

Letter to the Editor

Dear Educators:

The word "educate" is defined in *Black's Law Dictionary* as giving "proper moral, as well as intellectual and physical, instruction. To prepare and fit oneself for any calling or business, or for activity and usefulness in life" (italics mine). There can be no question of the fact that we, as forensic coaches and judges, are educators. Indeed, we are responsible for developing in our students one of the most important skills in today's job market: the ability to speak in public.

As the United States continues the transition from an industrial-based economy to a service-based economy, the ability to speak in public has become more necessary than at any other time in our history. A recent article in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* noted that "public speaking skills have risen to the top of nearly every company's wish list of executive attributes."

Dr. Joseph J. Penbera, chief economist for ValliWide Bank, has said that "[a]s the need for unskilled labor diminishes in many industries, there will be greater demand for those with...the ability to communicate through writing and public speaking." This view is shared by John Elwell, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute's Center for Educational Innovation has stated that "[b]usiness wants people who can communicate well and work together."

Unfortunately, far too many debate coaches and judges today are not teaching proper communication skills to their students. Instead they encourage students to engage in a form of debate that has become known as "spread." While the use of this style may gain victories in debate tournaments, it does not teach students the good communication skills that are necessary in the real world. As a result, those who promote the practice of spread style debate fail as educators.

Perhaps the best description of this style of debate was contained in an article in *The Dallas Morning News*:
These students debate as if they've been shot out of a cannon. One deep breath and they're off a mile a minute. The point of speaking at this fevered pitch is to cram as much information as possible into their allotted few minutes. But to the untrained ear, only a few recognizable words pop out of the stream of sounds roaring past.

Is this cannon ball style going to be of any use to a debater when he enters the working world? Certainly not! Yet anyone who has sat through a debate round in which at least one of the teams practiced spread style can attest to the accuracy of this description.

Spread style debate violates several important rules of communication in general, and of business communication in particular. First, as *The Dallas Morning News* article indicates, spread style debaters cannot be clearly understood because of poor articulation. However, making your message understood is vital in the business world.

"Speak clearly," writes Jeffrey Gitomer, president of Business Marketing Services. "Sounds simple, but if the prospect doesn't understand you, your communication won't be understood. You also won't get the sale."

"If you make it easy for people to understand you, they are more likely to listen to what you are saying," says trial consultant Noelle Nelson. "Poor articulation has no redeeming virtues. It is never effective as a communication device."

Second, spread style debaters consistently speak at an extremely fast rate, with little or no change of pace. Yet the average person cannot comprehend information if it is delivered too quickly, and often becomes bored with a presentation if the pace does not vary.

"[R]emember, a pause to focus people's attention on you is a more effective way of getting them to listen than a rapid-fire delivery," said Doug Malouf, author of *How to Create and Deliver a Dynamic Presentation*. "If you deliver your words more quickly than people can take them in, then your message is being lost."

A third mistake often committed by spread style debaters is the failure to edit the information presented. Instead of presenting only the most important information on a given topic, spread style debaters operate on the premise that more is better. This is rarely the case; in business words should not be wasted.

Where short-term memory is concerned, people can take in between five and nine pieces of new information before the first bit gets pushed out. Knowing that, you should aim for the bottom of the scale--introduce only five or six new pieces of information in a session, and reinforce them in as many different ways as possible.

Academic debate cannot exist in a vacuum. The communication skills that we teach high school debaters today will remain with those debaters when they enter the job market. In the long run our students loose when we encourage them to adopt the spread style of debate. As educators, it is our duty to teach students the best possible communication skills. We fail in that duty when we encourage the practice of "spread."

Sincerely,

Mark W. Podvia