

## STANDARDS FOR EVALUATION/JUDGING

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### THE INDIVIDUAL EVENT BALLOT: PEDAGOGICAL TOOL OR NARCISSISTIC SOAPBOX?

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I was recently discussing a tournament which a colleague of mine had hosted. At that tournament, one particular judge who was the coach of one of the schools attending the tournament, was turning in blank ballots. Only rank and rate were recorded. Upon confronting this coach and mentioning the importance of writing comments, the person responded "Why? They're only novices."

Most coaches have had to deal with this type of judge and ballot at one time or another. These ballots also provide the coach with the opportunity of attempting to console the distraught student who received the ballot and has selected some colorful adjectives with which to describe this judge.

As widespread as this "useless ballot" phenomenon may be, I do not believe that poor or blank ballots, in and by themselves, are the real problem which needs to be addressed. Useless ballots are a symptom of a larger disease towards which our attention should turn. The key problem which this paper will address is that when an individual receives, or is handed a ballot at a tournament, that individual is not assuming full responsibility for what that ballot means. By taking that ballot, that individual is not merely the judge of that panel, but has in actuality become the teacher of each student in that room. Therefore, each ballot must be viewed as a pedagogical tool by that judge.

Before developing some standards for evaluating/judging individual events, it is necessary to understand what exactly a ballot should do, and to look at some of the problems surrounding present standards and why new standards are in order. This paper will focus upon the pedagogical aspect of judging by first, examining the educational aspect of forensics; second, exploring the "useless ballot" issue and attempting to identify some causes of the problem; and finally, presenting some possible solutions and guidelines which might aid in correcting this concern. Hopefully, discussion will be generated from this paper and panel which will result in promoting our discipline as a whole. This paper attempts to merely be the catalyst for that discussion as the author is confident that many of his ballots have received some "colorful metaphors" as well!

## EDUCATIONAL JUSTIFICATION

The argument for the justification of the educational benefits/purpose of forensics need not take long at a conference of this nature. The 1974 National Developmental Conference on Forensics defined forensics as "an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." Ulrich (1984) clearly argues that "Students competing in forensics contests share a unique opportunity to learn and to experience personal growth" (p. 18). And McBath (1984) most aptly points out that "At its essence, forensics is an educational activity which provides students with the opportunity to develop a high level of proficiency in writing, thinking, reading, speaking, and listening" (p. 10).

These are but a few of the many arguments available for the educational benefits of forensics. From what is provided alone, however, there is consensus that forensics is educational. Therefore, when a student enters a room to speak at a tournament, that student should be able to assume that the judge will engage in pedagogy. Upon receiving and reading their ballots, the students should experience some type of learning process. It therefore becomes necessary for the judge to assume the role of teacher in order for this process to transpire.

## BALLOT PROBLEMS

Not all judges assume the attitude of the individual mentioned in the introduction to this paper (hopefully!). However, the fact remains that ballots are often far from helpful or useful to a student. Apart from tracking down poor ballot writers and asking "Why are you a terrible judge?" the following are three possible speculations.

As indicated by the comment from the judge in the introduction, perhaps the first "excuse" for poor, shallow, or useless ballots revolves around the fact that many judges may not understand the importance of the pedagogical nature of ballots. Some judges are not "educators." They do not teach in the classroom and judge for profit or as a favor to the host. That the judge is responsible to teach the student with helpful, effective, constructive comments may never have been explained to them.

Even if the judge is aware of this need, a second "excuse" may be that the judge just does not know what to write. The judge may not even know the event or may think that everyone is terrific. Often event rules, judging criteria, specifics, etc., are not clear and the judge literally has no idea what to write. Therefore, the best solution available in order to prevent writing a comment which may be incorrect or cause the judge to appear incompetent, is to not write anything at all.

