

EXTEMPORANEOUS INTRODUCTIONS: ART AND SKILL VERSES DANGEROUS PEDANTRY

by
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My mother's sighs were the only punishment that ever stayed with me. If I were mean she'd smack my rear, if I was mouthy she'd yell at me. But if I came up with a stupid idea or was a real disappointment to her all she'd do would be to look at me and let out a long sigh. If I were lucky she'd then try to explain to me how and why I was wrong. I dreaded hearing one of her sighs.

In the February *Rostrum* Brian Householder had an article entitled "Canned Attention Getting Devices". When I read it I sighed. I sighed a good long time.

Greatness for an extemporaneous speaker lies in the critics' reaction.

Mr. Householder's article is an attack on the use of prewritten, "canned", introductions. I believe that almost every premise it offers and most of the conclusions it reaches are dangerously wrong. They are dangerous for the competitor and they are more dangerous for the judge or coach who buys into them.

There are some things he writes that we can all agree on. He tells us "getting a speech off to a successful start is crucial...". Mr. Householder is unquestionably correct. He notes "a strong attention getting device creates a theme that functions as a linking mechanism through the speech". I agree. And towards the end of his article he observes that good introductions must come across with strong energy. He says that if you are using somebody else's writings or thoughts, and you know who the original author was, you should cite them as a source. These are all good coaching truths.

The essence of our disagreement is found in the very last sentence of his article: "fresh introductions are always better than canned." Even now I cringe as I view that sentence. Decades of sitting in extemp rounds and listening to boring, trite, poorly worded, artless, unskilled, shallow introductions flood into my mind. To give him his due I am sure that Mr. Householder's intent is to argue for high quality, fresh and "uncanned" introductions. But bringing those factors consistently together is both un-

likely and undesirable; it is bad teaching and bad coaching.

1. Ignoring The Big Picture?

Mr. Householder's article ignores or chooses not to discuss the bigger picture, a total view of the event we call extemporaneous speaking. But understanding the *whole* event is crucial to understanding the reason to have prewritten introductions.

There are at least two purposes to participate in extemp: to learn and to compete successfully. The amount of learning required to successfully compete, to consistently win, is staggering. For the serious student scholar it is far more than any other speech or debate event. Eight essential skills take years of work to master.

First, and hardest, is basic knowledge. To learn the intellectual framework essential for good topic analysis the student must learn economic theory, economic statistical analysis, basic political science, international relations theory, criminology, know the working fundamentals of environmental science, social welfare theory, sociology, and be comfortable discussing objective educational psychology.

To be sure of adequately presenting the best sample of important topic facts s/he must gather, highlight, and use a good quick information retrieval system that sources and dates the important statistics, key groups, key people, causes of the conflict, motives of the key players, the criteria for the best action, the best possible solutions, the vocabulary and humor specific to each probably topic. In selecting these materials the extemper should learn how to distinguish the quality and reliability of the source; Which to use and which to ignore -- *Time* verses a Brookings Institution Report, *Newsweek* or a CATO Analysis, the analytically intriguing but ideologically biased *Nation* or the sometimes boring objectivity of the OECD.

A good coach will help the student learn organization options and which organization fits which type of topic question. Both the student learn organization options and which organization fits which type of topic question. Both the student and coach will struggle to learn the best mix of content and entertainment, the answer to the tough question "how do I get an impressive depth of content across to the judge without boring him or her to death?"

The extemper must identify and then learn the best rules of time allocation. Time during each week, time division in the 30 minutes of prep, and time assignment during the actual speech are all critical. He or she must develop a method to write and remember introductions, and the good habits essential to successful conclusions.

And s/he must take the months of patience and practice it requires to learn how to be consistently fluent and interesting with only 30 minutes to write and memorize a 7-minute speech that answers a controversial question about contemporary events.

