Identifying and Evaluating
the “Unwritten Rules” of Competition
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Abstract
At first glance, forensics appears to be regulated only in broad terms by formal sets of rules. However, participants quickly discover that the written guidelines are supplemented by a plethora of “unwritten rules” which can be difficult to learn. In exploring these rules, we will address six questions. First, do unwritten rules exist? The answer is a definite “yes.” Second, why do these rules exist? Regulating both event-specific norms and general tournament behaviors, these guidelines provide a sense of objective stability in what is in fact a subjective arena. Third, how can newcomers learn the rules? A series of potentially helpful steps are suggested. Fourth, what are some of the educational advantages and/or disadvantages of these rules? Both the benefits and the drawbacks of following these rules are considered. Fifth, do students and coaches like these rules? While those who remain in the activity tend to grow fond of them, their operation encourages others to walk away. Finally, should people fight the rules or play within them? Several arguments are examined, and the importance of being open to risk-taking is highlighted.

For students, coaches, judges and programs who decide to dive into the competitive world of forensics, the waters can look deceptively smooth and open. A wide array of events offer the chance to express diverse interests and develop varied talents while the absence of extensive written rules establishes a broad playing area in which individuals can make far-ranging choices. However, as participants immerse themselves in the game, they discover that a complex set of unwritten rules creates undertows and cross-currents that impact significantly on the way in which the activity plays out. Very quickly, those new to intercollegiate forensics discover that these unwritten rules possess tremendous power, functioning to separate the “in-group” who know and follow the rules from the “out-group” who do not have access to (or deliberately choose to flout) these assumptive guidelines. The goal of this essay is to demystify the nature of these unwritten rules by asking and responding to six key questions which can be asked about them. It is my hope that this process will serve the dual purpose of making the activity more accessible to newcomers and more valuable to those already well acquainted with the game.

1. Do unwritten rules in fact exist?

Technically, the words "rules" and "norms" refer to distinctively different constructs. Rules are often formal and explicit whereas norms tend to be informal and implicit. Rules may be enacted at a particular moment by an official governing body, while norms are habits or patterns which evolve over time among the
members of a community. Rules are relatively more "hard and fast" or invariant in their enforcement, while norms tend to be more flexible in their application. In the context of forensics, the rules which govern the activity are comparatively few - but the norms which operate on the competitive circuit are legion. In the present article, when we talk about the "unwritten rules" we are in fact talking about "norms." Thus, while the words "rules" and "norms" will be used interchangeably in the following discussion, it is helpful to remember that what we're really talking about are habits and patterns which may become so entrenched that they operate as if they were "rules" - when in fact they are generally accepted conventions that we as members of the community are potentially able to modify in major and minor ways whenever we wish to (perhaps through individual action, and assuredly through our collective will).

So do such unwritten rules (or norms) in fact exist? As this question relates to guidelines which shape the presentation and judging of competitive programs, the answer is an obvious "yes." Andy Billings (2002) notes that "the first day that one of my students joins the team, they receive a forty-page booklet that explains the events. They are told to treat it as their forensic Bible. The booklet does not merely tell the students what the events are; it also tells students the hidden secrets for success. In essence, they are formulas" (p. 32). Such "formulas" provide coherently packaged explanations of the "unwritten rules." Gaer (2002) similarly affirms the existence of such rules, arguing that forensics is an activity dominated by "conventions" or "unwritten formulas established by coaches, judges and students" which constitute "ways of winning" (p. 54). Over the years, many articles have been devoted to the description and analysis of such event-specific norms (Ballinger & Brand, 1987; Crawford, 1984; Cummings, 1995; Harris, 1986; Harris, 1987; Heffling, 1990; Reynolds, 1983; Sellnow & Ziegelmueller, 1988; White & Messer, 2003 and many others) while innumerable convention programs have explored the "do's" and "don'ts" associated with each event in the forensics pantheon. These guidelines are living organisms which evolve over the years, yet (as is true of all cultural components) this evolution is a very gradual process which leaves many of the unwritten rules virtually unmodified for long periods of time.