Finally, a third, and very valid "excuse" for poor ballot writing may be time pressure and fatigue. Too often tournaments cram round after round and tournament directors are constantly "pushing ballots" to get them out and keep

the tournament running on time. As a judge begins to feel pressure to "stay on schedule" the simple solution is to keep comments short or to even write nothing at all. Often, those judges who do run late because they are writing ballots are teased for taking so long. Also, judging shortages require the use of judges for multiple rounds which further sends the message to just hurry up and move on.

#### ADDITIONAL BALLOT PROBLEMS

Also contributing to the pedagogical demise of tournament ballots are two other types of ballots which are equally as useless as the ballot with little or no comments.

The first is the rude ballot. These are ballots which reflect a conceited, selfish, or non-caring attitude from the judge. The ballot becomes a narcissistic soapbox and pedagogy is abandoned. Actual ballots have been received by my students with only short, rude comments such as (ADS) "I came to this round expecting to laugh, but not at this speech," (6-75). (C.A.) "Polly, it's nice to see you trying C.A., but if you plan to stay in this event you are going to need a better effort," (6-70). And my favorite went to a student who was presenting an informative speech on why humans lie. Her attention getter consisted of listing the 10 most common lies. The sole comment on the ballot (from a well known figure in the forensics community) was "You forgot the most common lie -I promise \_\_\_\_\_ in your mouth," (6-73).

Needless to say, the students who received these ballots did not view them positively. The lack of helpful teaching from these judges disillusioned the student; the activity failed to teach and help the student, and failed to meet their needs. As a result, when the students left forensics, they carried with them some bad feelings about the activity.

A second, and just as damaging type of ballot is the "personal opinion" ballot. These are the ballots where the judge takes it upon him/herself not to judge the student on the quality of the arguments made, clarity of organization, or presentational skills, but feels the need to merely inject personal opinion. There is a difference between a scholarly opinion and a personal opinion. A scholarly opinion is justified and warranted and consists of such comments as "Your second argument is a hasty generalization when you assume that..." or "I do not think that you fully understand what Burke meant by identification." The personal opinion involves such comments as when I had a student cite a particular person in their speech and the judge merely said "I think so-and-so is a jerk", (6-79). Other comments such as "We wouldn't need more money for education if Reagan wasn't such a jerk," also fall into this category.

The student must be taught how to develop and create good arguments and should be judged solely on that accomplishment. Failure by the judge to do so often indicates that pedagogy has been abandoned and the narcissistic soapbox

has become the focus.

Neither type of ballot helps the student, the event, the tournament, or the activity. A concerted effort by the forensics community must be made to eliminate these types of ballots, develop critical pedagogy, and promote the positive aspects of the discipline. The following guidelines are proposed as possible corrective measures.

#### GUIDELINES

1. Tournament directors must take responsibility for the quality of judges and judges' comments on ballots. Tab room personnel should observe ballots which are not pedagogical and bring them to the attention of the tournament director who should then pull the judge aside and discuss the importance of good, quality comments on the ballots. This will help to communicate the importance of pedagogical ballots.

2. Tournament directors should consider presenting "Outstanding Judge" awards at tournaments. This will positively reward those who do write good ballots and help to send a message to the rest of the judging community on the importance of good ballots. Recipients might possibly be selected by tournament directors and tab room personnel by skimming ballots as they are tabbed.

3. Tournament schedules must be altered to allow judges time to write comments after the rounds are completed. The "Round 1-9:00, Round 2-10:00, Round 3-11:00, etc." attitude needs to be eliminated. A "9:00-10:15-11:30" schedule is only appropriate if panels are limited to five students. When six students are consistently used in each panel, one and one-half hours between rounds (i.e., 9:00-10:30-12:00) seems a minimum. Good educational, teaching ballots are far more important than getting awards ceremonies done early in the day. Possibly budgeting occasional breaks in the schedule might also provide the judge time off in order to rest. By altering the time schedule, this will help to eliminate the "lack of time to write a good ballot" argument.

4. Judges need to be verbally reminded at opening assemblies, at the ballot table, in the hallways, etc., that comments on ballots are essential.

