Improving the Educational Value of Extemporaneous Speaking: Refocusing the Question

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Extemporaneous speaking, according to one prominent National Forensic Association dignitary, is the event for "real men and women." Reflected in this statement is a widespread belief in the educational value of the extemporaneous speech contest. After all, success in this event requires contestants to understand complicated subjects of worldly importance, to analyze and synthesize, and to display their intellectual wares by powerfully and persuasively presenting their judgments to a myriad of critical listeners. Given the intellectual and persuasive prowess required of the extemporaneous speaker, it is little wonder that many regard extemporaneous speaking as perhaps the most valuable educational individual event.¹

Despite the alleged value of extemporaneous speaking, the event is generally one of the least popular individual events.² Students often view the event with disdain, claiming that extemporaneous speaking consumes too much time and is difficult as well as boring. Alternately, coaches often express groans when forced to judge the event and dismay after the round at the inability of students to "answer the question."

Clearly, based upon contemporary practice, the value assigned to extemporaneous speaking by members of the forensics community is substantially lower than the theoretical value accorded the activity. The preceding statement is not meant to deride the intentions of coaches or competitors, or to suggest that forensics coaches merely offer lip-service to the event. Rather, the statement should be viewed as an illustration that somehow the true value of extemporaneous speaking, as practiced today, is not being fulfilled.

The forensics community has offered numerous suggestions for enhancing the extemporaneous speaking experience—suggestions ranging from revamping the format of contests to better coaching methods. John E. Crawford suggests a multifaceted solution, proposing standardization of topics and contests, requiring questions

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to feature a persuasive orientation, and encouraging contestants to adopt a uniform preparation model. Although many of the proposed solutions have merit, we argue that the crux of the problem lies not with the competitors, organizational speech patterns, or coaching methods. Rather, improving extemporaneous speaking requires surgery on the heart of extemporaneous speaking—the extemporaneous question. As George W. Ziegelmueller and Charles A. Dause note in the argumentation context, "the prerequisite for adequate analysis of any question is the careful phrasing of a statement expressing the basis of the controversy." Steps must be taken to upgrade the quality of extemporaneous questions, for a speech can be no better than the question it answers.

The problem with extemporaneous questions is that they are often not written from an argumentative perspective. Instead, the questions posed often dictate a descriptive rather than argumentative approach. Descriptive questions circumvent the true value of extemporaneous speaking in particular and forensics in general. As the first National Developmental Conference on Forensics concludes, "Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people." In this essay we assume an argumentative perspective to mean the following: the student is forced by the working of the question to employ skills of analysis and synthesis. Furthermore, the question should be worded in a manner which requires the student to answer the question specifically (in other words, to make a claim) and to provide support or "good reasons" to convince others to accept the claim.

Refocusing extemporaneous questions toward an argumentative perspective requires two problem areas within the realm of question writing to be addressed. First, many questions are written too broadly to be sufficiently and thoroughly answered in a seven-minute speech. Second, and most important, the forensics community must orient itself toward writing only evaluative and closed-ended, predictive questions. Such questions are best for forcing students to adopt an argumentative perspective in their speech-making. Before focusing on the two problem areas, a brief discussion of the types of extemporaneous questions and the educational goals of the event and activity is necessary.

James A. Benson identifies two broad categories of extemporaneous questions: information and speculative. "Information topics ask what or why. . . . Speculative questions, on the other hand, ask the speaker to predict or to evaluate and to offer a basis for determining the reasonableness of the prediction or evaluation. . . ." Benson's two categories are more appropriately divided
into three specific types of questions—information, prediction, and evaluation—for a speech asking for a prediction requires a much different approach than does a question demanding an evaluation.

Answering these types of questions, ideally, should teach students to think quickly and creatively about issues in current affairs, to organize the knowledge into a cogent presentation in just a short time, and to develop speaking skills that depend less on memorization and more on the speedy retrieval, arrangement, and analysis of information.7

Among the values ideally gained from extemporaneous speaking, then, are the abilities "to organize information and ideas logically" and "to analyze questions and topics" in a short period of time.8

If we are to approach extemporaneous speaking from an argumentative perspective, we also need to examine the goals of argumentation. As Ziegelmueller and Dause note:

the study of argumentation is concerned both with inquiry and advocacy. As an investigative study, argumentation is concerned with discovering what is probably true in any controversy. In directing the student to such discovery, the inquiry phase of the study of argumentation includes consideration of research methods, the nature and evaluation of data, the nature and testing of argument, and the synthesis of ideas. As a study of advocacy, argumentation is concerned with the individual's ability to convince others of the validity of the conclusion which he has discovered.9

Thus, extemporaneous questions should be written so that they require analysis and synthesis, in addition to inquiry and advocacy. In short, a question should force a student to break down an issue, pull together the relevant information, and then advocate his or her answer as the best answer to the question.

