

TABLE 3

The National Forensic Association Academic Learning Compact incorporates student learning outcome activity across five domains that should characterize the skills and abilities of a successfully trained student/competitor in collegiate forensics, regardless of the program, which they represent. The Academic Learning Compact¹ should align with the following five domains.

DISCIPLINE KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS (ALC 1)

- (ALC 1.1) Use communication technology effectively.
- (ALC 1.2) Describe and apply communication concepts and principles from the following areas:
 - Rhetorical theory
 - Fundamentals of speech
 - Audience analysis
 - Fundamentals of oral interpretation of literature
 - Argumentation

COMMUNICATION (ALC 2)

- (ALC 2.1) Adapt style and delivery to communication clearly and memorably.
- (ALC 2.2) Deliver effective presentations with well-defined introductions, main points, supporting information, and conclusions.
- (ALC 2.3) Establish credibility with audience.
- (ALC 2.4) Use information technology effectively to conduct research.

CRITICAL THINKING (ALC 3)

- (ALC 3.1) Apply rhetorical, relational and critical theories to understand communication events.
- (ALC 3.2) Evaluate effective and ineffective communication.
- (ALC 3.3) Suggest audience-centered strategies for improvement in public speaking and performance that are considerate of the speaker
- (ALC 3.4) Identify trustworthy evidence and information.

INTEGRITY/VALUES (ALC 4)

- (ALC 4.1) Distinguish between ethical and unethical behavior in human communication.
- (ALC 4.2) Describe and adhere to the principles of ethical practice in public speaking, performance, scholarly activity and citizenship.

Coaching for the Interstate Oratory Contest: Strategies for Success

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Perhaps no truer words were spoken about the Interstate Oratory Contest than by luminary coach Grace Walsh in her observations on oratory in the special edition of *Winning Orations* devoted to her when she commented, “Little agreement exists about what is a great oration these days.” Today, some thirty years later, those words continue to ring true. With 135 years of history, countless orations have been dubbed “winning” and the study of what makes successful oratory and orators persists. The purpose of this essay is to share some strategies about coaching successful oratory for this contest, with regard to topic choice, speech content, audience and judge analysis and delivery skills, acknowledging my limited perspective which includes but the past forty years.

As an avenue of study, oratory has been at the forefront of our discipline. The earliest volume of the *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking* devoted attention to the art of oratory (Gunnison 1915). Throughout the years, the Interstate Oratory Association has been the subject of a variety of studies, attempting to examine what comprises successful oratory. In 1984, Olson did a content analysis of the first five winning speeches and then the most recent speeches to determine what differences a century had made in the art of oratory. Reynolds (1983) examined current orations to determine similarities in organizational structure and evidence usage. Indeed, an entire early issue of the *National Forensic Journal* (1983) was devoted to what has become popularly known as “persuasive speaking.” Sellnow and Ziegelmuller (1988) did a content analysis of Interstate Oratory speeches comparing strategies from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, while Leiboff (1991) did a content analysis on what persuasive topics were successful in the 1990 National Forensic Association tournament. Today, public speaking textbook publishers regularly rely on the texts and examples of speeches from the Interstate

Oratory Contest to illustrate successful persuasive speaking. Without a doubt, the impact this historic contest has had on the field of oratory has been substantial. However, few scholarly efforts have been made within the past twenty years to analyze current trends of success at this unique event.

One hundred years after the inception of the Interstate Oratory Contest, the National Forensic Association began its national tournament and has selected a champion “persuasive speaker” each year since. In 1978 the American Forensic Association began its tournament and has likewise selected a “national winner” annually. Yet, both of these contests and corresponding national organizations such as Phi Rho Pi, Delta Sigma Rho, Tau Kappa Alpha and Pi Kappa Delta, have stuck routinely to traditional forensic modes of competition and judging, largely having current forensic coaches as the judges. As the Interstate Oratory Contest has developed, it has retained one unique feature setting it apart from traditional forensic contests—the final round judging panel.