In the huge time allocation required to master all of these factors a tool that increases quality and reduces the in-round time extracted is important and valuable. A tool that reduces the drain from the thirty minutes allowed for preparation is doubly valuable. A tool that gives you the time to contemplate options, strengthen verbal images, improve working, tell a better, pertinent, and yet shorter story or joke is priceless. Prewritten introductions are such a tool. And they have the added benefit of inviting coach interaction and feedback, a touch of Socratic method, and option comparisons.

2. What Makes a Good Introduction?

Mr. Householder's article never builds a list or sets the criteria for a "good" introduction. But he does share with us some insight about it. He writes: "What constitutes a strong attention step? There are many attention getting devices that have been employed by good speakers: jokes, rhetorical questions, personal stories, literary illusions, fables, startling statistics, historic quotes, recaps of historical events, plot discussions of movie and television programs, descriptions of political cartoons, and others. The basic premise operating in the attention getter is that these devices are exciting, able to draw the critic into the speech with their natural drama by activating the critic's curious interests via the critic's ability to identify with an underlying theme."

If we can summarize his writing Mr. Householder believes a good introduction gets attention. I agree and would add three other requirements for a good introduction. (1) It is short so that ample time is left for the analysis and facts necessary to answer the topic question. (2) It gets a theme pertinent to the topic question. (3) It sets the speaker apart from his or her competitors in a positive manner.

3. Where We Disagree.

Like most good extemp speeches I've divided my analysis into three facets: straw men, ethics, and inconsistencies.

Straw Men. First the author attempts to argue that a choice between "fresh" and prewritten introductions must be made when, in fact, no choice is necessary. Mr. Householders prewritten introduction must be made when, in fact, no choice is necessary. Mr. Householders says "canning" presents logistical problems. "A judge (may) see a competitor use the same attention step in a preliminary round and in the final round". Members of the same squad may use the same introduction. Competitors at a summer institute might come home with the same introductions.

None of these indict prewritten introductions. They do indict students and coaches who share without rewriting, they indict students not willing to do their own work and only copy others. But even then I will not condemn all forms of copying; copying

good ideas, or a Shakespearian turn of a phrase, or using the insight of a great idea to form your introduction are all forms of copying I endorse. Almost all of learning is copying in one form or another. Originality comes in adding our own flavor to the mix or adding a new component or new insight, but most of the mix comes from someone else-- from those who have come before us. Try to write a valid mathematical equation or a chemical formula without using the knowledge passed down to us, its almost impossible. Consistently writing a truly good introduction in the 2 or 3 minutes (at most) you can devote to it in the thirty minute prep period is impossible.

Should students and institutes and coaches share introduction ideas? Of course. Will good students and or their coaches rework and try to improve introduction ideas, and write many of their own? Of course. Both are forms of learning. To indict those too lazy to rework and rewrite does not condemn prewritten introductions, it just reminds us all to move beyond mere copying or suffer the consequences.

Brian then writes that "Critics often complain about introductions and whole speeches that fail to really address the topic. Often this is nothing more that the impact of canning introductions gone too far." There are three claims here, much like a syllogism with a false conclusion. (1) Do critics complain about introductions that fail to address the topic? Yes. I do, you do; you can't sit through one extemp round without observing this flaw. And even introductions that address the topic are often boring, uninspired, or even insipid. (2) Do critics complain about whole speeches that fail to really address the topic? Yes, absolutely. I applaud when I see judges pay attention to this factor, I wish they all would. "Did the speaker directly answer the topic question" should be very high on any judge's ranking factors. (3) Are 1 and 2 "the impact of canning introductions gone too far"? Whoops, how did we get to that conclusion?

Does thinking up an introduction during the 30 minutes of preparation guarantee that the speaker will answer the topic question? Of course not. Does having a prewritten introduction mean your speech will be "on topic" and have superb analysis? Of course not. Speeches that avoid answering the topic question and or which rely on irrelevant content are not determined by which introduction is used. Such speeches are usually either the result of inexperience or inadequate preparation. Prewritten introductions do not cause inexperience. Prewritten introductions leave more prep room time for on-topic preparation.