Unfortunately, however, many extemporaneous questions suffer from phrasing that is too broad to allow thorough analysis, given the limits of preparation and speaking times. As Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes write, extemporaneous questions "should not be frivolous, outdated, vague, or unreasonably obscure."10 Such questions detract from the educational value of the event by forcing a student to attempt to answer a question thoroughly that, for all purposes, is impossible to answer within the time constraints. The student, then, becomes frustrated with the event and, consequently, may find it less enjoyable or abandon it entirely.

Many of the problems of extemporaneous speaking can often be traced to broadly-written questions. Dunham, for example,
cautions coaches that "too often students are prone to present overly-simplified and shallow material." Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes urge that a good extemporaneous speech "should answer the question as directly as possible." Benson writes of the tendency to provide "information which is relevant to the topic area but not necessarily germane to the specific question asked." And Buys notes as a common fault of extemporaneous speakers the failure "to speak on the exact subject matter stated or implied in the topic selected."

When questions are broadly worded, it is impossible to fashion a speech which eliminates the criticisms raised by these commentators. Broad questions inherently raise in a judge's mind the issue of "why didn't you address this aspect of the question?" Consequently, the speaker is either downgraded for an incomplete speech or for choosing a poor question. The judge may counter that a speaker should have chosen a different question. Such a criticism, however, begs a larger issue: the tournament director should not have any poor questions from which to choose.

Identifying the reason behind broadly-written questions is a difficult task, but the fact remains that many questions which appear specific on the surface are actually quite broad. For examples of these types of questions, we turn to sample questions offered by Benson:

- What lies ahead for Anita Bryant and the "Save Our Children" Movement?
- What are the most pressing domestic problems facing President Carter?
- Can peace be achieved in the Middle East in the near future?

While the preceding questions do indeed ask for specific information, they seek too much information. In the first question, "What lies ahead . . . " is specific, yet could encompass many different aspects of the movement. The student could treat as many aspects as possible, but still be considered shallow. Or, the student could isolate a few aspects of the issue and be accused of incomplete analysis. Attempting to isolate the most pressing domestic problems in the second question presents the same dilemma. The third question's concern with peace in the Middle East is also overly broad, since there is more than one conflict in that region.

These dilemmas for the student can be eliminated by more careful consideration during the writing of extemporaneous questions. The person writing the questions should, at the least, be deeply familiar with the event. When wording the questions, one should assume the role of the competitor. Question authors should
attempt to answer the question themselves before placing it in the tournament pool. Only when question authors take the time to compose clear, manageable questions can students enjoy the true educational value of extemporaneous speaking.

More vital for improving the educational value of extemporaneous speaking, however, is the need for the forensics community to offer only evaluative and closed-ended, predictive questions to extemporaneous speakers. Presently, tournaments usually offer a variety of question types—only a few of them ask for an evaluation or prediction with a closed-ended answer. Employing evaluative and closed-ended, predictive questions provides the student with several educational benefits not found in other types of questions. Closed-ended, predictive questions subsume the purpose of information questions, encourage and more strongly develop student critical thinking skills, and are fairer to all students competing in the event.

Extemporaneous questions asking for an evaluation or closed-ended prediction inherently incorporate the task of providing information because before an evaluation or prediction can be articulated, one must provide a basis for that answer—information about the situation. As Ziegelmueller and Dause aptly point out:

Before you can begin to apply analytical formulas you must have an understanding of the context in which the controversy exists. A study of the background of the controversy can provide the definitional and historical perspectives which are the necessary starting points for the discovery of issues. Thus, students are faced with a suffer challenge—they are forced to provide both information and an evaluation or prediction.

A question phrased for information can usually be rephrased for evaluation. For example, the information question posed by Benson, "Why did President Carter oppose the B-I bomber?" can be changed to "Was President Carter's decision to oppose the B-I bomber a wise choice?" and thereby challenge the student to answer the first question as a foundation for the evaluation demanded in the second question. The student cannot evaluate Carter's decision without first explaining why he made his decision. Similarly, the predictive question, "Will President Carter's decision to oppose the B-I bomber return to haunt him?" requires the student to first examine Carter's decision before offering a prediction.

