

# 2009 CFL Nationals Extemp Topic Area Analysis

By Logan Scisco

In less than two weeks the 2009 CFL national tournament will commence in Albany, New York. It will offer the first nationwide test of extempers across the country, occurring three weeks before the NFL national tournament in Birmingham, Alabama. As a well versed extemper knows, preparation is everything before a competition and to assist in this process CFL, like its NFL counterpart, releases the extemp topic areas prior to the competition. These eight topic areas have been listed on the organization's website, [www.ncfl.org](http://www.ncfl.org).

For an extemper who has not been to the CFL national tournament, there are eight rounds of competition. Extempers compete in for preset preliminary rounds followed by four elimination rounds. A typical preliminary field starts with nearly 200 competitors and each preliminary rounds is adjudicated by three judges. The average size of a preliminary round is seven competitors. It must also be said that there is no precise order for the topic areas. All topic areas are drawn at random prior to each round of competition, so there is no point in guessing what topic areas you will hit in each round, although there are probably some topic areas that you would rather see in preliminary rounds and avoid in elimination rounds.

The CFL extemp tournament is unique in that it centers more on domestic issues than international ones. While there have been exceptions in the past, the topic areas of the tournament have often placed domestic concerns over those in the international arena and this year's topic areas signify a continuation of that process. At first glance, five of the topic areas are named for domestic concerns or departments in the federal government and three of the topic areas represent a broad collection of global regions.

While these topic areas are broad, I will reiterate a point made by Colin West and myself last summer when we did the NFL topic area analysis for International and United States extemp (and which will appear in the next edition of *The Ex Files*). This is that although these topic areas are broad (sometimes extraordinarily so), they do provide a framework that the rounds of competition will take place in, and the judges you will see in each of these rounds will be listening to a maximum of seven speeches about the same topic area. Therefore, preparing for possible questions, and using those in your practice routine before the tournament, may make the difference between going far in the tournament or having to sit and watch the remainder of the tournament on the sidelines.

As with last year, this topic area analysis will break down each of the eight topic areas released for the 2009 CFL national tournament, providing some issues that extempers should look into and some sample questions extempers can use to practice.

## **Topic Area #1: The Americas**

This topic area is the first of three international topic areas that extempers will encounter at the tournament. One of the themes this topic area will revolve around in the political tilt of Latin America. The region has continued to move in a very leftist direction over this season, albeit the recent Panamanian presidential election shows how political changes in Latin America do not need to be monolithic. Nevertheless, the political changes in Latin America have often posed a challenge to U.S. leadership in the region and now are being tested by the global economic crisis. Countries like Venezuela, who has long railed against U.S. capitalism, are seeing recessionary impacts on their economies and the true test will be whether or not they are blamed for these

economic problems or can successfully continue to shift the blame to the United States. To prepare for these issues, an extemper would be wise to read some history about U.S. relations in Latin America, especially in regards to the Monroe Doctrine and U.S. activities in the Cold War, and also understand economic information about the major powers in the region (Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Mexico, and Colombia). Also, Sarah Anand's topic brief on leftism in Latin America from the last edition of *The Ex Files* might be a good read as well.

If there are two countries that extempers will have to be prepared to encounter in this round it is Cuba and Mexico. Cuba emerges after the recent Summit of the Americas where countries in Latin America are starting to pressure the U.S. more into dropping its embargo against the island. Also, Cuba's political changes with Raul Castro at the helm do provide the opportunity for extempers to get questions about what the future of Cuba holds, a point accentuated by the recent lifting of travel and financial restrictions on the island by the Obama administration. Mexico will be a focus area for one of two concerns: drug violence and H1N1 flu. Felipe Calderon's handling of both issues has major political impacts for his administration and the H1N1 issue has serious economic ramifications for the Mexican people.