However, the unwritten rules regulate much more than simply the performance guidelines associated with particular events. They reach out to influence virtually every aspect of the forensics experience. For example, typical restrictions on the clothing choices made by students may include such directives as: (1) the ideal colors for women to wear are black and white (and perhaps red), while men should select dark 'business colors' like charcoal, navy blue, olive, and black, (2) men should always wear shirts and ties along with suit coats, while women are best served by business suits (pants, seldom considered ideal, may or may not be acceptable), (3) nobody should wear big clunky jewelry that draws the eye to it in a distracting way, and (4) informal articles of clothing like jeans and t-shirts are absolutely forbidden. Other unwritten rules regulate the way we react to the posting of finalists ("never scream or show unduly intense excitement or disappointment"), the nonverbal behaviors evident during award assemblies ("clap
equally for everybody and never cheer for your own school or give the raspberry to another school"), the way we enter rooms ("wait quietly outside the door if the round is already in progress and only walk in when you're absolutely sure nobody is speaking"), the way we leave rooms ("ask the judge's permission to leave if you depart mid-round to get to another event, but don't wave and shout 'good luck' to the other contestants"), and even the way students write their names on the blackboard ("print your name rather than use cursive letters, and don't make your handwriting either too big or too small"). Unlocking the code of such unwritten conventions can be a mystifying challenge for those new to the activity. It's not just a question of what the rules are, but also a question of why such rules exist at all. The bottom line is quite simple: the vast majority of an individual's behavior at a tournament is subject to reward or censure under the operation of the unwritten rules of the activity.

2. Why do these rules exist?

The forensics community constitutes an identifiable subculture. And inevitably, cultures and subcultures create group codes to live by. Dodd (1998) explains that "culture is the holistic interrelationship of a group's identity, beliefs, values, activities, rules, customs, communication patterns, and institutions...it shapes thinking, acting, and communicating according to group expectations" (p. 36). The unwritten rules provide the members of a subculture with a sense of clarity. They render the group experience comprehensible and allow members to "make sense" of their shared world. These rules are especially important when members confront situations involving conflict. And of course, by its very nature, forensics is a continuous string of conflicts: one round of competition follows another in an endless stream. In each round, judges must employ some set of criteria to enable them to rank and rate the contestants they watch. Meanwhile, the contestants must try to understand why they win or lose to their competitors. By its very nature, forensics demands that judges make largely "subjective" decisions - the very performance that one judge loves will be severely criticized by another critic. The frequent lack of inter-judge consistency can be very frustrating for competitors. Thus, the more these decisions appear to abide by a mutually accepted body of rules or norms, the easier it is to make and accept the decisions that are made. Judges and competitors are encouraged to stay in the arena and "keep fighting" if they can "figure out the game" - but if the world of competition appears to be unfocussed, random, and beyond the control of those participating, then it becomes more likely that people will walk away from the activity in disgust. As a result, ever since there have been tournaments, there has been pressure to standardize as many of the practices associated with them as possible. It's not that any given practice is "the only way to go." After all, other practices could theoretically have been adopted which would have worked just as well or better. But in the choice between chaos and clarity, the unspoken rules provide functional directions.

The application of these rules is not limited to the regulation of obviously important issues - they can operate in relation to even the most trivial of topics.
For example, in the Midwest the norm is for competitors signing into rounds to write both their first and last names on the board. In other regions, the norm is for students to write only their last names on the blackboard. Either way "works." Judges in both areas are able to look at the blackboard and acquire the basic information they need to fill out the ballot. Yet, there are clearly different regional expectations in play here. And while it embarrasses me a little to say it, I must admit that, as a judge from the Midwest, it doesn't feel "right" to me when a student doesn't put her or his first name on the board (does she/he have something to hide?).

Other unwritten rules give shape to issues that are of more obvious weight. For example, students are expected to be "good audiences" for the other competitors performing in their rounds. If a judge looks over at student "A" while student "B" is performing and notices that "A" is memorizing his own speech, painting her nails, staring out the window, or even taking a nap, then it's highly likely that the rank/rating received by student "A" will somehow reflect a penalty imposed by the judge. There is no "written rule" to force students to politely pay attention to each other, but the operation of unwritten norms helps to ensure that student performers are minimally likely to be "thrown off" by deliberately rude or callously indifferent auditors.

