



DRILLS TO IMPROVE YOUR [DEBATE] SPEAKING

by David M. Cheshier

Debating on the national circuit is too fast, in my opinion, perhaps a worthy topic for a later column. But feeling as I do creates an immediate problem, since my intention is to offer advice on how to speak more clearly, more economically, and yes, more quickly. Yet I do not wish to be understood as advocating even faster talking by recommending drills enabling speedy delivery, although leaving that impression may be inevitable. So let me state at the outset my admittedly hard to defend position: it seems to me that given the current state of overfast debate speaking practices, debate educators have an obligation to improve delivery even if doing so risks reinforcing potentially counterproductive features of the activity. If students are losing debates because they cannot make themselves clearly understood at the prevailing rates of speed in their circuit, in other words, we should teach them how to adjust successfully.

The conflicted sense conveyed just now is one I commonly encounter. Of course, there are those for whom the issue creates no problem. Some reasonably consider speed the ugly secret of debate, one which vastly complicates attempts to win supporters for forensics activities and which should be eliminated by imposing conversational rates of speed. Others are reasonably attracted to the increased cogni-

tive and critical thinking demands imposed under conditions of rapid-fire delivery, and wouldn't mind if the activity got even faster. But the majority of coaches I talk to are somewhere in between. So they often articulate their views in a form as self-contradicting as my own introduction. "I don't mind the speed," some will say, "if only debaters would speak more clearly" — an odd formulation since it's the speed which makes students incomprehensible in the first place. Or, "some of the best debates I've ever seen were super-fast, and I think it wrong to dismiss the activity's commitment to speed because of its sloppiest practitioners" — which is also an odd claim since the vast, vast majority of students languish in the "sloppy practitioner" category.

But it's not my purpose to caricature perspectives on this issue. In fact, I think it wrong to talk about these disagreements as reflecting "conservative" versus "liberal," "traditional" versus "progressive," or "local" versus "national" considerations: the differences are reasonable, and reflect genuine pedagogical priorities. But, regardless of your views about speaking speed in debate (formerly one had to specify "policy" debate, but now Lincoln Douglas is speeding up too), I hope all can agree on the need to make students clearer. And that is the spirit of what follows.

Two quick points before diving in: First, the advice offered here is not aimed at improving persuasiveness, an essential set of skills I've discussed elsewhere. The drills and problems I discuss relate to the actual mechanics of talking in a clearer fashion. I mention this because it is important to say at the start that I am not a speech pathologist. My experience in improving student speaking comes from the accumulated habits of working with speakers, and not from a sophisticated understanding of the biology of speech. On that account I do not presume to offer advice for some common speaking difficulties, like stuttering, where high quality therapeutic and clinical treatment options are available.

The second point is simply to declare that the most important drill for improving public speaking of any kind is practice, practice, and practice. Practice is most helpful when done in front of an audience — speaking quickly in front of a mirror can make a positive difference, but the immediate feedback enabled by rehearsal before a live human being is so much better. Interactive practices enable a quick diagnosis of speaking problems, and since debaters are often

unaware of how unclear they can be, drilling in front of a coach or peer can make an immediate and impressive difference. In previous essays, I've repeatedly recommended videotaping actual tournament debates for later review by coaches who may have to judge other rounds at the time. Yes, using audio or videotaping often produces hard to understand transcripts, but in the speaking context such technological constraints are a benefit: if you can speak so clearly that you can even be understood on a videotape, then you have made real progress.

Some students have a natural gift for speaking clearly at a faster rate, but for the vast majority this is an acquired skill requiring rehearsal. And everyone can improve his or her clarity and word economy. With that in mind, we'll start in a general way, and then move to discuss some common problems and potential drills.

Struggling With Speed: Some Things to Keep in Mind

Because fast rates of delivery are the first things new students notice about successful varsity debaters, the desire to role model super-quick arguers can be a powerful one. And there are few experiences as frustrating as losing a debate to a team with less experience or intelligence or knowledge, simply because they ran you out of the room. It can be easy to infer from such experiences that working on speed, speed, speed is the highest goal of debate practices. So some students push themselves by going faster, faster, ever faster, even when doing so complicates or worsens other delivery problems.