Out of all international topic areas, this is the one topic area that extempers should expect to have their judges have some basic knowledge about. Your judge has probably heard of Mexico's problems or Hugo Chavez, even if they do not know specifics about them. Explaining how these issues relate to the U.S. can greatly assist you inside of a round, especially since many of the judges you encounter at CFL tend to be parents moreso than coaches, a trend that does not change as you move farther into elimination rounds.

*Sample Questions:*

1. What impact has the H1N1 virus had on the Mexican economy?
2. Why is Hugo Chavez entrenching his power in Venezuela?
3. How would the lifting of the U.S. embargo impact the Cuban economy?
4. Are leftist economic policies good for Latin America?
5. Is the Kirchner political dynasty coming to an end?

**Topic Area #2: Europe, Asia, and Africa**

Wow, this topic area is not broad at all! It might have been better for the topic committee to just create a "International" round that involved all three of these continents and let the best extemper survive. As with the Americas topic area, the committee this year did not create a global economics round. Considering that, and based on my past experience at the tournament, you may still get economic questions pertaining to country or region specific issues in this round. All three continents, especially Europe, which has seen the downfall of governments in Iceland and Latvia over the economic crisis, have experienced negative ramifications from the economic downturn. Continent-wide economic analysis pieces, especially from regional think tanks or from the International Monetary Fund, may be valuable sources of information to have on hand for this round.

Elections are also a predominant concern for all three continents, most notably in Asia and Africa. The Indian elections are nearing the home stretch and when a new government is selected it will greatly impact policy with Pakistan, which is crucial because that relationship stands to enhance or reduce the chances of success of our winning in Afghanistan. Furthermore, Afghanistan is holding a presidential election this summer, so extempers may have to speculate on whether or not the polls will be fair or how they will impact U.S. policy. However, I must add

that extempers may not see any questions about Pakistan or Afghanistan in this topic area, as those may be shifted to the U.S. State Department topic area or the Homeland Security topic area. Extempers will also want to keep an eye on the political upheavals in Thailand and Nepal. In terms of Africa, there are bound to be questions about the South Africa elections that brought Jacob Zuma to power and ushered in yet another term of ANC rule. For these questions, extempers must be aware that each country has different voting patterns and political cultures. Issues that one would assume would have universal appeal, such as the status of the economy or terrorism, do not necessarily play well everywhere. For example, the recent Indian elections have showed that voters are caring more about mundane local issues than terrorism or the performance of the economy.

Extempers cannot ignore power politics involving the European Union, Russia, and China in this round either. Human rights questions are still a favorite of topic writers when discussing Russia and China and Russia's actions against Ukraine and Georgia this year provide fertile ground for questions pertaining to those regions or in regards to how the European Union can contain Russia. China's movements towards more passive reunification with Taiwan also deserve attention.

More so than any other topic area in the tournament, this is one where extempers *really* need to communicate well with their audience. Judges often hate judging international topic rounds because they do not understand any of the issues being discussed. If you make your judge frustrated you run a high risk of being dropped in the round. When discussing these topics you must develop strong historical background, explaining clearly what is going on in these countries and why, and develop a detailed impact story. You do not have to relate all of the impacts to the U.S., but you must identify what these issues will lead to later. Simply saying that China's rise as a global superpower is bad is not enough. You must explain *why* China's rise as a global superpower is bad. Using this technique will allow you to speak *to* your judge rather than *at* your judge and in bigger rounds at the tournament, which are classically a crap shoot, this can make a world of difference.

A final rule of thumb here is for extempers to try to find local sources of information to cite in their speeches. While it can be hard to find objective reporting in China or Russia, having sources close to where these issues are occurring can add some uniqueness to a speech. Judges expect to hear *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, but their ears tend to perk up when they hear *The Far East Economic Review* or *The South China Morning Post*.

*Sample Questions:*

1. How should the EU deal with Russia?
2. Why is Sarkozy's popularity falling in France?
3. Were the South Africa elections bad for COPE?
4. Should Algeria investigate the disappearances that took place in its civil war?
5. Should the Sri Lankan government cease its offensive against the Tamil Tigers?