Now, if one truly believes Walsh’s initial words, it is no surprise that what traditional forensic “experts” may judge to be successful oratory, may not always “play in Peoria”—the final round Interstate panel, typically comprised of local politicians, media experts, and prominent community members. For the final round audience, success often hinges on connecting “in the moment” with the members of that judging panel. And so, while advancing to that final round through the traditional notions of having forensic coaches adjudicate the preliminary and semi-final rounds, often an entirely different tack is necessary to achieve victory at Interstate. Indeed, when one examines the results for NFA, AFA and Interstate over the past thirty-five years, it is rare to find a contestant who has won both an AFA and/or NFA persuasive speaking title AND been victorious at

Interstate. In fact, due to the nature of qualifying two contestants from each state, not every AFA or NFA champion has even qualified for the Interstate Oratory Contest. This essay will attempt to articulate what sets Interstate apart from these other national contests and provide insights found successful when coaching for the Interstate Oratory Contest.

Initially, topic choice is key for the successful orator. While no small amount of debate has occurred on what makes a “winning topic,” Walsh counsels that traditional problems are successful, ones that emanate from society. For many years, the “dread disease” speech was popular (Reynolds 1983). Prior to that, the “I am the . . .” genre was quite popular relying on a great deal of personal proof from the speaker about the particular problem elucidated (Sellnow and Ziegelmueller, 1988).

In recent years, the popularity of topics which an audience might be unfamiliar with, where speakers first present an expose about the horrors of a previously unknown problem and then attempt to offer practical solutions seems to be a trend. Since Clanton’s* winning speech in 1988 on nuclear experimentation in space (following on the heels of the Challenger disaster), speakers have been able to find problems which are not in the headlines of daily newspapers, but which may be uncovered on news shows, such as *60 Minutes*, *Dateline*, or *20/20*. Successful speeches that have fit this mold include Griesinger* (2007) on the Falun Gong organ harvest, Holbrook (2005) on domestic abuse in the gay community, Shankar (1999) on free Saipan, Johnson* (1998) on Astro turf legislation, Keaveny* (1996) on foreign prescription drugs, Jamison* (1991) on battery disposal, and Kimmey* (1990) on time theft. In each of these speeches from the final round, the audience was introduced to a problem they were probably unfamiliar

with, stunned by the significance of the problem, and then presented with solutions which could help to remedy the problem.

A second genre of topics that have been successful are the speeches which find a problem embedded within the solution to another, typically more well known, problem. These topics lend themselves well to shocking the audience with the fact that in solving a previously known problem, another—often worse—problem has arisen, which far surpasses the initial problem, and often calls for swift, immediate action. Successful speeches using this strategy have been Klatt* (2005) and Meinen* (1999) on funding AIDS research, Bevernitz (2004) companies investing in corporate owned life insurance on elderly and terminally ill employees, Note (2002) on unreliable mammograms, Gallagher (1999) on enhanced computerized 911 responses, Campbell (1996) on the recycling placebo, Kaplan (1990) on the dangers of asbestos removal and Kimmey (1989) on reselling unsafe school busses.

Now, while both of these contemporary topic area suggestions may seem somewhat formulaic, it is critical to reinforce already known criteria of topic selection, and that is that the topic/problem must be one the speaker feels strongly about. While the “I am the...” genre of speeches have waned—often sacrificing personal credibility—several successful contestants have indicated how their topic impacts them personally. Among these speakers are: Ohl (2007) on skin cancer, Bender (2005) on media misinformation, Grace (2000) on unsanitary hotels, and Schawe (1999) on diploma mills. Indeed, if a coach just hands a “winning” topic to a student and he/she doesn’t feel compassion for the topic, the content and delivery is likely to suffer. Similarly, as we teach our public speaking students, there should also be an adequate amount and variety

of resources available on the problem as the standard for proof within persuasive speaking also seems to have risen over the past several years (Olson, 1984).

But the content of the successful Interstate speech rests not only with a winning topic, but also in how the speech is developed. As contemporarily practiced, persuasive speeches typically have three main points, clearly identified as problem, causes, and solutions. Thorough substructuring has also become more common as typical forensics judges often “require” the highlighting of the organization, down to specific solutions on a global, national, and individual level. However, while some level of structure is no doubt helpful, the successful Interstate contestant needs to balance this expectation for explicit structure, with the expectations from the final round panel of judges being for merely “some” structure...where less is often more. Moorehead’s* (2004) winning speech on oral histories was void of any overt structure or substructure, serves as a clear example.

