

TEN COMMANDMENTS

FOR EFFECTIVE EXTEMPORANEOUS

DELIVERY

by Martha B. Ebeling

My debate coach was asleep in the front seat next to me, while three students, incredibly cramped amid the luggage and debate and extemp files, were sharing their memorization of Shakespeare's "Speak the speech..." for their Monday morning English class. Challenging weather was lengthening the drive home from the exhilarating experience of the first ever Round Robin in Extemporaneous Speaking at Montgomery Bell Academy in Nashville. But, I was blessed with many hours to reflect on the adventure in which I had been privileged to participate during the past two days. After 15 years as an extemp coach, I have a comfortable level of expertise in the activity, but I had found that veteran extemp coaches can learn much from judging and observing some of the finest extempers from across the nation. Additionally, it was interesting to note those tiny differences that set apart the "best" of these talented and successful competitors.

Every coach/judge has experienced that Extemp Round from H---! Let me assure you, these 8 preliminary rounds and the exhibition round were purely from Heaven. Needless to say, these young people were all well versed on their topics which they presented with superb analysis, depth and organization. Critiquing their efforts was truly difficult. The subtle differences came with their delivery styles--how they presented their ideas through the effective use of verbals and non-verbals. And, the finest extemper knows how to find that consummate union of impeccable analysis and superb delivery.

My experience led me to put together this list of "Ten Commandments" for superior extemp delivery that might help produce these "Heavenly Rounds" that we all appreciate. Those who won the day at the MBA Round Robin were those who had most clearly adhered to these basic rules. We all know that when rounds are as close as these, decisions will rest often on very minute or "nit-picking" issues. Let me share my observations with you:

1. Exude Confidence: From the moment you sail through the door, *the aura must be one of complete confidence and command of the situation.* Maybe you are not totally comfortable with the topic you selected (you managed to pick three lousy ones!) but the judge should never have a hint of this from your body language. Smile, but don't ingratiate. Be businesslike and professional. Being an exceptional extemper is an art, but according to Henry Clay, "the greatest art is to conceal the art."

2. Relax: This commandment ties into the first one and together they are an unbeatable combination. *A graceful walk, relaxed fingers, with the middle finger lightly touching the side seam* so that you don't stand like an "ape," chin up (but not too far) and shoulders back all present a confident and relaxed you. I have a student who really got the message that he looked up tight when the judge wrote on the ballot, "When did rigor mortis set in?"

3. Simplicity is Key: Words that you do not use normally in your conversation tend to come off as affected when thrown

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into an extemp round. I have yet to hear a young person in the rear of the van refer to requirements as "exigencies." If you *would*, then, fine, but otherwise it sounds staged and practiced, as do elaborate intros. I tell my extempers to pretend as if the two of us were having a discussion about the issue being presented. There is, of course, a very thin line which must not be crossed. One dare not be too casual and lose the professionalism the event demands. *Slang, triteness, and flippancy have no place in an extemp speech.* Use of the first person singular should be avoided. Simplicity in outline, simplicity in word choice, and simplicity in sentence structure will win the day!

4. Slow Down! Slow Down! Slow Down! One of the lessons from MBA that reinforced for me that I need to continue to recite these words fifty times at every practice with my team was listening to Lucas Kline from Blacksburg, VA., who was last year's national champion in United States Extemp. I had heard Lucas at Nationals and was certainly impressed, but listening to him in a small room was fantastic. He speaks slowly! He has a clear, simple but complete analysis, chooses simple words and explanations, and yet, he manages to get in all the information necessary to support his answer in seven minutes. He does not try to tell me everything he knows on the subject which, so often causes extempers to race through their speeches, swallowing words and dropping word endings all over the floor.

5. Remember Shakespeare's "Speak the Speech"..which continues: "Nor do not

saw the air too much with your hand..." Gestures, appropriately flowing from the content of the speech are perhaps the most valuable of all non-verbals, but gestures overly used, or ineffectively used are a terrible distraction from the message being delivered. There are several ways to decrease the perpetual motion. *Deliver an entire speech without one gesture and then limit gestures to one or two per speech for a period of time.* This may help. Also, really THINK about what you are saying. You will soon realize how unrelated the gestures may be to the point being made. Practice in front of a mirror; or have the coach do a video tape and torture yourself by watching it!

6. Convey Passion: Quoting Bishop Gregg (whoever he was!): "There are three things to aim at in public speaking. First: to *get into your subject, then to get your subject into yourself, and lastly, to get your subject into your hearers.*" That is worth thinking about. Deliver with warmth and excitement so that your judge will feel that you really care about the hunger in Africa or the future of the euro. If you care, chances are that s/he will, also. If you don't grab them with your enthusiasm for the subject, you are very likely to find them reading

the wall posters or shaking their stop watch to see if it is still running. Remember Commandment #3? Simplicity with the aid of passion persuades!

7. "Nothing is pleasant that is not spiced with variety:" This is certainly a saying that holds special meaning in extemporaneous speaking. *Variety of rate, tone, pace, pitch is so important to keeping the attention of the audience.* I recently heard a speech by the Episcopal Bishop of Milwaukee, Roger White, and how I wished that everyone of my extempers could have been in the audience because he is a master of the effective use of the "pause." He allows a thought to sink in. He looks at you so that you absorb it. What a difference it makes to the delivery of a speech. Another great way to add variety is to *ask the rhetorical question.* Making the judge be part of the answer transfers some ownership in the message. Getting variety takes lots of work and, again, there is nothing like a tape to convince the student that it is needed.

8. Let it Flow! Listening to oneself on a tape often will allow the extemper to hear that s/he is delivering their speech in choppy phrases. Fluency is so important and does come with much, much practice

and experience and a growing self confidence. However, extempers must use every opportunity to develop fluency. I had a student who would listen to a walkman on his way to school. I made him pitch it and practice an extemp speech to himself instead. Doing a speech in every shower is smart, too.

9. Look the judge in the eye - always! This is one of the first and most basic lessons learned by the novice extemper, so it was a surprise to find that some of the fine extempers at MBA would let their eyes flick away from me, look over my shoulder or at the floor when moving. My advice is to "hook on with one judge" through a sentence or a complete idea when there is more than one judge present, then do the same with the others. Don't flit back and forth between them and always maintain that contact with one of them. Basic!

And finally, the last commandment:

10. Love what you do! Success in any arena is an act of creation that combines some basic talent, lots of hard work, and a fire in the belly to be the best you can be. This really was evident with all the participants at the first national extemp round robin!