

# EXTEMPORANEOUS SPEAKING AND GENDER: LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

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It's no secret that throughout the past twenty-five years, gender has become an ever-increasing issue in forensics. From those who argue there are distinct differences in the way males and females think, reason, and communicate, to those who claim forensic training serves to level the playing field, the issue of gender has polarized camps on both sides. No doubt any forensic educator would agree that the forensic activity exists for the educational betterment of the students and steps which promote that should be promulgated. This essay seeks to trace the distinctions of stylistic argument between males and females. It then points to proven examples of current inequity in forensic practice, that of extemporaneous speaking. By modifying the event, study results are provided which suggest ways to improve the educational process of extemporaneous speaking.

## Gender Differences

In response to several feminist critiques, certain critics have pointed to the fact that gender differences in communication arise from social contexts, social roles, and power relations (Rakow, 1986; Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983). As an oppressed group, women have developed alternative styles of communication based on their subordinate status, their tasks, the division of labor between the sexes, and their talk among themselves (Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983). As such, the experience of women necessitates them finding their own voice. Kolodny (1985) posits that women create their own symbols and meanings based upon their own experiences. One could conclude with Showalter (1985) that women have begun to find their own "voice." This is not a voice emanating from a void, but from experience, albeit a different experience from men. Stanley (1983) argues that a woman's style has evolved from a lack of participation in society, so this style has come to be "based on personal revelations, examples and women's own symbols and experiences" (Murphy, 1989).

From this position, Campbell (1973)

has argued that women's style has been one of "consciousness-raising," and as such, is grounded in personal experience, given that they have been denied the public forum for so long. Jamieson (1988) extends this notion by portraying feminine rhetoric as "inductive, even circuitous, moving from example to example, and usually grounded in personal experience...[W]omen tend to adopt associative, dramatic, and narrative modes of development, as opposed to deductive forms of organization" (pp. 75-76). She further argues that the masculine style has long dominated public rhetoric and women have typically adapted accordingly. Finally, Treichler and Kramarae (1983) content that women are more concerned with storytelling, with narrative, with personal experience and with the use of talk to establish equality and maintain relationships, rather than to prove a point. Perhaps it is most optimistic to conclude with Foss and Foss (1991) that "women have an eloquence of their own, manifest in a variety of contexts and forms" (p. 2).

Perhaps no where in forensics has the distinction between male and female style been so pronounced as in the event of extemporaneous speaking. While there are certain stereotypes of the differences in male and female speech (Siegle and Siegle 1976), Kramer (1974) has notoriously dubbed women "separate, but unequal." The notion that events such as debate and extemporaneous speaking needed to be separated continued throughout the sixties in college competition and into the eighties in high school extemp, with separate categories for "boys" and "girls" extemp. Within our activity some of the first researchers to examine this phenomenon were Friedley and Manchester (1985) who discovered disparate levels of participation between males and females, with the largest discrepancy in limited preparation events. Greenstreet (1997) notes that women are still under represented today.

While there have been some initial attempts to modify the expectations in the event (Bensen 1978) and Aden and Kay

(1988), they found that the types of questions used in extemporaneous speaking often make a distinct difference in how they may link into male or female style.

The distinct inequalities in this particular event were articulately noted by Murphy in 1989 and again by the empirical evidence from White (1997) who discovered the percentage of females participating in extemp favored males 63% to 37% and also that the number of contestants who advanced at the national tournaments became increasingly male as the tournament progressed from quarterfinals (77%), to semifinals (82%), to finals (87%). Friedley and Manchester (1985) initially argued that males were more likely to receive superior ranks at national tournaments and subsequently argued (1987) that judges treated males more favorable than female contestants.

Intense debate rages on the reasoning behind this. Logue (1993) believes that women tend to be more suited to collaborative activities, while a host of others have found that women are no less rational, assertive, or argumentative than men (Bradley, 1987; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Dindia, 1987; Martin & Craig, 1983; Wright & Hosman, 1983). However, contemporary practice and results has brought the inequality issue in extemporaneous speaking into the fore of forensic practice today (Congalton and Ganer, 1997; Karns, 1997; Keaveny, 1997; Piercy, 1997; Thompson, 1999; and White, 1997). While calls for eliminating gender barriers were made at both national developmental conferences on forensics, recognized by calls for greater research, the fact remains in extemporaneous speaking today that men continue to enjoy greater success than women (White 1997).

