host tournaments, make sure all hired and volunteer judges are aware of the rules that govern your tournament. If you personally prefer that students refrain from using notes, please indicate so on your ballot. If you instead prefer students use notes, also indicate that on your ballot. I would encourage those in both camps to resist the temptation to use it as a basis for a decision. If you must, please educational reasons that justify your decision.

Finally, although I disagree adamantly with some of the conclusions drawn by Burnett, Brand and Meister (2001), I do believe that we must be careful not to place competitive goals above educational goals. Many students who choose to compete without notes in extemporaneous speaking, and many of the coaches and judges who encourage and reward it, do so for competitive gain, not educationally sound reasons. Although I believe that competition and education are both valuable, and both support each other, if one is to be sacrificed it should be competition. This thought is illustrated best in one last post to the IE-L, written by a person responding to an accusation of ethical violations. The author concludes by saying "take the pewter and the lucite back, because, at least for me, that represents the tiniest part of why I do this" (IE-L, November 14, 2003). Hopefully we can all make that same claim, and place ethics and education above competition.

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Ric L. Shafer is the director of forensics at Texas Tech University. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the National Communication Association National Convention, Miami, FL, November 21, 2003.