### **Topic Area #3: The U.S. State Department**

With this topic area, we start to get a listing of U.S. cabinet departments as opposed to the traditional language that is seen when looking at topic areas. When initially looking at the wording of these topic areas, I was trying to figure out what exactly they mean. On one hand, the topic area could have questions specific to the U.S. State Department. On the other hand, they could be code for a broader issue that extempers should look at. After much debate, I chose to go with the second idea that I came up with, and that these topic areas are about a larger theme. As

such, this round should be a round concerning U.S. foreign policy and recent foreign policy decisions, which makes sense because that is the operation of the State Department.

Nevertheless, to prepare for anything, it might be wise for extempers to peruse the Internet and clip briefings and analysis that are posted on these government websites. It might also be a good idea to do some background research and clip some information on the functions of the U.S. State Department (as well as other departments that will emerge later). Having this knowledge would add some nice touches to a speech and showcase the breadth of an extempers knowledge about the U.S. government.

Foreign policy questions are classic questions that involve a simple equation: “how does x affect y?” This is where you see questions such as “How big of a threat is North Korea to the United States?” or “How can the U.S. play a more constructive role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process?” A typical problem for a speech of this magnitude is that an extemper spends way too much time explaining background information in the introduction and reduces the time they need to spend in their three points. When facing these questions, a good rule is to quickly summarize each side’s motivations and then move into your speech, where you can explain these details in more depth (with adequately cited source material).

More so than any other topic area, historic knowledge is critical for U.S. foreign policy questions. The United States has been very involved in global affairs since the end of World War II, but our alignment with certain countries or our past actions in supporting rebel movements, dictatorships, or certain economic policies have alienated parts of the world and help to explain some of the hostility we face by these countries on a global scale. Also, understanding foreign policy theories such as realism, international liberalism, and neoconservatism can add more intellectual depth to a speech. The classic book I never hesitate to recommend to extempers so that they can handle foreign policy questions is Henry Kissinger’s *Diplomacy*, which does an excellent job detailing the history of international interaction.

Since CFL is a “mixed” extemp tournament, extempers do not have to worry about not bringing enough files, a typical dilemma that the U.S. extemper experiences at NFL. The questions for this topic area will probably cover the U.S. relationship with established or rising global powers such as Russia, China, India, Brazil, and Great Britain and/or with international bodies such as the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization. International economic agreements may also emerge such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). So-called “international hotspots” are also a favorite of topic writers so the U.S.’s troubled relationships with Venezuela, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Syria could arise.

While foreign policy rounds are nothing new to competitors, there is one problem most foreign policy rounds create. This is that extempers often give unbalanced speeches that focus more on the “x” or “y” than both variables. Remember that U.S. motivations are not the only thing that matter in these questions and that the other side is just as important. Also, be prepared to have some solutions for the world’s conflicts because questions such as “How can the U.S. save Pakistan?” or “How can the U.S. better engage South Africa?” do emerge and the more detailed your solution is and the best you can articulate it, the better off you will be.

*Sample Questions:*

1. Should the U.S. see China as more of a threat or as an ally?
2. How can the U.S. stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon?

3. Should the U.S. put pressure on Israel to stop settlement building?
4. Has Obama successfully rehabilitated America's image abroad?
5. Should the U.S. support an expansion of the UN Security Council?

#### **Topic Area #4: Agriculture, the Interior, and Energy**

For one of the first times that I can remember, agriculture is listed as a topic area for the national tournament. This round is shaping up to be a traditional "environment and energy" round that domestic extempers are familiar with, especially because the Department of the Interior is tasked with conserving wildlife and other aspects of the U.S. environment.

The agriculture portion of the topic is a hybrid topic area of how the U.S. should handle the safety of its food supply and has an economic dimension as well. Questions about genetically modified crops or hormones in cattle (especially after a recent trade spat was thawed with the EU over hormones in beef products) could be written, as well as whether the U.S. should overhaul its system of agricultural subsidies.