Clearly, as they relate to either major points of etiquette or minor points of habit, the "unwritten rules" narrow the acceptable options available to us as we operate within the naturally ambiguous tournament context. Unsure of "what we should do" in any given situation, the assumptive communal subtext lights our path. By accepting "one way" as "the way," the world of forensics becomes comprehensible and graspable, order is brought out of chaos, and the ground solidifies under our feet.

3. How can newcomers learn the rules?

Some rules seem to apply virtually nationwide, while others are region or area specific. Programs or competitors wishing to become involved in the activity may consider taking the following steps.

First, talk to people who are currently involved in the community or have been involved in recent years. Competitors, coaches, and judges from other schools and/or from one's own school are invaluable sources of information.

Second, don't talk to just one or two people - try to talk to several. Because the "unwritten rules" are "unwritten," they may be perceived quite differently by different people. Some members of the community may be very aware of "rules" relative to certain topics yet relatively unaware of the unspoken guidelines which operate relative to other aspects of the activity. One person may see rule "A" as absolute ("every oral interpretation performance should have a teaser"), while another person perceives that same rule as minor and/or easily sidestepped ("I don't care if students provide teasers or not"). One person may argue that there is only "one way" to do a certain thing ("every Persuasion should follow the problem-solution format"), while another person will assert that several options are
possible. Thus, the more people one talks to, the more well-rounded a picture one is likely to get of the actual situation. Remember that the vast majority of people involved in the activity truly want to help other programs grow and thrive. As more and more healthy programs flourish across the country, the quality of the experience for everyone is improved.

Third, consider attending a tournament or two simply as "an observer" rather than as a competitor. Try to keep your eyes open to as many aspects of the activity as possible inside and outside of the actual rounds of competition. Compare notes with other people from your school who attend the tournament. During or after the tournament, ask questions of each other and of "tournament insiders" who may be able to answer any questions or react to (interpret and help to make sense of) your observations.

Fourth, read scholarly articles on the activity which have been published in places like The National Forensic Journal. These offer invaluable insights into the operation of the community and the "unwritten expectations" that surround the performance of particular events, the dictates of "tournament etiquette," and so on.

Fifth, make conscious choices about what the goals and guidelines for your own program should be. Every program nationwide participates to some degree in the general ethos of the circuit, but each also builds its own tradition of practices, guidelines, expectations, and hopes. No program should feel that it "has to do" anything a certain way just because that way constitutes the circuit norm. Each program director has the right and the responsibility to develop a program which best fits the needs of her/his own self, students, and school.

4. What are some of the educational advantages and/or disadvantages of these rules?

Many of the unwritten rules can help students to learn very valuable lessons and/or skills. For example, while no written rules exist to specify how Impromptu speeches should be organized, the unwritten rules call on competitors to develop clearly partitioned main points (usually 2 or 3 of them) which work together to demonstrate a central thesis clearly identified near the beginning of the speech. This basic organizational structure is generally useful to students who can employ it not only in this one speaking event but in a variety of contexts (writing papers for classes, responding to essay exams, delivering other public speeches, and so on). Very few of the unwritten rules are purely capricious - essentially all of them develop a worthwhile skill, advocate proper social etiquette, or exemplify tried-and-true methods of "effective" speaking. Thus, learning the rules can promote the acquisition of an array of educational goals.

