

Basic Training: An Assertion of Principles for Coaching  
Oral Interpretation for Intercollegiate Forensics Competition

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**Abstract**

*This essay explores a variety of basic issues and challenges a new coach will face when assisting students in navigating the experience of developing an oral interpretation performance for collegiate forensics competition. While the piece tends to focus on the event of prose interpretation, much of the content relates just as clearly to the events of duo, poetry, program oral interpretation and dramatic interpretation. The essay attempts to offer a set of starting points for the coaching process in terms of finding literature, choosing a specific piece, cutting scripts, and exploring performance-related issues.*

Enabling students to meet the challenges of oral interpretation competition may seem a daunting task at the outset. Especially for the inexperienced coach, the challenges of mining literature resources, cutting scripts to meet time constraints, juggling the often unclear expectations of students, and coaching the performance can be overwhelming. This essay is directed to the individual who has just recently strapped on the boots of coach or director of forensics. Additionally, this essay is designed to serve the needs of the new coach who may be attempting to start a program by coaching novice competitors who are new to competitive oral-interpretive performance, or at least new to the intercollegiate forensic scene. This exploration of the initial adventures in a directorial role of forensics brings the art and science of *interp* back to the fundamentals of the process that still support and maintain the most longstanding and competitive collegiate programs in the United States.

***Mining Literature Resources***

Developing students as oral interpretation performers is a multi-step process that begins with *mining literature resources*. The search for student performance literature is a task best completed by a coordinated effort between coach and competitor. First, two eyes are always better than one, and second, the transactional nature of the search allows some discussion concerning the choice.

***Rationale***

While the primary goal of this process is to introduce and expose students to a wide array of poetry, prose and drama, at its heart, it is not simply a process of exploration. Rather, one primary rationale underlying the inclusion of oral interpretation in competitive forensics (from an educational perspective) is to breed and feed avid readers. Students are constantly in search of the "perfect

prose." Handing students literature that you have found on your private expeditions through the stacks is certainly not inappropriate. Indeed, it may be fueling the fire of curiosity. Additionally, providing students with literature and scripts that have been performed by students in the past is a common practice in collegiate forensics. This act gives students an introduction to that piece of literature (it is new to them) and an opportunity to mark it with the *personal* as they develop a fresh interpretation of the performance piece. An injustice that is possible in this process, however, is a failure to foster student interest in literature that they will carry beyond their time in college and competitive forensics. In the final tally, igniting, developing, and enhancing student skill in performance (as a communication art) and interest in literature is at the heart of the inclusion of oral interpretation in the activity.

### *Practical Choice Making*

One of the central aims of the coach should always be to expand the mind of the student before them. That expansion requires that coaches introduce students to a wide array of channels through which to procure literature. The recent drift in collegiate forensics, at least in the mythological pining of conventional wisdom, places a high value on the most recent, unknown, and undiscovered literature as though these characteristics fuel the fire of "quality performance." While much of the literature that is performed on the collegiate circuit was published (in a perpetual cycle) within the last few years, that does not preclude the use of authors' work that has been celebrated for generations. Indeed, the work of Seamus Heaney, Joyce Carol Oates and Anton Chekhov never disappoint an audience if told with an appropriate voice, fresh persona, or simply, by an individual who has an ability to breathe new life into the familiar through the act of *oral interpretation*. Perpetually, students seem to move away from this brand of literature because it presents a different challenge than the latest David Sedaris montage (although Sedaris should also be celebrated for his unique voice).

This general discussion of choice making for performance literature is just that, general. It excludes a discussion of the nuances of the relationship between the forensics circuit as a public audience and a particular piece of literature. For instance, the 2004 National Forensic Association National Champion in Prose Interpretation performed "The Notebook" by Nicholas Sparks.<sup>1</sup> While this accomplishment should not preclude students from choosing to perform this piece of literature in the future, the coach and student should attempt to gain a clear understanding of the possible nuances of the relationship that the audience may have with this piece when they encounter it during the following season(s). If a student from another school (even if they were never exposed to the previous

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<sup>1</sup>The publication date for this essay is 2005. The reference to the "The Notebook" refers to Jacob Hodgson from Eastern Michigan University. He won the NFA national championship last year (the most recent national champion in that event at the time of the composition of this piece).

year's performance of the piece) chooses to perform "The Notebook" during the 2004-05 season, they may come upon feedback from judges that mentions the fact that a student performing the same piece won the previous national tournament. The audience, in this case tournament judges, may deem the choice of literature as one that does not reflect that student's ability to mine fresh material that illustrates the student's efforts to analyze the audience. While that student may bring new life to a performance of the story, the audience still may reject the choice given the nuances of the situation.

This discussion leads to the conclusion that all literature is fair game in the forensic community. The coach, however, maintains the role of guiding students toward literature choices that make creative, competitive, and communicative sense for that individual performer and the perceived/encountered audience. Fulfilling that responsibility, in this competitive environment, requires more than simply literary knowledge.