Of course, once I said environment most extempers probably thought global warming, which is not a bad place to start when looking at this topic area. In fact, questions on the merits of global warming or solutions about carbon emissions, most notably recent cap and trade schemes in Congress, can and will emerge. However, an extemper should not get completely caught up in global warming and carbon regulation that they ignore other pressing concerns such as whether the U.S. should strengthen standards for environmental regulations in the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the Endangered Species Act. Also, the topic of cleaning up toxic waste has always been a favorite of national topic area writers, so getting research on the Superfund program may not be a bad idea. Sometimes extempers even encounter really broad, vague, and (to be blunt) stupid questions such as "Does the environment matter?"

This topic area could also ask you to evaluate how good of a job certain leaders are doing in their cabinet departments so far. Remember, Tom Vilsack is in charge of the Department of Agriculture, Ken Salazar is in charge of the Department of the Interior, and Steven Chu is in charge of the Department of Energy. Lest we forget another important position, also remember that Lisa Jackson is in charge of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). This is where getting background information on each of these leaders is important, which can be found at their respective government websites, and getting news briefings about recent decisions in these departments can greatly assist if one of these evaluation questions comes up.

The energy portion of the topic will require extempers to be well versed in alternative energy technologies. Having files for solar, wind, clean coal, and nuclear energy will be of great help in this round, as most veteran extempers could probably list at least ten possibilities for questions about the merits of these different energy sources. Also, extempers should be aware of the impact these energy sources could have on transportation technology, which is where questions about hybrid or electric cars could come into play.

A major theme extempers need to prepare for in this topic area is how regulation in any of these three areas could impact the economy. Debates have occurred all year, especially with the rise in oil prices last summer, about U.S. energy security and whether the U.S. should drill offshore for oil (or classically in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). The debate over whether to enhance oil production or tax oil production to enhance alternative energy sources is a fierce one and extempers need to have a few cards up their sleeve to handle this issue.

*Sample Questions:*

1. Should the U.S. reduce its agricultural subsidies?
2. Is nuclear power necessary if the U.S. wants to create a fleet of electric cars?
3. Will a carbon trading system be a benefit or a detriment to the U.S. economy?
4. What is America's most pressing environmental issue?
5. Should the U.S. create a public transportation system?

**Topic Area #5: Education, Housing & Urban Development, and Health & Human Services**

If there is one topic area that cries “eww” at the tournament it is this one. As a result of that, I would almost be willing to bet that this topic area emerges in semi-finals or finals. All kidding aside, this topic area is yet another extension of the tournament's focus on domestic issues, but enough has been published over the last year that should provide extempers with enough material to survive this round. If you are a veteran domestic extemper, and someone who loves domestic programs, though, this round is your gold mine

With education, the topic of education reform has heated up over the last several years, especially as U.S. schools continue to lag behind their international counterparts. Questions about education reform such as school vouchers, charter schools, merit pay, and the infamous No Child Left Behind law will rear their ugly head in this round. Extempers also need to have a college file because the cost of college education continues to rise with tuition hikes and that has the potential to exclude students from higher education, a move that could prompt federal involvement in the future. A random question about affirmative action could also squeeze into this topic area as well.

The housing and urban development topic area is probably foreign to many extempers, who never have to cite this department much in rounds. I cannot recall ever doing so in my six and half year career. However, with the downturns in the housing market, this department has been the one to spearhead reforms to make it easier for homeowners in default to retain their homes. Therefore, economic questions about the federal government's efforts to assist the housing market could face extempers in this round. Also, efforts to rebuild New Orleans post-Katrina (and who thought we'd still be talking about that) fall under this department's purview as well.