Mr. Householder also editorializes that "Speakers tend to over estimate audience intelligence by picking material that is over their critics head and/or not something the judge can relate to on a personal or interpersonal level." Such a mistake, if it is a mistake, can occur with both prewritten and "fresh" (i.e. written during thirty minute prep time) introductions. Overestimating judge intelligence is not an inherent component of prewritten introductions. Since speakers do not know who their judges will be before the speech is done any extemper is trying to find or write the introduction most likely to succeed with the most probably judge-types.

And I question the advice to talk down to your judge or to assume that he or she is not intelligent. The dumbing down of America is a serious enough problem for our entire society without the speech community doing its bit to exacerbate it. Otherwise good teachers and coaches advising strategies that teach their students to speak for the lowest common denominator is a tactic that will bore your intelligent judges. It also fails to reward the

creativity and insight of our own intelligent competitors.

Ethics. The author is quite stringent in his condemnation of prewritten introductions. At one point he writes, "The presentation of canned material constitutes fraud and is antithetical to the natural intent and definition of extemporaneous speaking." Two sentences later he claims, "canning is plagiarism". Strong indictments indeed, if true.

Fraud says my *American Heritage Dictionary* is "a deliberate deception for unfair gain". If my student writes and memorizes an Afghanistan introduction two weeks before a tournament and then uses it one round at the tournament that is not unfair, it is good scholarship (and good preparation) if it fits the topic he drew. To say you cannot use things you've learned prior to the thirty minutes of preparation time is not the intent of the thirty-minute rule. You learned to read before prep time, you're allowed to use that skill in prep time. Most extempers have cut and highlighted articles before they go to the tournament; they're allowed to remember material from those articles even if they do not need to consult them in the 30-minute preparation period. Mr. Householder himself recommends using story lines from television shows and movies for introductions, clearly those are seen and remembered from times before the thirty minutes of preparation. The purpose of the preparation rule is to eliminate coach consultation, outline, practice topic specific content, and create an equal playing field in topic-specific decisions. It is not the purpose of the thirty minutes preparation rule to outlaw reading and thinking about possible topics, it is not its intent to stop students from learning economics, statistics, and leaders names; it is not its intent to prohibit learning possible jokes and truths than will fit some topics, and it is not its intent to ban learning possible introductions.

But the author also says prewritten introductions are "antithetical to the natural intent" of extemporaneous speaking. Antithetical means the exact opposite of. I am not sure that extemp has a "natural intent". If it does the intent is to separate it from impromptu, i.e. to allow and perhaps even encourage preparation. If Mr. Householder really means to write that learning things, whether they be introductions or statistics or educational frames of analysis or how to organize a speech, before the thirty minutes of legal preparation starts is not the intent of extemp then coaching and teaching of any kind is immoral. Indeed the only ethical extemper would be s/he who is illiterate and uneducated.

How about his charge that "canning is plagiarism"? Well it's a patently false charge so long as the student wrote the original introduction himself. Prewritten introductions are not inherently plagiarized. I assume Brian knows that and his intent was to say that *some* prewritten introductions are from authors or camps or coaches and should be acknowledged as such. Well many prewritten introductions do acknowledge it, they cite the publication or author or famous person who said the original statement--sometimes even noting the date and or issue number. Those introductions are not plagiarized. They are honest and ethical beginnings to a speech.

What is left are introductions written by a coach or by other students, usually at a summer camp or as part of squad work. *If* a student who did not contribute to that introduction takes it and uses it without attribution it is plagiarism, plain and simple. And as a writer whose work is often plagiarized I would be delighted to learn of a way to stop this practice in any form.