#### *Mining Resources*

The descriptive phrase of "mining resources" constructs an accurate image of the task of delving into the multitude of literary channels in search of fitting material. At the helm of the literature reservoir is the most obvious and affordable option: public collections. University and public libraries contain a rich variety of literary works in poetry, prose and drama. While it may seem silly to note that "*the library has books*", trends on the collegiate forensics circuit have steered students away from the publicly held stacks and into the armchairs at Barnes & Noble. Perhaps the Dewey Decimal System of Classification has proven to be more challenging than a bookstore shelf marked "PROSE." A bit of investigation, however, will prove that libraries contain many of the current (cutting edge) titles that are available in the box stores. Additionally, many libraries are dedicated to honoring book requests from patrons, which allows coaches to spend stretched budgetary allotments on travel, scholarships, and other related expenses.

If, however, the expense of a bookstore is not one that is prohibitive, then this option is, also, richly appealing. Confined in the walls of Borders, Barnes & Noble, Books-A-Million and other large book superstores are consistently stocked (and easy to locate) sections of poetry, prose and drama. While these collections maintain small quantities of classical texts, much of literature that is stocked is recently published material that certainly provides both coaches and competitors with a defined and refreshed collection of literature on a regular basis.

Additionally, beyond the grounds of the book superstore exist a wide variety of specialty bookstores (many of which service customers with online browsing and sales). This assortment of stores possess pointed in their collections that seek to meet the expectations of specific buyers. For example, Soliloquy (formally Act I) bookstore in Chicago, IL. is a store that provides literature the performance community. This shop maintains a rich stock of plays and stage performance pieces. While you may not live in Chicago, specialty shops such as this can be found in cities and towns around the US. Most are willing to sell via phone

or Internet, thus making their stock available to all. With collections that are often a mix of new and used books, specialty stores provide forensics coaches and competitors a pointed experience in the search for competitive literature.

Specialty stores, like book super stores and libraries, stock anthologies of prose, poetry and drama. Examples of such anthologies include: Prose-Scribner's Best Short Stories (published annually); Pushcart Press Collection (published annually); Duo-Humana Festival Collections (published annually); Best American Short Plays (published annually); Poetry-numerous collections of poetry are published frequently. A common thematic current often ties the collections together. If a student is searching for literature that deals with specific emotions, experiences, subject matter, or character attributes, taking a close look at the anthologies section of their local text haunt could prove very productive.

Finally, literary magazines, poetry journals, and online literary collections/forums provide exposure to cutting edge and current literature that is fresh and, often, unavailable in hardcover. The monthly or quarterly publications for literature often provide exposure to writers who are not yet (and may never be) marvels in the publishing world. Reading through these publications may provides a student a chance to work with material that is not mainstream for book publishing and that brand of literature presents a unique performance opportunity.

### ***Crafting the Performance Piece: Script Choice, Cutting, & Editing***

#### *Choosing a Piece*

The central issue in choosing a piece of literature for performance arrives in the issue of *person*. Pronouns and verbs used to indicate one speaking (I am—first person), one being spoken to (you are—second person), or spoken about (he is—third person) present the initial challenge in script choice. While each of these constructions for literature has been utilized in competition, the trend in collegiate forensics has tended toward first person in recent years. This trend does not indicate a lack of quality in 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person work, but rather a sub-cultural norm in the forensics community. Conventional wisdom would suggest that the telling of a first person tale grants the performer an increased ability to connect with the audience, because they are able to enact and engage the characterization in a more direct fashion. While this argument seems to carry some credibility in a surface examination, succumbing to popular thought does not always keep us on the path to truth. The collection of individuals who have, in recent years, performed second and third person material constitutes a clear minority in the full breadth of the interpretation slots entered into collegiate competition nationally. In this way, it is certainly fair to refer to 1<sup>st</sup> person literature as the current norm in choice of performance piece. Yet, that does not preclude 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> person choices. A great performance relies on the performer to be great. Perhaps the most fitting closure to this discussion arrives in the old adage, "some people are so talented that they could make the phone book sound interesting." Allowing cultural norms to prevent a student from exploring a piece of literature (or the phone book) in perform-

ance, goes against the core values of the activity. In the same moment, failing to recognize that cultural norms exist and will partially, if unfairly, fuel the evaluation of performances in forensics is foolish.

### *Cutting: Crafting the Content*

The notion of crafting the script can seem like an awesome roadblock for the new coach guiding novice competitors. While an experienced student may be able to generate a vision of the direction in which they believe a script/performance should go, however flawed and misguided that perspective may be, indeed the novice competitor (especially one that has limited exposure to any stage or level of forensics competition) may find a greater challenge in trimming a short story, novel, collection of poetry or play to a ten minute performance piece. There is a small collection of guiding principles that will assist in getting both coaches and competitors started in the process.