Given that the primary goal of the forensic activity is education, and that this inequity reduces the educational value for women, it is important to understand how contemporary practice reinforces prejudices against women and their styles of communication, erodes opportunities for success and requires solutions to redress this gap. Given the large body of past research, the

expectations for a successful extemporaneous speech seem to align with what White (1997) identifies as the "highly confident, criterion based, argumentative, objective, and deductive masculine style" (p. 34). There is little wonder, then, the question about this event should be if there is a problem inherent in the way we practice this event.

As forensic educators, it is incumbent upon us to find ways to equalize forensic opportunities. While Keaveny (1997) argues that the rational world paradigm is masculine, the extemporaneous event typifies the male style of communication. The male style is expected, and rewarded by judges, and females are typically penalized for using aggressive strategies (Burgoon, Dillard, and Dolan, 1983). The field of education has made strides on becoming gender sensitive. Peterson (1991) describes five stages through which a curriculum passes to become truly gender sensitive. Forensics finds itself poised on the threshold between Stage 2 and Stage 3; that is, between teaching understanding of the male norm and how best to achieve it to all students, and the more inclusive stage of changing norms to accept more feminine styles as well (Thompson, 1999). While White (1997) notes strides have been made in terms of the success female participants experience in persuasive speaking, extemporaneous speaking has not kept pace.

Thompson's (1999) study found that valued characteristics in extemporaneous speaking have a masculine valence, and that women do not perceive they have as wide a spectrum of choices as men to make themselves both likable and credible speakers. This perceptual deficit causes inequity not only in forensics practice, but in the real world as well. The assumption of Thompson's (1999) study was that men and women reward different things in the event of extemporaneous speaking. His study further found that both male and female contestants believed the judges reward masculine qualities. His survey found that male judges rewarded truthfulness, reliability, and being a strong decision-maker (all masculine traits); whereas female judges rewarded risk-taking and friendliness, which are more gender neutral characteristics.

Hence, it is clear that women feel trapped into a need to imitate a masculine style while retaining their femininity. Piercy's (1997) study found that in terms of style, the women who did advance to the final round of the national tournament had several similarities to their male counterparts.

Initially, those women who were more successful tended to have lower-pitched voices. Women also had a greater tendency to use two-handed gestures which are often perceived as weaker, the women who adopted single hand gestures were more successful in final rounds. Finally, an integrated use of humor, not merely a single instance (as most females used, which caused a perception of low confidence) was most successful stylistically.

Perhaps what is needed, then, is not a method to demasculinize extemporaneous speaking, but a way to help subsume the "other." Given that both men and women experience life through stories (Fisher, 1984), a narrative approach would seem to be warranted. While White (1997) calls for proactive measures to equalize opportunities in extemp, Keaveny (1997) suggests the implementation of narrative topics to mesh more with a typically feminine style.

Karns (1997) contends that for too long, women have been on the "outside looking in." Murphy (1989) claims that to date, women have had two choices in crafting their style for extemporaneous speaking. One, they could defy the norms and compete with their own defined style, which often risked being less successful, or two, they could adapt to the male style.

This essay presents a third option, to adapt the event to make it more gender neutral. Two particular manipulations were explored in the current study: having the event judged exclusively by women, and adapting the nature of the questions into the format of "narrative questions." Based on past research, two specific research questions were addressed:

RQ1: Does judge gender make a difference in results of men vs. women in extemporaneous speaking?

RQ2: Do narrative questions make a difference in the results of men vs. women in extemporaneous speaking?

### Method

An experiment was conducted at two large tournaments that manipulated the typical format of extemporaneous speaking. In one round, all of the contestants were judged by female judges to determine who received higher scores, men or women. Secondly, in one round narrative questions were used as a typical departure from the policy-oriented questions traditionally used in extemp. For example, questions which involved role-taking, personal experience,

and storytelling were featured, such as "If you were the CEO of a major tobacco company, how would you react to recent court rulings directed at the tobacco industry?" and "Do you feel adequately protected by current sexual harassment laws?" and "As a public school teacher, would you embrace a single-sex classroom?" The purpose behind these questions was to provide a forum that would more closely match what researchers have defined as a more traditional female style.

Two tournaments were targeted for this manipulation, one invitational at a large, southwestern university, which attracted a national draw, and the 1998 American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament. While the number of contestants and schools at each tournament was large, the invitational tournament had contestants from 25 different schools compete in extemporaneous speaking, while the AFA-NIET had contestants in extemp from 63 different schools. The total sample size was 199 with males comprising 124 participants and females comprising the remaining 75 slots. At each tournament; the three preliminary rounds were analyzed to determine the average rank for all contestants by sex. One round at each tournament was left as a control for the basis of comparison.