Unfortunately, the rules can also inhibit creative experimentation and potentially ground-breaking risk-taking. Once students learn that a certain formula is what "wins," many become unwilling to push the envelope which surrounds the straight-and-narrow path. After all, why take a chance on something new that may not work when the old well-worn road to success is so clearly visible? The general wisdom seems to be that students are expected to serve a period of
"apprenticeship" at the start of their competitive careers, demonstrating that they know and are able and willing to follow the standardized rules. Then, after they have sufficiently "proven themselves" (perhaps around their third year of competition), they are free to venture off the beaten path and take some chances. In fact, they may be rewarded for these risks (provided that the risks are not too extreme and violate some rules but not others). For example, not long ago I coached a student who during her first two years of competition built a strong reputation on the circuit. During her junior year she decided to change the color of her wardrobe, and instead of wearing exclusively black clothes to tournaments she purchased a vivid lime-green suit. Many ballots complimented her on this "bold choice," and virtually no ballot ever chastised her for breaking the applicable unwritten rules. For her, earning the opportunity to bend the rules was a truly liberating experience. Last year, another of my students tossed aside almost all of the conventional structural norms regulating Persuasion and developed his speech around a Native American organizational format that most of his judges had never heard of before. Some judges embraced this innovation and rewarded him with high scores. Others could not accept this violation of the norms and "tanked" him. For this student, the joy of risk-taking and the value of learning-from-experimentation far outweighed his interest in trophies. His commitment to the idea of the speech took precedence over the demand of some judges for conformity, and he was happy to live with the consequences of his choice. Meanwhile, students who do not (or cannot) find personally satisfying ways to bend the rules may become tired of the activity. Playing the same game by the same rules and producing the same basic product year after year can become boring, and over the years I have seen many students withdraw from the activity because they felt that forensics had "nothing left to teach them." The truth is that every performance in every round offers opportunities for more growth. However, that growth is only possible if one is willing to break the unwritten rules, challenge the conventions, and run the risk of "losing the ballot" (a daunting possibility for the experienced competitor or coach who is used to winning and whose ego has become deeply invested in the outcome of the game).

5. Do students and coaches like these rules?

The answer to this question varies from person to person. Overall, the students who remain in the activity tend to develop an attachment to the unwritten rules. In fact, when asked what aspects of the activity most make it "fun" or enhance their level of personal commitment to it, one of the prime factors identified by students is the level of "professionalism" (willingness to play according to the unwritten rules) which typifies their teammates, their coaches, and their own experience (Paine & Stanley, 2000). The rules seem to provide a security net, a blueprint to the forensics world which makes it more pleasurable to travel through. On the other hand, those students who enjoy taking risks and acting individualistically seem to be more likely to drop off the team. This pattern clearly has practical implications for coaches as they shape the ethos of their own team.
Will they train students to be winners who play by the rules, or will they encourage them to be experimental individualists who do not make “winning” their ultimate goal? Of course, some risk-takers will win and some students who adhere to the known patterns will not - but the general patterns are not obviated by the exceptions.

Coaches also view the unwritten rules in different ways. Overall, it seems that “new coaches” who have recently completed their own competitive careers tend to place more faith in the value of the unwritten rules. But as the years go by, many coaches seem to become less attached to the redundant patterns of standardization and grow more open to experimental choices. Of course, the relationship between length of career and attachment to standardization is not invariant. For example, perhaps one of the most risk-rewarding judges on the circuit last year was a graduate student who had been a competitor just the year before. Thus, in pragmatic terms, it is helpful for any given competitor to know as much as possible before the round starts about the tastes of the critic sitting in the back of the room. It can be helpful to remember that no performance is "frozen" from round to round - practicing appropriate audience analysis, the same speech or literary selection can be performed in very different ways in two successive rounds depending on who is evaluating it. Talk to the judges. Read the ballots they have written. As a competitor, allow yourself to make different performance choices round-by-round as the circumstances warrant.

6. Should I fight the rules, or play within them?

This question must be answered on four interlocking levels. First, as individual coaches and competitors, we must select for ourselves our own personal goals (and those of the programs we represent). What is it that we feel we "need" to get out of our forensics experience? Ideally, I believe that it is desirable to start by learning the rules. After all, the conventions exist for a reason. Understanding them and following them (at least at times, at least when the circumstances make it desirable) can help us to teach and learn valuable educational lessons. While following the unwritten rules can support competitive success (in and of itself a potentially desirable goal), it can also help students to learn important lessons about such diverse topics as structure, pacing, cutting, research, etiquette, and so on. Yet blindly following the norms forever can be experientially and educationally stultifying. Which rules we follow, and how long we follow them, must be a function of our goals: what do we need/want to learn and/or accomplish, and what do we have to do in order to reach those ends?