The need for speed must be kept in perspective, in four important senses. First, *adapting to the preferences of your judge* matters more than your rate of delivery. Flying like the wind will not accomplish your purposes if your judge either opposes fast talking on pedagogical grounds or is simply unwilling to work as hard as necessary to track your hard-to-understand claims. If your home circuit favors slower debating, adapt to it. There are still reasons to practice a speedier delivery even in a slower circuit: if you are clear and persuasive at a faster rate than normal, it'll seem easier to sustain clarity and eloquence at a more normal rate. And it's a rare circuit where every opponent speaks more slowly, so sometimes there will be a pragmatic basis for accelerating. But adaptation is everything.

Second, *speaking clarity* matters

more than rate of delivery. Everyone knows this, and at the extreme no one disagrees. What is the point, after all, of speaking at 2000 words per minute if the resulting noise more closely resembles the drone of a loud insect than Clarence Darrow or Barbara Jordan? At the margin between fast and slow, the issue is harder, and often students end up preferring a slightly faster rate of speed even if it produces a decline in clarity and adequate articulation. Each person has her or his own maximum efficient speaking rate, a tipping point where going faster will become counterproductive — the mouth won't move fast enough to match the firing synapses, and the resulting stammering ends up actually slowing the debater down. Work to find your own maximum efficiency. When you do, you'll discover that you can speak at a lower rate (fewer words per minute) and still cover more ground than some of your opponents who struggle incomprehensibly to go even faster, but have to back track every four seconds to make themselves understood.

Third, and this is related, *efficiency* matters more than speed. But here I mean efficiency in a different sense. I'm referring not to one's physical capacity to communicate quickly and clearly, but the skill of expressing oneself concisely, of using the fewest words necessary to persuasively convey one's meaning. Efficiency is no less a learned skill than speed, and can be improved with practice. Although I do not discuss this particular point in much detail, here are two tips for improving your word economy. First, give repeated versions of the same speech where the time you're allocated is decreased every time (move the rebuttal time down by thirty seconds, and then forty-five), but fight to intelligibly cover all the same arguments as before. The pressure of shrinking time forces you to delete verbosity. And second, when you are scripting debate briefs, tags, and overviews, explicitly do so with economy in mind. Put your prose to this test: "Is there a more concise but as powerful a way to make the same basic point"?

Fourth, a sense of *passionate urgency* in your delivery matters more than the rate of speed. Quick delivery can have a leveling effect, making every argument sound the same. Amazingly, some debaters seem to prefer to speak in a monotonous drone, since apparently it makes them feel faster. But this is counterproductive in the extreme. When fast speed makes all arguments sound equally important, debat-

ers forfeit a powerful tool for making distinctions, and instructing the judge about what really matters and what matters less.

Part of the problem is that as we speak, our ability to judge how the nuances of our own speech are heard is degraded. Because it is my voice doing the talking, I will be sensitive to every subtlety in my voice's modulation and volume and emphasis. But my audience may not pick up on the nuance. What feels like passionate advocacy to me will come across as deathly dull for some of my listeners. And nothing puts a judge to sleep faster than a communicated sense of boredom or apathy.

In some important respects, debate is every bit as much a performance event as playing a role on the theatrical stage. And in the same way actors must sometimes exaggerate their delivery so the subtleties of their performance will be clear even to people in the cheap seats, debaters too need to exaggerate their own sense of passionate urgency. When emphasizing words and phrases in evidence, for example, consider stressing them to the point of what will feel like over-emphasis. You may feel you are screaming out the words, but usually for the judge it'll sound about right.

The performance metaphor works in another unrelated sense. Sometimes when I work with debaters on their speaking, and especially when I'm trying to encourage them to instill their speaking with emphasis and passion, they will say something like: "Well, of course I know to emphasize key words. But how can I do that when I've never seen this brief before? Obviously, I can address the emphasis concern later when I highlight the evidence." The problem, of course, is that a lot of the evidence never gets highlighted (who has the time?). But much in the same way musicians can learn the skill of sight-reading, debaters can also learn with practice to pick up unhighlighted text and instinctively know what to emphasize. The trick is to learn to recognize by sight those words almost always worth emphasizing. These include the obvious ones (nuclear! apocalypse! depression! war! holocaust! billions!) and also words of singularity (never! always! only! not!) and terms that match the argument's tagline (such a proposal would solve...! implementing this would require the President to expend precious political capital!).