I forecast, though, that the final part of this topic area, with Health and Human Services will be the key focus for this round. The recent H1N1 flu shows how the U.S. needs to continually reinforce and fund its pandemic flu plan and offers a test for U.S. medical services. Also, one of the Obama administration's priorities is in passing some version of a universal health insurance plan, although there is significant disagreement between it and some members of Congress about how this should be done. Furthermore, reforms in Medicare and Medicaid programs are debated by think tanks, which would be good for extempers to get a hold of, and efforts to decrease the price of prescription drugs are also a big political issue. Finally, major public health issues in regards to AIDS or tobacco always squeeze their way in here as well as ethical debates over medical technology such as cloning and stem cell research.

As with the previous topic area, extempers would be wise to research each of these departments and clip information about their leadership and priorities (and I will warn you that the Department of Housing and Urban Development's website looks like it was designed by a six year old). Also, clipping medical journals might be wise, but check the credentials of the writer because bias might be an issue (this is a good procedure to follow when you read any major article).

Extempers also need to take into account the political dimensions of what they are talking about. There is no domestic politics topic area for this tournament so the odds are that those political questions will find their way into these domestic topic areas. This is also where extempers need to be careful about their audience. At the tournament do not bash the entire U.S. education system as many of your judges will be either teachers or parents who have children in the U.S. education system. Also, if you are forced to discuss a controversial issue such as stem cell research, cloning, or abortion, be careful to give each side of the debate its due because you cannot guess which side of the issue your judge is on and how that might impact their decision. Sometimes its best to avoid these topics, but if you must speak on them you need to have all your facts correct.

*Sample Questions:*

1. What adjustments need to be made to No Child Left Behind?
2. Are plans to help trouble homeowners creating a moral hazard?
3. Is there a solution that can break the political deadlock on reforming Medicare?
4. Should the federal government institute a cap on college tuition rates?
5. Can the U.S. medical infrastructure absorb the burden of a universal healthcare system?

**Topic Area #6: Labor, Treasury, and Commerce**

Without question, this is the main topic area of the tournament. More articles have been written about the economy this year than nearly any other issue. The only other issue that would come close would be President Obama's victory in the 2008 election, but there is no topic area at the tournament where you will be talking about that. As economy files have expanded exponentially this year, extempers need to make sure that everything has been subdivided accordingly. If you have an economy folder that is humongous, I would suggest cleaning it out prior to the tournament.

Economy questions, like international topics, can be some of the worst rounds for judges to observe (unless you get Steve Moss as a judge in the back of the room). At local tournaments and in pockets of the national tournament, there are judges who have no grasp of economic theory or its activities. To handle these judges, it is best to give them a clear story of what your discussing. If you mention a major economic theory or concept, it might be wise to become more "audience friendly" and give a 1-2 sentence explanation of that theory or concept. You do not have to beat a dead horse, but the fault of many extempers is they are more concerned about sounding smart on economics than on actually *explaining* economics, which is your burden in these types of rounds.

My prediction is that many of the topics you are going to encounter in this round are going to be evaluations of current economic policies or the effectiveness of federal actions rather than proposing economic solutions (although there will most likely be a few questions in the pool about this). Government policies such as TARP, the PPIP, the stimulus package, its solutions for the nation's automakers, Obama's budget plans, or steps it has taken to shore up the bank system (i.e. stress tests) are all fair game here. Also, evaluations of how much government interference in the economy is appropriate can be expected.

Extempers should not just limit their analysis, though, to national economic issues. State governments are also facing their own budget shortfalls and they are often more painful than what the federal government experiences. While you will not face questions specific to a state (with the possible exception of California), but questions about their overall economic situation may arise.

The move towards protectionism in trade markets, or its effects on the global economy, may also come up, and extempers should prepare for a question about the Employee Free Choice Act, which would allow unions to form via “card check” instead of having a secret ballot to determine if they could form inside of a company.

*Sample Questions:*

1. Will “card check” damage the U.S. economy?
2. Should the federal government nationalize troubled banks?
3. Is Obama’s call for tougher tax enforcement a good idea?
4. Was Chrysler’s bankruptcy mismanaged?
5. Is the worst of the economic recession over?

