

On Developing Style

By: Sebastian Pyrek

Being a speaking event, extemp relies not only on substance but also on style. The process of becoming better at the event is an uphill struggle, with each step becoming more difficult to grasp than the previous, but yet there is something that many extempers will overlook or save for very end that could be developed earlier along with the other facets of the event: style. Observing the final rounds of the higher extemp championships demonstrates the varied styles that each speaker has, and these varied styles reach the final because they work well at uniquely setting the speaker apart in prelims and outrounds. But don't let yourself think that completely emulating these styles will land you the championship spot at the state or national level. The point behind the event is about finding a way to place *yourself* into the information, and this is the way that developing a style should be viewed.

For many judges, watching a round of extemp can be tedious, and even for those judges that are seasoned veterans and extemp junkies, a round that contains identical styles can be just as tedious to rank. A good extemper is one who has the ability to stand out, and this becomes harder to do at higher levels because once prelims are finished, when almost all of the competitors have some sort of merit in the event. The author of this article struggled with this fact for most of his career, and was only able to win his state's title after having realized the importance of a unique style (with the help of his coach) a week before the state finals.

Though a style can be forced, this may not be the best strategy because it will not be genuine and the speaker may have a hard time maintaining it during stressful situations. The most effective style is best achieved by finding what comes naturally to the speaker. For me, it was a slightly less formal tone with sarcastic, yet tasteful humor. I had spent a good part of three seasons trying to analyze and formally explain what I was trying to argue, and though this worked well enough, it wasn't the way that I naturally thought which caused problems when the pressure began to mount.

The best styles are those that mix what the speaker does well and is comfortable with, along with what will help the speaker do well. A speech that is all humorous or all analytical may be what the speaker feels most comfortable with, but it will not allow them to win the final round on most occasions. The important point is to include what you are comfortable with so you don't feel completely out of your comfort zone; this will provide comfort when it counts most.

This is also not something I would recommend to look for the week before a big tournament. Finding the perfect balance takes dozens of practice rounds and much trial and error to find the perfect balance of what works, and what comes naturally. It may also

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help to have multiple opinions throughout the process, because the most effective balance is one that will work with the widest audience of judges because the judging pool is a dangerous variable for nearly every extemper. I know of extempers who would videotape themselves or record their speeches and then critique themselves also (though this will not work for everyone). During the practice process, it may be helpful to involve interp judges for stylistic commentary (be prepared to take certain things with a grain of salt, but I found interp people to be vital in my own process).

Finally, remember not to get discouraged. Extemp is not an easy event, and most of the enjoyment should come out of the process that it takes you to reach the point where you can make the final round at every tournament or to win every tournament.

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