5. Some type of possible financial sanctions may be executed. Hired judges are hired with the clear understanding that financial compensation for their time will only transpire if ballots are turned in which are deemed positive by the tournament personnel.

6. Tournament directors need to work hard to discourage the use of personal opinions by judges. Verbal reminders and instructions on ballots should help to send this message.

7. Perhaps the best possible solution is to actually provide criteria on the ballots which judges may use as a guide by which to evaluate the speeches in the round. These are not to be strict rules, but flexible guidelines and should be communicated as such. Judges need to be asked if they would like to receive

the ballot they just wrote. If not, they need to consider some other possible guidelines. Appendix A to this paper is a possible sample ballot guideline which could actually be attached to a set of ballots. The sample is for rhetorical criticism and encourages the judge to understand the role of "teacher" which the judge must assume, general speech evaluation criteria, and specific rhetorical criticism criteria.

Appendix B of this paper is a sample of judging guidelines presently used at a tournament on the West Coast.

These are samples of possible criteria which might be referred to. It is hoped that this panel and this convention produce similar such guidelines which may be referred to by tournament directors. Various cover sheets should be developed for various events. For interp events, a possible criteria to reference could be Jay Verlinden's (1987) metacritical model for judging. After Dinner ballot criteria might draw upon excerpts from Dreibelbis and Redmon (1987). Dean (1987) might prove useful for impromptu and extemp guidelines. And Logue's (1982) "Guidelines for the use of argument in prepared events" could provide direction in informative or persuasion. Many other articles are available for this purpose.

These judging guidelines can help to eliminate the "event criteria is not clear" excuse.

8. A final guideline which needs to be discussed is the elimination of the "this is an old topic/interp" comment.

Yes, many veteran coaches have heard several speeches on certain topics, and it is the responsibility of the students' coach to point this potential concern out to the student in practice sessions. However, if a student really wants to speak on a particular topic or interp a specific piece, that student deserves the chance to learn how to do what they are doing. Too many judges are so closed minded that as soon as an "overdone" topic (in their perception) is introduced, that judge closes their ears and refuses to give the student a chance. It is appropriate to mention this concern to the student, but it should not become a factor in the ranking. The speech should be judged fairly against the other speeches in that round. This is obviously not promoting a learning, educational environment.

Yes, a topic may be old to a veteran judge, but the young student has not been around as long and this topic is very new to them. It is our responsibility as teachers to encourage each student to learn how to explore ideas, develop arguments, present thoughts, and learn critical thinking.

Voltaire argued, "I disagree with what you are saying, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." While studying under the great teacher Wayne Brockriede in graduate school, I had the privilege of Wayne disagreeing with my ideas on many occasions. However, no matter what the topic, or no matter how much he disagreed with me, Wayne never failed to teach me, to encourage

me to make the best argument I could, and to learn how to think. The goal was always the process of critical thinking, not to stand on a narcissistic soapbox because the topic was old.

Every time a judge picks up a ballot, that judge becomes a teacher and no matter what the topic, has the responsibility to teach that student. Teaching can only take place with an open mind.

#### CONCLUSION

This essay has addressed an essential area when assessing the judging criteria for individual events. That forensics is an educational activity is a foregone conclusion. Therefore, judges must view themselves as teachers and assume that pedagogical responsibility every time they receive a ballot. Many ballots are useless, rude, or contain far too many personal opinions to be effective pedagogical tools. Many ballots fail to teach due to lack of understanding by the judge as to the importance of the teaching nature of ballots, lack of time at tournaments to write effective comments, or lack of clear criteria with which to evaluate the speech.

Several guidelines have been proposed in this paper which attempt to correct many of these concerns. The guidelines are not without flaws and are not presented as the final word. However, when discussing standards for evaluating/judging individual events, we must begin by examining some possible weaknesses of the present system. Useless ballots must be a part of this examination.

#### APPENDIX A

##### JUDGING GUIDELINES FOR RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Dear Judge,

Thank you for helping to make this tournament as much of a success as possible. It is the goal of this tournament to provide as positive of a learning experience as possible. Therefore, your comments on each ballot will help to do that.