First, conceptualizing a content line for the performance is the initial step in the purposeful transformation of a piece of literature to a performance piece. As it relates to the event of prose, this refers to the isolation of the story within the story. A coach and/or student may find that devising a script for a 10-minute performance is impossible with some pieces of literature. There are many wonderful short stories and novels in the world; however, cutting a piece for performance places some limitations on certain storylines. At the end of the day, some stories cannot be effectively told in ten minutes. This is an important premise upon which to initiate the process. While the point has been a subject of debate in the past, the performance piece does not contain the complete story content, poetic attributes of language, or dramatic environment that comprised the original published work. The cutting process generates a new entity. This product reflects and respects the integrity of the author's original work (at least in theory), but also uses the content to impact an audience in a different fashion. Even the adaptation of dramatic literature requires the conversion of the performance context. In the end, the adaptations become entities in themselves designed for a competitive performance environment.

A successful conceptualization stage requires that the coach and competitor negotiate a sense of how they believe the material should impact the audience. When cutting a prose, for instance, the story may contain a central storyline as well as a variety of minor content lines, characters, and relationships that all contribute to the construction of the central line. Quickly coming to terms with the fact that all of these elements will not make their way into the performance piece (given time constraints) often makes it easier to begin removing elements (relationships, characters, etc.) that do not contribute to the chosen content line.

A second key concept in the process of cutting material for competition is the matter of "he said" "she said" and other tag lines. There is a performance choice to be made when a competitor or coach confronts this element, specifically in prose or drama. Removing this brand of tag line provides the performer an opportunity to enact the character shifts (living persona alterations), rather than

orally providing to the audience, through varied and distinct characterizations. Additionally, a performer's use of those lines to enhance a primary character reading of another's words also presents a unique performance option. While the collegiate trend leans toward the removal of such references, that trend certainly does not prohibit another performer from including them in the piece. Students who explore performance options fill forensics interpretation events with intrigue and the unexpected.

Cutting a script for prose, developing a program of poetry, or cutting a complete play for the stage to a ten minute duo each present the coach and student with a different set of challenges. There is no prescription for how the process must be enacted. Regularly, sets of coaches and students from different teams choose to perform the same literature. Somehow, each set develops an utterly different content structure, interpretation, characterizations, physical choices, etc. and each team utilized a different developmental process. The product of each team's practice is unique, yet the principles at the root of that process are similar. This essay scratches the surface of those roots and provides a limited viewing window into the developmental possibilities.

In the end, there is no magic set of directions the cutting a high quality script for competition. It is a practice that requires time, testing and numerous drafts that explore different options on paper and in performance. Each set of coaches and students will develop a unique epistemology related to the process that will become a page in the team's ontological development.

*Developing and Refining Performance Choices: The Interpretation in Action*

This practice is a challenging issue to discuss given the limitations of an essay, much less one focused on an activity overview, because the possibilities that exist in performance are only limited by the imagination and experience of the multitude of performers in collegiate forensics. In order to provide new coaches with substantive material related to oral interpretation performance technique, strategy, choice making, etc., this essay includes references (see footnote 2) to several celebrated authors who provide some of the richest written work on the subject<sup>2</sup>. These sources are appropriate and high quality starting points for work in the oral interpretation of literature.

While there is a vast selection of sources on the subject, these current texts by key authors in the discipline provide discussion on a full range of issues related the art of oral interpretation performance.

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<sup>2</sup>The following are excellent resources concerning oral interpretation-process & performance:

- Roles in Interpretation, 5th Edition by Judy E. Yordon
- Oral Interpretation by Charlotte Lee, Timothy Gura

*Discussion*

Two values should structurally support the process for the coach. First, the student's education should be put at the forefront. The quality of speech and debate as an activity is based wholly on the education coaches and directors provide the students of each generation. Students need to be taught how to develop their own method for cutting scripts. Students need to be taught the various ways to find literature, develop characters, and assist others in developing their performances. Students need to be taught that the interpretation is not simply something that can be taught from a book. Rather that it is an act that requires one to tap into reservoirs of energy and intrigue inside oneself, then allow it to bubble up from that secret interior place so that the experience becomes shared; audience and speaker.

If each generation of students in forensics is taught well, then some of those students will become the next generation of teachers (coaches). This cycle will perpetually support a rich educational and competitive experience for students around the country. Hopefully each generation of coaches will continue to strive to extend the boundaries of our collective performance experience by encouraging their students to explore, take risks and have fun with the opportunities that this activity provides.

Principles of debate techniques with emphasis on methods of logical analysis and reflective thinking. Practical application through adaptation of material to forms of debate on current issues. CSU/ UC (C-ID). This course is designed to prepare students to participate at an advanced level in intercollegiate speech competition. Includes instruction and direction for the junior competition of interpretation of literature programs, limited preparation speeches, readers' theater, public debate, and general public address. Focuses on mentoring and coaching novice members. Students are required to participate in off-campus forensics events. May be repeated. CSU. Student Learning Outcome (s) Upon successful completion of this course, students will be able to PDF | This study examines competitive intercollegiate speech and debate. Specifically, levels of communication apprehension, student motivation, organizational identification and organizational culture understanding were analyzed in regard to potential gender differences.... We use cookies to make interactions with our website easy and meaningful, to better understand the use of our services, and to tailor advertising. For further information, including about cookie settings, please read our Cookie Policy . By continuing to use this site, you consent to the use of cookies. Got it.