Crucial to the phrasing of predictive questions is closed-ended wording. Closed-ended questions are more straightforward and provide the student with a focused area in which to compose a speech. For example, "Will the ERA be adopted?" is preferable
to "What lies ahead for the ERA?" Both versions deal with the same topic area, but the former is more answerable and eliminates possible conflicting interpretations between student and judge. Question interpretation has no place in extemporaneous speaking; closed-ended, predictive questions prevent differing interpretations and preserve the educational value of the activity.

When writing extemporaneous questions, the following guidelines may be helpful. First, avoid questions that begin with present or past tense interrogatives such as "what" and "how." Such words are not amenable to questions which call for closed-ended prediction or evaluation. Instead, questions should begin with future tense interrogatives: "will" (prediction), "should" (evaluation), and/or "can" (either prediction or evaluation). Second, evaluative questions can also begin with past tense verbs such as "did" or "was" if the question writer includes a value-laden adjective that modifies the question's subject (e.g., "good," "bad," "wise," "responsible"). Examples of weak questions and their stronger revisions can be found in Table 1.

### TABLE 1
Sample Extemporaneous Speaking Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak Wording</th>
<th>Better Wording</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How will the cutoff of military aid affect the Contras?</td>
<td>Will the cutoff of military aid result in the end of Contra resistance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should the United States do about Israeli action on the West Bank?</td>
<td>Should the United States pressure Israel to ease up on the West Bank protesters?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What did the United States gain from the INF treaty?</td>
<td>Was the INF treaty good for the United States' defense posture?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phrasing questions according to these guidelines produces several advantages. First, when students answer evaluative or closed-ended, predictive questions, their critical thinking skills are developed more than they would be with other types of questions. Evaluative and closed-ended, predictive questions are more chal-
lenging because they require students to do more than simply re-
gurgitate information. When faced with these types of questions, 
students are forced to analyze the information as background for a 
judgment of their own. Students must examine all the existing per-
spectives, weigh each carefully, and then make a judgment about 
the situation.

In addition to analysis and judgment, synthesis and argumenta-
tion skills are developed through the answering of closed-ended, 
predictive questions and evaluative questions. Making a judgment 
requires the student to synthesize the information available in or-
der to determine the best answer. Structuring that information into 
a clear position statement on the situation in the question demands 
argumentative skills. The student, in essence, prepares a persuas-
ive speech supporting his or her answer to the question. Questions 
which do not force the student to analyze, synthesize, and argue 
are clearly not as educationally beneficial as those which do force 
such critical thinking.

A final advantage of evaluative and closed-ended, predictive 
questions is more pragmatic—such questions make extemporane-
ous speaking more enjoyable for both students and judges. Extem-
poraneous speaking devoid of broad, unanswerable questions and 
rich with challenging, focused questions allows students to prepare 
speeches which do indeed answer the question. Extemporaneous 
speaking thus can become more intellectually stimulating for both 
the students who prepare the speeches and the judges who listen to 
the speeches. The event can then become less of a contest of who 
came closest to answering the question, but one where decisions 
are rendered on the basis of who answered the question best.

At this point two cautions are in order. First, evaluative and 
closed-ended, predictive questions must be phrased carefully in 
order to ensure a tight focus on the question. Second, the ques-
tions must be fair in both topic area and distribution of difficulty 
within the round. And, repeating a previous suggestion, the author 
of the extemporaneous questions should place himself or herself in 
the place of the speaker when deciding upon the topic area or 
wording of the question.

Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes may well be correct when they 
claim that "Extemporaneous speaking may well be the most valu-
able educational event offered in forensics." But members of the 
forensics community must remember that the foundation of the 
event is the question. Writing the extemporaneous question in ar-
gumentative form will not only make the event more educational 
for students, it will also make the event more enjoyable for both 
competitors and judges. By following the suggestions for extempo-
raneous speaking outlined in this essay, judges can produce an event as realistically valuable as it is theoretically valuable.

Endnotes


2Extemporaneous speaking, along with rhetorical criticism and after-dinner speaking, are consistently the smallest events at the NFA National Individual Events Tournament, according to the tournament booklets. John E. Crawford, "Toward Standardized Extemporaneous Speech Competition: Tournament Design," *National Forensic Journal*, 2 (1984), 41-55.


6Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes, 209.


8Ziegelmueller and Dause, 4.


11Faules, Rieke, and Rhodes, 212.

12Benson, 155.

13Buys, 72. Italics in original.

14Benson, 150, 151, 154.

15Ziegelmueller and Dause, 30.

16Benson, 150.

17Benson, 150.

18Benson, 150.