

CANNED ATTENTION GETTING DEVICES: EXTEMPORANEOUS SPEAKING OR DINNER THEATER?

by

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Most speech texts recognize three basic parts of a speech, the introduction, body, and conclusion. In more advanced analyses the parts of a speech are further broken down. The introduction is arguably the most complex and important part of a speech. A speech introduction can be broken down into four distinct parts: (1) the attention getter, (2) specific purpose statement, (3) relation of speech topic to audience, and (4) preview. Addressing each one of these elements successfully is vital to giving a successful speech of any kind.

discussions of movie and television programs, descriptions of political cartoons, and others. The basic premise operating in the attention getter is that these devices are exciting, able to draw the critic into the speech with their natural drama by activating the critic's curious interests via the critic's ability to identify with an underlying theme. Often times these attention devices are only loosely linked to the topic at hand. Clever speakers are able to craft a strong link between the attention getting device they use and the question they must attempt to answer.

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Furthermore, a strong attention getting device creates a theme that functions as a linking mechanism through the speech. For example, a former foreign extemp champion used a pop music theme and worked that theme into each of his main point transitions. By using an attention getting device that lends itself to a theme, the speaker creates a strong sense of organization and rhetorical sophistication. That degree of rhetorical sophistication is difficult for many orators to achieve with a whole speech season for fine-tuning their speeches. Many extempers and extemp coaches are re-

The extemporaneous speaking contest is a unique animal. In general, competitors are given thirty minutes to prepare for a seven-minute speech. Topics are often centered on foreign and domestic news issues. In recent years, a problem has come to light; students and their coaches have been "canning" attention getters in an attempt to get an edge on their competition. First, this essay seeks to define the attributes of a successful attention step and explain the "canning" process. Moreover, this essay addresses the logistical and ethical problems with "canning." Finally, this essay proposes steps that speakers and coaches can take to assure that their attention getters are *Fresh*.

sorting to preplanning attention getting devices and themes to improve the perceived rhetorical sophistication of their speeches and gain an edge over the competition. Once an extemper has an attention getting device down s/he will call on that device repeatedly over the course of the speech season and even repeatedly in a tournament.

Getting a speech off to a successful start is crucial for two reasons, the confidence of the speaker and the initial impression on the critic. Just like a basketball player who starts a game with a hot shooting hand, an extemper who starts hot will more often than not have a good round. The critic, like a fan at a game, will have a more positive experience watching a confident and successful speaker and accordingly rank that speaker higher in the round. What constitutes a strong attention step? There are many attention getting devices that have been employed by good speakers: jokes, rhetorical questions, personal stories, literary illusions, fables, startling statistics, historic quotes, recaps of historical events, plot

Canning of attention getting devices presents a multitude of logistical problems. It has become par for the course that a judge see a competitor use the same attention step in a preliminary round and in the final round of the same tournament. Likewise, it is not uncommon for a judge to hear the same attention getter and theme from members of the same team in different rounds. Moreover, this problem is compounded by competitors from different schools attending the same national summer institutes. Competitors at summer institute, in their labs (work groups) will in teams or individually work on creating attention getters that are shared by the group. It is not unheard of for competitors who attended the same institute during the summer to approach an institute lab mate in the prep room when in the same panel to inquire about what attention getter they might be doing. Even in late elimination rounds of the national tournament competitors have used identical attention getters in the same panel. Canning presents a logical dilemma for evalua-

tors. When seeking a clearly canned attention step the critic must decide if they wish to punish (give a lower rank) the extemper for the lack of creativity or both in the case of two competitors using the same attention step in the same round.

Additionally, the canning of attention getters creates an ethical dilemma. The National Forensic League (NFL) recognizes extemporaneous speaking as an original speech event. As a result of being classified as an original event extemporaneous speakers are rewarded with more NFL points than interpretative speech. Often times attention getters take-up a significant portion of a speech (1-2 minutes). Since canned attention getters are often written in institute labs, intrateam work groups, or by overly helpful coaches, the question of whether extemporaneous speech is an original or an interpretive event comes into question? Ought an extemper be awarded original event points for presenting something entirely unoriginal? It is my contention that the presentation of canned material constitutes fraud and is antithetical to the natural intent and definition of extemporaneous speaking. No words should be presented in a speech that are not the words of the speaker without that speaker offering a citation or authorship credit. Basically, canning is plagiarism. As educators and students we understand that plagiarism is unethical and uneducational.