One way to more subtly accomplish this “less is more” aim is through the language choices a speaker builds into his or her speech. The use of metaphors has often distinguished the successful Interstate speech, perhaps used no better than by Joeckel* (1981):

In past election years, it has been said that if politicians discover their constituents are cannibals, they will promise them Christians for dinner. In 1980, the reverse was true. Evangelical members of the New Christian Right served up politicians, from the county weed commissioner to the President of the United States with the zeal and expertise of French chefs. Lead by religious television figures such as Falwell, members of the

movement concocted their elaborate recipe for success: Mix the country's 30 to 65 million Evangelical Protestants and Catholics together with heaping handfuls of conservative discontent. Add a dash of Salt II; blend in abortion, gay rights and Equal Rights Amendment, the Department of Education and sex education in public schools. Sprinkle liberally (if you will) with unconstitutional activity and tax law violation. Cook over high heat with plenty of fire and brimstone until November 4. Yield: the defeat of numerous liberal politicians targeted by the New Christian Right.

Metaphors and clever language choices serve to highlight the intentionality of writing the oration. Rawlins' (2005) speech on internet phishing began her preview by stating "[W]e will today *load the boat* with the problems of phishing, then *cast* into the causes of phishing, before finally *reeling in* some solutions." In explaining the nature of the problem Rawlins wrote "Here we see the *hook*. . .," and her concluding line was "[W]e can avoid taking the *bait*." Johnson's* (1998) speech on Astroturf lobbying serves as another successful example. In his previewing the problem to be the "fastest growing segment of the public relations field," he wrote, "In clarifying the mechanics of this practice, it will become clear that in both football and lobbying, Astroturf has two main advantages over real grass. It's easier to maintain and it's a lot prettier." In his transition to his second point, Johnson proclaimed, "But [Kansas City] Chief's running back Marcus Allen is quick to point out that Astroturf might be prettier and easier to maintain than real grass, but it yields more injuries. And in the lobbying game, it's not just the big name players getting hurt." Finally, as he makes a transition to his conclusions he notes: "On the field of public policy, Astroturf has caused enough damage. It's time to rip it up

from the stadium floor and plant the seeds of authentic grass roots, by finally looking at what can be done to ensure the legitimacy of grass roots reform.” These metaphoric examples serve to demonstrate the way clever language choices can help unify a theme. While some traditional forensics judges may criticize such language choices for being “punny” and unnecessarily cute, once inserted into the final round, they often provide a large advantage to the speaker who can pull them off by appearing as an intentional rhetorical device to the lay judges in the final round.

The last aspect of content that sets apart Interstate speeches from typical persuasive speeches is the reference to the occasion. Interstate has a rich and illustrious history, one that is often referred to prior to and during the contest. Past contests have been held in historic locations such as the Smithsonian, the first U.S. colonial capitol, and several state capitol buildings. Often a single reference to the historic events that happened in the very building where the final round occurs, or even within a historic city can gain the favor of the final round Interstate judging panel. Perhaps the best example of this technique was by Pruitt (1996) in her speech on the college credit card crisis. The final round was held in the home of William Jennings Bryant, and at the luncheon which preceded the final round, a guest speaker had made liberal reference to Bryant’s “Cross of Gold” speech. In moving to her conclusion Pruitt parodied how today’s college students are being crucified upon a “cross of plastic.” The addition of this reference made the content of her speech stand apart from speakers who were merely reciting memorized orations for the hundredth time that year.

There is no doubt that audience analysis plays a key role in successful speaking as it is ultimately the audience who determines the success or failure of a speaking event

(Brigance, 1925). Attempting to analyze the final round audience can be a unique task. Often, coaches and contestants merely assume that the final round panel will act as Perelman's universal audience (1969), and that what is sufficient to advance to the final round during a typical tournament, will often be enough to win the Interstate Oratory Contest. Indeed, Interstate provides collegiate speakers with a unique opportunity to adapt not only to a typical forensics audience in preliminary rounds, but also the lay audience of community members who typically adjudicate the final round. A quick look at results from the past twenty-five years shows that frequently it is the lowest ranked contestants who advance to elimination rounds who are most successful in elimination rounds (1989, 1993, 1996). This proves that what forensics judges deem successful differs in the final round with lay judges. Given the divided expert/lay audience, it behooves both the coach and the speaker to identify characteristics that may set apart the final round audience.