### Results

Each contestant was ranked on a scale from 1-5. In the rounds that were used as controls, where typical extemp questions were used and no effort was made to control the sex of the judges, males received higher average ranks with one judge of nearly one-quarter of a rank higher. The total results of the study indicated that males received a full ninth of a rank higher.

These results changed significantly when contestants were judged solely by females. With one judge, females received only slightly higher scores, but the total results indicated that women received .09 rank higher than men with female judges.

The biggest difference was noted with the use of narrative questions. At the invitational tournament with a single judge per round, narrative questions had the greatest equalizing effect, as the average ranks for men and women were 3.16 and 3.15 respectively. With two judges at the national tournament the results were even more dramatic, favoring women by .16 of a rank.

The total results indicate significant changes in equalizing results when modification (Olson from page 14)

tions were made in the practice of the event.

### Discussion

Initially, one would expect there to be some shift in results. With regard to the sex of judges, it would be expected that female judges would recognize and reward female contestants with higher ranks. Recognizing similarities in style, perhaps female judges found specific characteristics in style they could identify with and hence reward with higher scores. It has long been assumed that the gender of judges makes a difference as to ultimate results (Friedley & Manchester 1987). Since males have held a notorious edge in success, it is not surprising that many of the judges who propagated this male edge might well have been male themselves. A current trend at national tournaments is to have final rounds adjudicated by former champions. Since most former extemporaneous champions have been male, the pool of "acceptable" judges is more likely to be male. While it is unlikely that the full equalization of men and women in extemp can be resolved by the use of female judges, practicality alone would preclude this option, it does point to one possible solution to bring into balance the inequities that currently exist between male and female contestants in this event.

Perhaps the use of narrative questions provides an even more practical solution. While only utilized during a single round, the more prevalent use of narrative

questions could conceivably suit what scholars have labeled the female style more readily, thus making the event fairer and creating a more level playing field. Those who argue that narrative questions provide an inherent advantage to female contestants should realize that children of both sexes grow up encouraged to tell stories, and both sexes are likely to be equally experienced at it. Furthermore, the advantage noted at the national tournaments due to narrative questions can be explained by the fact that the female contestants at the AFA-NIET already had overcome certain hurdles to even qualify for this tournament. Given that fact, they are likely to be a more talented pool and their skills are likely to be superior to males, so it is understandable that the results might indicate an advantage. Given that most extemp rounds are held at invitational tournaments, the use of narrative questions there might well serve to equalize opportunities.

### Conclusions

Some may argue that extemporaneous speaking is an event to help train students to prepare them for argumentation in the real world and that any modification of that would do a disservice both to women and to men (Conglton & Ganer, 1997). However, that disservice is done when we in forensics have created a situation where men and women are not competing equally. This is not to say that they cannot, but that they

have not, and given that the problem has been recognized and documented for over a decade, this is a trend that has not changed. Clearly there have been successful women extempers who have either broken the mold, or found ways to fit into it, but the lack of substantial female success in the event over the decades indicates that those contestants are the exception, not the rule.

Others may object to the nature of narrative questions, complaining that they dilute the research orientation of extemp. However, narrative questions can easily retain their focus on current events. The argumentative focus does not need to be substantially altered, but instead can create a style that is conducive for success for women.

Undoubtedly, additional research needs to be done to research comprehensively all the variables that may cause women to be disadvantaged. Research has just begun to discuss the male dominated extemp prep room and how that culture may disadvantage female contestants (Thompson 1999). However, from a structural standpoint, perhaps a first step can be the inclusion of narrative questions, which may help place forensics at the fore of equalizing communication styles between the genders.

**Table 1**  
**Comparative Ranks of Extemporaneous Speakers in Different Conditions**

	Control		Female Judges		Narrative Q's	
	M	W	M	W	M	W
Tournament A (1 judge/section)	3.07 (132)	3.30 (109)	3.21 (138)	3.18 (105)	3.16 (136)	3.15 (104)
Tournament B 2 judges/section)	3.27 (529)	3.35 (281)	3.33 (539)	3.23 (271)	3.35 (542)	3.19 (268)
TOTALS	3.22 (661)	3.33 (390)	3.30 (677)	3.21 (376)	3.31 (678)	3.17 (372)

N=199 (M=124, 62%; W=75, 38%)

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