Furthermore, promotion of canning threatens the pedagogical value of the contest as a whole. Oftentimes students who can are highly successful, younger students tend to learn via a social learning model and implement the techniques of the canners. As a result, students do not learn the value of the extemporaneous style, rather learning the memorized style of delivery. Why stop at the introduction? Why not memorize whole speeches? I know this is a slippery slope but I have had more than a few personal run-ins with seeing speakers do the exact same speech at different tournaments on different questions.

Extempers have been heard saying in prep rooms around the country, "Oh! This is a Russia topic. I will do my Russia speech." Critics often complain about introductions and whole speeches that fail to really address the topic. Often, this is nothing more than the impact of canning introductions gone too far. Speakers learning to short cut entire speeches to gain any competitive edge, their speech no longer being truly extemporaneous and at the same time not having the value of flexibility and freshness that comes with the extemporaneous style speech. Again, these speeches are not in-line with the true spirit of the extemporaneous speaking event.

The simplest solutions to this rampant problem are education and coaching. Educating coaches and competitors that canning is not proper. Educating coaches and competitors to alternatives to canning is also important. The only genuine alternative to canning is using fresh introductory material. This requires a great deal of work. Weekly, the quality extemper should be on the lookout for material that would make a good attention step and anticipating what questions might be in the loop of that week's tournament. Oftentimes, extempers and extemp coaches are short-cited in their approach to what constitutes a good source of attention material and what topics might appear. Remember that a major part of the successful introduction is critic or judge identification. Speakers tend to over-estimate audience intelligence by picking material that is over their critics' heads and/or not something the judge can relate to on a personal or interpersonal level. Picking odd local news events, cover stories in popular magazines (People, Entertainment Weekly, and Better Homes & Gardens), and story lines from top-rated television programs would be strong aids in making the

identification link. Chances are critics have seen those devices, thought about those devices, and can identify with those devices more than a crusty old fable. Also, those devices are constantly changing, updating and fresh.

If going with a truly fresh introduction is not possible, freshen. Change or twist an old introduction. Make-up a new character or add a new part to a fable/story used in the past. Augment the punch line of a joke used in the past. The key to any attempt to freshen is adding enough new material to the old, that the old is revitalized and timely. An extemporaneous speech should fit *that* moment in time and topic; not *any* moment in time and any topic.

There are additional advantages to going with fresh over canned. Other than the logistical problem with some competitors using the same introduction in rounds, speakers who use fresh will come across with more energy. After using the same introduction a few times speakers get flat or bored with the introductory segment. Energy is the main advantage of the extemporaneous style of delivery and the main criticism or short-coming of the memorized style of delivery. Just like a performer in a stage show, it is hard to recreate the energy of opening night. Even the most seasoned actors will complain of the difficulty involved in getting up for the same performance night after night. If extempers were great actors, they would be doing DI or HI and not DX or FX. Moreover, even the best interpers are making changes (adding or changing characters and gestures) to keep their pieces fresh throughout the long forensics season. Extempers should never face the concern of energy or lack of pop due to boredom with a speech since each speech should be unique. In the end, speakers that use fresh introductions will be rewarded by critics for being energized and original and not penalized for being bored, boring, and indistinguishable from the previous speaker.

This essay explicated the importance and parts of a quality introductory segment, discussed the problem of canning in extemporaneous speaking contests and offered some alternatives to the canning of introductions. Unless coaches and competitors start taking steps to eliminate the canning of introductions (and speeches) the extemporaneous speaking contest is in jeopardy. Maybe the NFL should change the name of the Extemporaneous Speaking Contest to Current Events Interpretation? Whatever the answer to that question, fresh introductions are always better than canned.

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