Solving Specific Problems

All this sounds great in the abstract, but when the rubber hits the road more spe-

cific speaking problems are likely to emerge. What can be done to solve these common problems?

When I talk fast I lose my breath and start making obnoxious gasping noises! Putting it bluntly, if your body is screaming for air (and isn't that what gasping is all about?), then you're not breathing correctly or often enough. The issue may simply be that you are out of physical shape — it's odd to think of debate as an athletic event, but a certain amount of physical stamina is required to make it through a constructive speech. Or, if you do it, how about quitting smoking? That will make an immediate difference. But other problems can cause gasping. Often students who gasp do it because they try to say too much on a single breath, and so literally run out of air. If that's the problem, try a speaking drill where you force a breath (even if only a shallow one) at every major punctuation point, or at the start of every new sentence, or at the start of every new argument. Such a drill will feel awkward at first, but over time the mechanics of breathing can be improved by such practice.

Some students gasp because they are not taking in enough air. Perhaps their posture is poor, or they are speaking from a sitting position, (which can easily complicate normal airflow). If this describes you, then stand up straight. Stack up evidence tubs to create a podium at the right height, so that you're not bent over.

Others gasp for no apparent reason — they appear to breathe normally and are not red-faced, but make heaving noises anyway. This odd behavior is not unique to debate, as anyone who's ever seen tennis players gasping whenever they hit the ball will know. But this gasping is, certainly in the debate context, counterproductive. It makes a jarring noise, which offends the normal listening process. And gasping has a wearing effect on your vocal chords. The simple solution? Stop making gasping noises! With concentration you can lessen the noise of rapidly breathing. Open your throat more fully. Or consider a drill where you start reading at normal speed. When you make a gasping sound, stop and start over. See if you can get further every time. You will soon be cured of this annoying problem.

I'm often criticized for speaking too softly. Or, relatedly, I seem to lose my voice at every tournament. These are usually problems resulting from poor breathing habits. Moving air efficiently across the vocal

chords best produces volume. If not enough air is moving, volume will decrease or something else has to compensate, with the result of damage to the voice. To some extent this is a rehearsal issue — I once coached a student who lost her voice every weekend debating until she joined a singing group. It turned out that the vocal discipline imposed by her involvement in choral groups strengthened her ability to speak over sustained periods of time. Breathing more consciously from the diaphragm makes an important difference too. Some recommend drills designed to strengthen the diaphragm. Thus, you may have heard of drills where students are asked to hold a chair in front of them (the weight on the arms can help force a more normal breathing pattern) — for some students this works, for others it doesn't. It also helps, of course, to keep the throat adequately moist by having water available during debate rounds.

Some students are physically able to project their voices but simply don't for fear of shouting. But there is a happy medium where everyone in the room can clearly hear what you have to say. Instead of reaching that place by shouting (which of course only does more damage), practice by gradually speaking louder and louder. See what your comfort level is, and whether you can induce a better sense of vocal projection by working on your breathing.

My judges say I'm incomprehensible, that the words I'm speaking blur together. Poor articulation is a common delivery problem, perhaps the most common. The problem may be physically based — that is, perhaps you are simply not working hard enough to clearly articulate your words. There are several popular drills designed to force a clear sense of articulation. One demands that the student "over-articulate," opening the mouth more widely, and explicitly verbalizing every single syllable. Others prefer the "pencil in mouth" drill — putting a pencil in your mouth as far as it will go (side by side, parallel to your eyebrows) creates a considerable obstacle to clear speaking. If you can manage to articulate under such extreme circumstances, then it almost always clears up unimpeded speech.

If the problem is that words are blurring together, drills designed to force separation between them can help. The "a" drill has students insert the letter "a" between every word: "The [a] President [a] announced [a] today [a] his [a] plans..." It's hard to get used to, but has the virtue of forcing attention to the beginning and ends

of words. A common alternative is a drill where students read evidence backward, word for word: “plans his today announced President the.” Again, the artificially created situation draws attention to specific verbal articulation problems.

Several coaches I know drill students by literally punishing every instance of blurred speech. I had a coach once who watched me practice reading while he held a squirt gun. Every time he couldn’t understand me, he squirted me with water. I was soon soaked, but I fixed the problem fast. Some others have their students practice using tongue twisters. Jeff Wortman, who coached with enormous success before leaving debate for the law, had his students read Dr. Seuss books.