To help us answer this question for ourselves, we need to keep in mind a second key issue: the difference between "meaningful" and "meaningless" norm challenges. For example, in recent years the prototypical Informative speech has examined a medical and/or technological topic. Challenging this norm allows students (both as speakers and as audience members) to learn a lot of important information drawn from other fields of knowledge. Confronting this topic-choice norm has the potential to be a "meaningful" challenge. But are some challenges
in fact relatively "meaningless?" The circuit expects competitors to use black binders in oral interpretation. Would a student learn anything worthwhile from using a bright orange binder just to "stand out" or "be different?" Here, opinions may differ. Some might say that there doesn't seem to be any viable or educationally significant reason behind such a challenge: changing the binder's color might draw attention, but it's unlikely to help the student give a better performance. Others, however, would argue that every norm potentially deserves to be challenged. For example, a student interpreting a piece of prose meta-fiction might argue that an orange binder would reflect the tone/nature of the text more appropriately than would a sedate black folder. Pushed to the extreme, such risk-takers might assert that the real question is not "why should I break a norm?" but rather "why shouldn't I push the envelope?" On balance, I would argue that every choice should be a deliberate one: whatever we choose to do, we should know why we're doing it, and we should be able to explain to others the basis for our choice if asked to do so (especially since answering this question can help others to learn and grow from our decision to experiment).

As we decide what norms to honor vs. challenge, and as we decide how strictly to hold both ourselves and others to the unwritten rules, we need to keep in mind a third key point: the limits of the unwritten rules. They can choke off creativity. They can kill the joy that comes with the free-fall of experimentation. This is true not only for students, but also for coaches and judges. As argued by Gaer (2002), "we as a community and especially as judges and coaches need to...get out of the rut we have created...[and] stop attempting to simplify the coaching and judging process by adding formulaic rules to a creative and expressive activity. Think of the judging process as a means by which we would suggest ways for each student individually to enhance or improve their performance, not to 'fit in' with the rest of the crowd" (p. 55). After all, as Gaer goes on to avow, "there is not a coach/judge among us who would argue that this activity could be even more educational if we only take the time to develop an open mind when it comes to the events we coach/judge" (p. 56). In a similar vein, Burnett (2002) asserts that "the success formulas...stifle creativity and certainly do not provide new material for forensic research. Not only are these formulas troubling, they are time-consuming for the coach who must take excessive amounts of time to suggest obscure pieces for oral interpretation or obscure topics for public address. In addition, working through the formulaic, stifling 'unwritten rules' takes time away from other academic duties" (p. 80).

This raises a fourth key issue: the difficulties and opportunities faced by coaches vs. competitors vs. judges when it comes to challenging the unwritten rules. Judges can only evaluate the performances they see. Thus, unless coaches and students are willing to courageously duel the norms, judges will have no choice but to continue rewarding "the same old thing." It's also a numbers game. If only one student at a tournament chooses to buck the system, then it's very easy for judges to "down" that one competitor. But if two students, or ten, or the majority of the students in any given event decide to push the envelope, then the pressure reverses itself and judges may be more likely to seriously consider the
value of risk-taking. Of course, much of the power for change lies in the hands of the judges. Judges who strictly enforce the unwritten rules add weight to the status quo and act as barriers to creative experimentation. Is that good? Is it bad? It all depends. To return to a theme we have already stressed, as coaches, competitors and judges, it's important that we consciously review our behavior patterns. What do we really want the activity to teach? What is it most important that we walk away from a tournament having learned? Some norms promote important lessons, some reflect arbitrary preferences, and some perpetuate counterproductive patterns. Rather than sleepwalking through our accustomed paces, we all need to consciously reflect on what we're doing and be sure that we can justify our choices to ourselves, our students, our peers, our administrators, our schools, and our society. Ultimately, even those students who find security in the safety net of conventions need to be brave enough to jump from the nest if they want to keep learning. Even those judges who most love the rules must be willing to reward students who dare to soar beyond them.
References