One simple way is to do your homework, even at the tournament. Ask the tournament director and host who the members of the final round panel are, and find out as much detail as possible. In addition, know exactly where the respective members will sit, so that specific appeals can be made directly to specific audience members. For example, political solutions can be referred to local politicians, legal solutions to members of the judiciary, business solutions to members of that community, educational solutions to teachers, and informational solutions to members of the media. When judges believe solutions or appeals have been crafted especially for them, they tend to become ego involved in the speech and tend to rank it higher. Two examples from recent contests provide proof of this technique. In 1995, Benton* discovered that the mayor of the local

city was a final round judge and made direct reference regarding his speech on private police to what local politicians could do. Unseth* (2001) offered as part of his solution a CD to be played on local radio stations, and emphasized that solution to a radio media personality who was a member of the final round panel. Being aware of the proclivities of judges can often tilt the balance toward a given contestant, and at the very least gives the speaker an added feeling of confidence as they reach the home stretch of their speech.

Finally, several delivery techniques can be employed to give a speaker an edge in Interstate competition. Hopefully, speakers will already feel some passion about their topic. Given that Interstate is typically the last tournament of the year, and that the final round is often the last time a speech will be given in competition, energy is often high. But speakers should be coached to guard against being complacent in this round and instead speak with all the conviction they can muster. Slight modifications may need to be made in pronoun usage to include the entire audience in the speech. The title of the event the final round judges have come to hear is the Interstate Oratory Contest, and for many, the word “oratory” conjures up great meanings of high emoting and great conviction. Typically, the older the panel, the greater emotional involvement and volume expected. In addition to vocal emotion, speakers can show further conviction by directly addressing the audience, particularly the judges. Devoting a disproportionate amount of eye contact to the judges can help the judges feel they are the only ones in the room, and that the speech is meant exclusively for them. Additionally, moving physically closer to the audience, again particularly the judges, can make a speaker appear confident, and unafraid as they explicate their solutions and truly motivate the audience to feel involved and responsible for the problem and urged to take action. Even developing a wider stance

or broader gestures can signal to the judging panel a high degree of personal involvement.

Despite thorough delivery preparation, sound fluency, and confident delivery, every speaker can learn from the mistakes of other speakers. As speakers learn to “work a room” they can try to make the speaking situation work in their favor. Typically the first speaker in the round will set the tone and pace for the round. For instance, the first speaker sets the standard as to where it is appropriate for the speaker to stand. Given that many final rounds do not occur in typical classrooms, often there is a choice for speakers to make. Sometimes physical barriers, such as a stage or table, separate the speaker from the audience, and the speaker should use every advantage to attempt to diminish these barriers, reducing the space between audience and speaker so the conviction is easier to “feel.” In adapting to a room, successful speakers should take the opportunity to visit the physical location of the round, so they can get the feel of how their voice will carry, where they want to direct their eye contact and energy, and be able to feel comfortable motivating an audience. Speakers who are later in speaking order can observe earlier speakers; make a mental checklist of successful and unsuccessful techniques used by earlier speakers. They can then adjust their volume and even their physical stance to avoid running into objects as they move, and work to distinguish their style. Often these are the subtle, intangibles that give a winning speaker the edge.

The Interstate Oratory Contest is a unique speaking situation. Contestants are all usually solid, representing their states with pride. For many speakers, their dream is to participate in the final round of this distinguished contest (Schnoor and Wickelgren, 2001). No small amount of preparation goes into creating an Interstate champion.

Typically, the unique factors of the contest—being cognizant of the history and surroundings as well as the little adjustments one can make from preliminary rounds to the final—which separate all the successful speakers who qualify for Interstate from those who make history as champions.

Notes

All referenced speeches are finalists in respective years at the Interstate Oratory Contest. First place winners are noted with an *.

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