But very often the truth is that it is a shared creation meant to be shared in usage. Let me offer a firsthand example. Almost ten

years ago an extemp student at my wife's high school brought in a clipping about Gavrillo Principe, the man who some say started World War I. She thought it might make a good Bosnia introduction. I told her to write a draft up. She did that, then when it was presented in our group every student there liked it but nobody thought it was ready to use. Everybody typed up their own version and then pieced them together. When my students finished their draft I added four words at the end of one sentence. They all used the intro at some point that year. Should they have started it attributing it to Jennifer, who brought in the original clipping? To Jennifer and myself? Or since they all contributed to the final text were they justified in using it however they chose to? I suppose there is a defense for any of those positions but I also believe that to label any student who had a hand in writing an introduction a plagiarist is inaccurate. And the effect of such labeling is to discourage sharing ideas and trying out new things with other students and teachers.

To discourage sharing and learning from each other is the true antithetical position. The best of speech and education and coaching is the enjoyment from sharing and helping others learn. Why do we all buy video tapes of final rounds? To learn from the best. Why do debaters run federalism and business confidence disadvantages without judges punishing them for not giving attribution to whichever school first ran the idea? Should we make interspers note in their introductions who helped on rewriting an oratory paragraph that just isn't working for you? I am sure there are plagiarists in all our fields, just as there are in academic writing. But as educators we need to separate coaching from irresponsible charges of plagiarism. An extemper who prepares one or forty introductions in advance, and is a participant in or writes each one himself, is not only ethical but is to be commended for his efforts and attempts to improve.

Inconsistencies. It is possible that Mr. Householder realizes that there are some problems with his position. At one point, for example, he writes that "Oftentimes students who 'can' are highly successful" but four paragraphs later says those who use prewritten introductions are "penalized for being bored, boring, and indistinguishable from the previous speaker". The truth is that most people who win both high school and college nationals use prewritten introductions most rounds. Mediocre students use them too. The difference is not in who uses canned introductions verses who does not, the test is whose introduction is most constructively and topic-pertinently attention getting.

His solution to "canned" or prewritten introductions is an example of the dilemma his position creates. He urges us to educate "coaches and competitors that canning is not proper". To replace these prewritten introductions he suggests two options. First, that speakers pick "odd local news events, cover stories in popular magazines" and story lines from television shows. But aren't these written too? Why is it okay to taken an introduction from a local newspaper or popular magazines but not the sources the author indicts?

The second option Brian offers is to "freshen change or twist an old introduction:. I agree that's a great way to keep energy in your introductions, and it sometimes helps make them appear to be topic specific. But isn't he still advocating the use of "canned" introductions just so long as you change some of the words?

(Bennett continued to page 88)

4. The Best Introductions.

The best introductions always reflect a quest for greatness. Some reflect the great thinkers (Shakespeare, Newton, Ts'ai Lun, Aristotle, or even a Paul Kennedy). Some reflect great ideas, others great stories. Some of the best introductions are anecdotes, occasionally a simple joke. But greatness is not determined by when they were written. Greatness for an extemporaneous speaker lies in the critics' reaction.

Should we allow "canned" or prewritten introductions? Yes, absolutely. Education is not a time-limited function. Learning doesn't suddenly begin thirty minutes before you are scheduled to speak. So long as the student played an important role in writing the introduction I applaud whatever she does to write it, learn it, and make it better. Greatness does not stem from a thirty minute preparation period, it stems from months or years of learning and practice and willingness to keep at an incredibly grueling event.

So let students write their introductions. Then do your coaching duty and critique them, have them rewrite, and rewrite yet again. Have them use their ballots and talk to their judges to make their introductions even better.

And when you judge reject the idea that you should sniff out and punish those whose introductions are prewritten. Instead sniff out and reward those whose introductions tie well to their topic. Give good feedback to those whose introductions are so well written that they serve as little bits of joy in those rounds where most speakers begin their speeches with fluff or the thin results of a hurried search...because they only had thirty minutes to prepare everything. And try to stifle your sighs as you sit through the rest of the speeches.

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