You are the teacher in this round! Your comments will teach these students how to improve. Please justify your decisions and offer both positive and negative criticism. PLEASE refrain from the use of personal opinion. The following are some proposed guidelines (not strict rules):

**DELIVERY:** Try to comment on vocal projection, gestures, body movement, posture, facials, relaxed appearance, confidence.

**STRUCTURE:** Comment on Introduction, Body, Conclusion, Thesis Statement, Clear Main Points, etc.

**RHETORICAL CRITICISM SPECIFICS:** In *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism*, Brock and Scott point out that "The primary purposes of rhetorical criticism are to describe, to interpret, and to evaluate" (p. 19). Therefore, when evaluating the speeches in this round, please comment on how well the student:

1. Describes clearly the phenomenon being examined, the model being used, historical background, etc.
  2. Interpretation of the phenomenon and the relevant ramifications.
  3. Judges or evaluates the phenomenon and the interpretation of that phenomenon.
- Should a student fail to fulfill any of these guidelines, please explain how and why they might improve their criticism.  
Thank you for your help and cooperation!

Joe Forensics  
Tournament Director

#### APPENDIX B PROPOSED INSTRUCTIONS TO JUDGES

The tournament would like to offer the following suggestions and guidelines to facilitate your judging and to ensure an educational experience for the competitors.

**ORAL COMMENTS:** Judges may not reveal their decisions to anyone but designated tab room personnel. Judges should not delay turning in their ballots by engaging in discussion with competitors during or immediately after the round.

**TIME LIMITS:** A judge may use his or her discretion in evaluating whether or not the seriousness of exceeding the maximum time should result in a loss of one or more ratings and/or rankings.

**TIME SIGNALS:** Please provide appropriate time signals to competitors in impromptu and extemp.

**BALLOT RETURN:** Please return ballots promptly.

**JUDGING PHILOSOPHY:** In debate, judges are encouraged to state their judging philosophy at the beginning of the round to facilitate speaker adaptation.

**CALLING CODES IN ROUNDS:** Judges must call out speaker codes before the round begins, so that both judges and students will know that they are in the correct round.

**WAITING:** In Individual Events, judges should wait a minimum of one hour beyond commencement of the round before assuming a competitor is not going to show. In debate, if one or both teams are not in the room ready to debate 15 minutes after the round is scheduled to begin, the judge should report to the tabroom.

**VISUAL AIDS:** Are not required or prohibited in any non-interpretive individual event.

**JUDGE Demeanor:** Judges are encouraged to present a positive and attentive attitude toward speakers. No smoking in the room during a round.

**BALLOT INFORMATION:** Please double check your ballots before re-

turning them to ensure that all necessary information has been included. In debate, please be sure you have indicated the winner of the round (by both sides and speaker), have indicated speaker points, and have indicated ranks for all the speakers.

**BALLOT COMMENTS:** To facilitate the educational value of the activity judges are encouraged to write copiously and constructively. Oral critiques shall not substitute for written ballots. It is acceptable to write comments during the presentation. Suggestions for comments are as follows:

1. Never leave the ballot blank. Make at least one written suggestion for improvement.
2. Try to make at least one positive comment on the strength of their performance (They really need the strokes).
3. Focus the critique on behavior rather than the person. i.e. "Try slowing down your rate to capture more emotion," rather than "You are a lousy interpreter..why aren't you in debate?"
4. Focus the critique on observations rather than inferences. i.e. "I think you need to provide a rationale for choosing these examples," rather than "You obviously do not understand the implications of this research."
5. Focus the critique on exploration of alternatives rather than absolutes. i.e. "If you are going to focus on two major points you want to make sure to give them both equal attention," rather than "You must have three points in an impromptu speech."
6. Focus the critique on the value it may have to the receiver not on the value of the "release" it provides you. i.e. "I would like to make the following suggestions for improvement..." rather than "It is very painful for me to sit through the most boring recitation I have ever heard."

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