

# I M P R O M P T U

## IMPROMPTU SPEAKING

by Martin "Randy" Cox

### What is Impromptu?

Impromptu speaking is one of the toughest events in forensic competition.

Although rules for the event differ from region to region and level to level, the National Forensic League allows each student five minutes of preparation and five minutes of speaking time. In some areas of the country, preparation time and speaking time are mixed together. For example, at the college level, the American Forensic Association allows a total of seven minutes for both preparation and speaking.

Impromptu is a limited preparation event which requires the student to prepare a speech based upon the examination of an quotation, object, or anecdote. Usually, quotations are the subject of impromptu speeches.

### Okay, so how do we analyze a quotation?

What does the quotation mean? This is the first question that you need to ask yourself. Pinpoint the definitive meaning or relationship suggested by the quotation. Remember that because quotations are usually proverbial in nature, they usually won't hit you over the head with their meaning. So you need to think about it and decide what the clearest meaning is.

CLARITY is the first rule of impromptu. The meaning of the quotation should be clear to you and you should be able to make it clear to your audience.

For example, if you are given Ben Franklin's famous quotation: "A stitch in time saves nine." Some possible meanings might include: "short-cuts" or "ingenuity" or "foresight".

There may be other meanings, but it is very easy to identify the point of this quotation in simple terms. These are called definitional TAGS -- the concise ideas or relationships which you draw out of quotations.

Some quotations may be a little more complex and hard to pin down. In these instances, identify the overall relationship. For example: "Good cheer is something more than faith in the future, it is gratitude for the past and joy in the present." This quotation says a lot. Were we to define it as "optimism", we would be neglecting the second half of the quotation which deals with "gratitude for the past and joy in the

present". Were we do define it as "hedonism", we would be focusing on "joy in the present". At the same time, "gratitude for the past" may imply "learning".

Choosing any of these by themselves would decrease your analysis of the quotation as a whole. You need to define the relationship inherent in the quotation as clearly as possible. An example might be: "learned optimism" -- we must base our optimism on our learning of the past and our experience of the present.

What you just say was an example of a JUSTIFICATION. After defining the quotation, you must justify exactly how your interpretation is correct and what that means for us, i.e. SO WHAT?

### Okay, Randy, SO WHAT?

What does the quotation mean in the real world? Or, what is it telling us we should do? This is called justification, and when you are speaking, it should come immediately after your definition. But we'll get to structure later.

### Define with Clarity, then Justify. Then what?

Okay, now we are to the part where you REALLY need to reach down into your brain and use it.

After you have defined the quotation and thought about how to justify it, you need to think of 2 or 3 EXAMPLES or SUPPORTS.

Supports are illustrations from art, literature, philosophy, music, science, history, or even personal interest stories (and there are many other genres of supports which we will talk about) which illustrate how other people have learned the same lesson and done something about it, the same way we should.

Try to be diverse, try to be specific, try to be CLEAR.

For example, going back to "a stitch in time saves nine":

"Thomas Jefferson, when deciding whether or not to buy the Louisiana Territory from France, took it upon himself to bypass Congress and go ahead and sign the deed. The U.S. ended up paying \$15 million dollars for the property, and it

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has gone down as the best real estate deal in history. France needed the money for its war effort. Had he waited, the purchase probably would have cost us quite a bit more, and it might not have happened at all. By creating a new stitch, and using all of the authority he could muster to buy Louisiana, Jefferson not only saved many more stitches, he saved a lot of money."

This example is a pretty basic one. You would need to develop it more, provide some more specific information, and give us a better sense of the historical significance of the support. Notice though, that the example not only provides narrative about the situation, it brings the quotation back into the example to make it CLEARLY contextualized to the quotation.

### **Supports: Diverse, Developed, Clear, and Contextualized. Great!! What next?**

Move on to the next support. Transition time. Then develop the support.

"Not only did Thomas Jefferson capitalize on an ingenious short-cut, but the character Ariel in Disney's modern classic 'The Little Mermaid' managed to save some time and get what she wanted."

"Walt Disney's 'The Little Mermaid', adapted with an optimistic twist from a Hans-Christian Andersen story, introduces us to Ariel, a teenage mermaid with a crush on a landlocked prince. Rebellious against her father, she seeks the help of an evil sea witch, who transforms Ariel into a human in exchange for her voice. But, there's a catch. Ariel must make the prince fall in love with her, and kiss her, within three days. The story goes through several twists, including music orchestrated by a hermit crab named Sebastian, and in the end, the prince kills the sea witch and they live happily ever after.

Ariel manages to fulfill her wish, marrying the prince, by taking a short-cut, just as Thomas Jefferson did purchasing the Louisiana, and in the process she also resolves the con-

flict with her father and helps to kill off the sea witch.

But just as Jefferson and Ariel in 'The Little Mermaid' used short-cuts to save some stitches in time..."

And so on to the third support.

### **Recap**

Read the quotation, define it, justify it (so what?), and then give us some specific, diverse examples which show the relationship inherent in the quotation clearly.

That's how we define and support a quotation. That's what impromptu is all about.

### **Preparing for Impromptu**

Even though impromptu is a limited preparation event, there are some things that you can do to ready yourself for the event.

To begin with READ!!! Start reading stuff. Start thinking like an impromptuer. Start cataloguing. Start applying. Start contextualizing.

Supports for impromptu can come from just about anywhere. Remember, though, that examples probably SHOULD NOT be drawn from current events. Why? Because judges want to hear something new, they want to learn. We have a different event for current events and that is extemporaneous speaking.

When you read stories or poems, think about what they say about people. What is the rhetoric in the story? What is it telling us to do or what not to do? Stories have agendas -- think about what they are and under what circumstances you might refer to them.

The same is true of poems, of paintings, of songs, of dramas.

History is also rhetorical. We learn from our past. As Henry Fairlie says, "We all carry our landscapes with us." Take what you learn into the round with you (via your brain) and make it accessible to you (via forethought).

Tips: When you read about something, or when you watch something, think about the overall point of the situation. Does it make a grand statement about anything in particular? Cheating? Success? Love? Lies? Failure? Learning? Culture? Imagination? Optimism? Pessimism?

Start reading quotations. Practice defining and justifying them. Practice coming up with supports for them.

Develop DIVERSITY. Pick a genre of support material and start beefing up on it.

If you don't know much about history, start reading it. If you don't know Diddley, find out about him. If you have an interest in something, start getting some depth. For instance, do you like Peter Gabriel? What is his history? What things does he say about himself? What does he have to say about the human condition? What do his songs have to say?

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