### **Topic Area #7: Justice Department & Attorney General**

The “attorney general” part of this topic area is a little confusing, since the obvious inference would be that it would entail questions about current attorney general Eric Holder, is too limiting for a variety of questions. However, I see this round as more of a “Criminal Justice”-type round.

This labeling, though, might be too limiting as well. With David Souter’s recent decision to leave the Supreme Court, extempers need to be ready to explain who might replace him or what the implications might be for the Court when he leaves. Since the Supreme Court is also hearing cases right now, extempers need to be familiar with those cases and be able to explain what the pressing legal issues are and how the Supreme Court might rule. The Supreme Court has already ruled on cases concerning identity theft, “fleeting” expletives, and a mandatory sentence for a gun crime this year and will rule on cases concerning strip searches in schools, the Voting Rights Act, and conflicting parts of the Civil Rights Act. While you may think your not going to hit a specific case question, you are wrong because the 2007 final round at CFL saw questions that asked extempers to evaluate cases just like that.

This is also where extempers could get questions about the possible prosecution of Bush officials who authorized enhanced interrogation techniques. If that does not emerge in this topic area, it could emerge in the Homeland Security topic area. However, just because this topic area might appear to have a legalistic dimension does not mean that it cannot have a political one as well.

Legal questions are a different animal in the extemp world. Instead of having to base your ideas on facts, you also have to take the perspective as a lawyer or judge and look at arguments in their legal dimensions. This requires knowing prior Supreme Court cases and the legal theories of different justices on the Court. Framing your arguments and sounding like a lawyer when you give these speeches can be very impressive.

You also should not forget about Obama’s attempts at closing down tax havens as well. If not framed as an economic issue, it could come up in this round as a criminal one.

*Sample Questions:*

1. Should the U.S. legalize illegal drugs?
2. How should the Supreme Court rule in *Ricci v. DeStefano*?
3. Should Obama appoint a strong leftist to the Supreme Court to replace Souter?
4. Is the death penalty cruel and unusual punishment?



5. Are strip searches of high school students a violation of their Fourth Amendment rights?

### **Topic Area #8: Homeland Security**

The final topic area is a mainstay for national tournaments since September 11<sup>th</sup>, but this is one that has lost steam over the last several years, especially as the perceived risk of a terrorist attack continues to be reduced in the minds of Americans.

Unlike previous years, I believe that this topic is going to have more of a focus on America's international activities in regards to containing terrorism than it will be about domestic terror prevention. Issues like the Patriot Act and national ID cards are so 2002 and 2003, while recent actions in Pakistan and Somalia have grabbed global attention.

This topic area will probably be where military questions will be inserted. There is no round that is about the Defense Department, so I believe that question writers will tie U.S. military activities in Iraq and Afghanistan into this round. Extempers should understand the shifts going on in Defense Department policy and will want to read up on the latest QDR that outlines America's strategic focus.

Getting briefings from the Department of Homeland Security will be a vital preparation for this round, especially because gaffes by Janet Napolitano have led to some Republicans calling for her resignation.

The controversial topic of illegal immigration is also going to be placed in this round because border security is still a significant concern among Americans. Knowing the proposed laws to solve the illegal immigration dilemma and their merits/disadvantages will help you in navigating this topic, one that is more complex than it initially appears. It is also a political hot potato, so make sure to explain that if you draw this issue as well.

Finally, a comparison question between Obama's policies towards terror sponsors and towards terrorism compared to President Bush's is a possibility. You may be asked to grade Obama's policies so far or how they make America safer/more vulnerable than the Bush era. You may also be asked if the so-called "Bush doctrine" in handling terrorism and terrorist sponsors is dead.

#### *Sample Questions:*

1. Can Pakistan's government successfully defeat the Taliban?
2. Should the U.S. security focus be more on rising global powers or failed states?
3. If it is closed, what should be done with Gitmo's prisoners?
4. Did President Bush make America less safe?
5. How can America best secure its borders?