I’m fine later in the day, but really sluggish and unclear in the morning. This, too, is a common problem, simply because the body does not emerge from sleep prepared to talk fast. The cure for this is easy: Get up earlier. Practice reading at your tournament speed before the first round of debate, and not just for two minutes, but for the duration of an entire constructive speech.

My pitch creeps higher and higher, so that by the end of my constructive only the neighborhood dogs can hear my speaking. It’s easy to recommend that someone simply drop his or her pitch, but sometimes that proves hard in practice. When pitch is the problem, I find it best to think about speaking as if it’s singing. The pitch problem is fixed by imagining that, say, at the start of every new position, the musical “key” shifts and the voice drops down a couple notes. This is another of those problems which is easily solved once you concentrate on fixing it.

I’m just too slow. Here the key is to diagnose the real problem. Are you too slow because you verbalize at too slow a rate of speed, either by drawling or reading at a snail’s pace? Or are you “slow” because of your lack of word economy? If the problem is the former, then practicing reading twenty minutes or so every day can make a major difference, even if it’s only the newspaper being read. Again, the point is not to go as fast as humanly possible, but to find your own maximum efficient rate. Press yourself bit by bit, and your limits will slowly be expanded. When you slip into incomprehensibility, draw back. If the latter, remember the ideas I mentioned earlier (shorter practice speeches, more careful argument scripting).

I start fast, but get slower and slower, tripping over words as I read. When this happens, the problem is usually that the debater’s maximal rate of efficiency is being exceeded. Slowing down just a little under such circumstances actually has the counterintuitive effect of enabling you to move through evidence more quickly. Alternatively, sometimes the problem is that it’s hard to keep your eyes focused on the right part of the evidence. Since your eyes move faster than your mouth, it’s thus easy to lose place on the page. Several drills are commonly used to help fix these problems. Some recommend you try using your free index finger to follow along word by word as you read. It may feel a bit like elementary school, but you might be surprised how much such a simple trick can clean up your fluency. The downside is that if you’re not careful, following along word for word with your finger on the page can slow you down, but that’s easily addressed by racing your finger a couple words ahead of what you’re speaking at the moment. Another solution might simply be to hold your papers closer to your eyes.

My judges describe me as unflowable, even though I think I articulate very well. OK, maybe you aren’t as clear as you think. But it is possible that you’re unflowable though clear. In that case, the difficulty probably relates to the way you are emphasizing key words and phrases, or more likely, not doing so. Keep this in mind: Even superhuman judges will never be able to write down every single word you say. Given that fact, think about how your delivery, and in particular the words you choose to emphasize, will help determine what the judge chooses to write on her flowsheet. Proper emphasis can transform a speech’s clarity.

As with the “finger” drill, the risk of emphasizing words is that emphasis can drag down the speaking rate. But this effect can be minimized if your mode of emphasis is a simple one. Just saying the key word louder (as opposed to changing the

pitch higher or lower, which does tend to slow one down) can make a major difference in clarity. And keep in mind the point made earlier regarding exaggeration: when drilling, you should overly exaggerate the main words, since doing so conveys a more genuine sense of passion and argumentative conviction.

Conclusion

The key when it comes to speaking drills is to experiment widely. Not all drills work for all debaters, since problems vary from person to person. Thus, you should try the whole range of speaking drills and discover what best improves your speaking. Try each drill on a sustained basis, since it can be too easy to try, say, the “pencil in mouth” drill for ten seconds and declare it worthless.

The purpose of drills that exaggerate the constraints on speaking is to forcibly revise your own body’s habitual manner of speaking. Making such changes takes some time. Ending something as apparently simple as repeated gasping can take extended work. But the implication of this fact is not that you should speak for two hours with the pencil lodged between your teeth. You’ll get far more benefit by speaking under constraint for twenty seconds or so, then speaking normally for twenty seconds, then back to the drill. Alternating back and forth reduces the danger that you’ll simply slip into “drill mode” which doesn’t translate back into your typical debating.

This short introduction leaves much unsaid about speaking drills, and many specific drills unmentioned. But as with all good debating, it all boils down to the basics: practice, judge adaptation, more practice, revision, extended tournament experience, practice, practice, practice...

© David M. Cheshier

(David M. Cheshier is Assistant Professor of Communications and Director of Debate at Georgia State University. His column appears monthly in the Rostrum.)