

PROSE INTERPRETATION: AN ANALYSIS

by Don Crabtree

Samuel Johnson once said, "Imitations produce pain or pleasure, not because they are mistaken for realities, but because they bring realities to mind." Mr. Johnson's quote is very applicable when one considers the very popular event of prose interpretation. The purpose of this essay is to briefly review the National Forensic League rules regarding prose interp as a supplemental event; to come to some basic, agreeable definition of prose; and some techniques for coaches and students to use when preparing for this event.

Initially, the NFL Manual (TN-8) gives us the following guidelines: Prose expresses thought through language recorded in sentences and paragraphs. Prose includes fiction (short stories, novels) and non-fiction (articles, essays, journals, biographies.) Selections must be published and no plays or other dramatic material may be used. The time limit is not more than five minutes including the introduction. Presentations must be from a manuscript (which may be in a folder). Reading from a book or magazine is not permitted.

Secondly, one needs a concrete definition of prose. After investigating several sources, the best definition found was: "Prose -- is the ordinary form of written language. Most writing that is not poetry, drama, or song is considered prose. Prose is one of the major genres of literature and occurs in two forms: fiction and non-fiction."

Finally, the crux of the article is concerned with techniques for coaching and presenting prose interpretations. (Notice that I chose not to get into an endless debate over the definition of prose. Trust your NFL council and follow the rules they have established.) For the sake of brevity and clarity, I have chosen to enumerate some of the techniques I feel crucial to prose interpretation.

1. Economy: Economy is needed in the art of prose interpretation. When the interpreter fails to practice economy, he/she is sometimes said to be acting.

2. Locus: "Place and site." Where are you coming from? The interpreter is never static! In drama and humor interpretation, locus is rather like letters, except there is always a "speaking" listener -- both the person speaking and the person spoken to take part in the dialogue." In prose, your

goal is to be the speaker and make the audience the listener. The only way to achieve this is to make the printed page come alive.

3. Purpose: The purpose, in my opinion, is to stimulate the student to find the meaning of printed prose and to communicate the meaning orally to his/her listeners. Participation in this contest should also assist a student to develop critical techniques in the evaluation of prose. Oral interpretation of prose is to convey subtleties of meaning of prose and feeling through vocal control.

4. The Four I's: I use the four I's concept with my students simply as a helpful reminder. They are intelligence, imagery, intensity, and imagination. Intelligence: Use your intelligence to choose a selection of good literature that suits you and will interest your audience. A good prose selection should make the audience want more and give them something to mentally digest. Imagery: Choose a selection that will allow you to vocally create word pictures. It is the interpreter's job to create a memorable, positive performance. I can think of no better way than through the literary technique of imagery. Finding and selecting the right prose interp is as every bit as difficult as finding the right humor or drama script! Intensity: Intensity involves establishing the correct tone and mood. Essentially, this refers back to the fact of, "Where are you coming from?" Please keep in mind that a good prose interp does not have to be about death, dying, and depression. There are many excellent selections out there that deserve your attention. When I am asked which will do better, a serious or humorous prose, I simply answer, the one that is carefully chosen, carefully analyzed, and artistically performed. Imagination: Imagination deals with your creativity. What can you do with this piece without distorting the author's intent? Experiment and be brave. Remember that your overall goal is to make the author's work come alive for the listener. The prose interpreter here is concerned with impression and impact and how to give prose a separate identity from humor and drama.

Prose is indeed different and to those of you that feel you can simply take a DI or HI and put a script in the student's hands...I say, no! They are equal events in terms of analysis and time spent in effective prepara-

tion but different in terms of purpose.

5. Final Tips for Effective Prose Interpretation: This is a grouping of some final ideas for consideration.

A. Avoid over exaggeration.

B. Know your commitment to the piece of literature.

C. How will you use silence?

Let the pause work for you.

D. Decide which vocal traits -- tempo, rhythm, range, and quality (practice using many types) will most accurately convey your meaning to the judge/audience.

E. Muscle memory -- often referred to as the "theory of remembered action." It aids in suggesting hurry or leisure, activity or passivity, tension or relaxation.

F. Use your script to your advantage. You are not a robot. Gestures are still allowed and of great importance in establishing over all impact.

G. Maintain eye contact with your script. It is your tool. I would suggest a 50% eye contact with the audience and a 50% eye contact with your script. This is not a memorized event.

H. Suggestion becomes paramount -- in prose interp, all is not told to the audience. There must be room for the reader's imagination to work.

Prose interp is an exciting and challenging event. It takes the same amount of time and commitment as an event or any type of debate. Prose is an art that involves a shared experience with the author and the interpreter and his/her audience. Remember that technical display is not an art...It won't convey human quality. The prose interpreter is similar to an outstanding musician playing Mozart. We are aware of the final product, but not the process.

(Don Crabtree coaches at Park Hill (MO) HS. He serves on the Executive Council and has hosted the 1983 and 1994 Nationals. He coached the National Dramatic Interp winner in 1986.)