

WHAT MAKES A "HOT" EXTEMP TOPIC (AND WHAT TO DO WHEN THE TOPICS AREN'T SO HOT)

by Martin "Randy" Cox

Every extemper has faced it. It is that dreaded moment when, after spending an entire month cutting every magazine known to humanity, from *The Economist* to *Mother Jones* and even *The Weekly World News* just for kicks, you walk into the draw room, place your files in some location for easy access, get yourself situated, and walk up to the draw table to select your three topics. And as you dig down into the envelope and select the fist slip of paper, the dreaded words leap out at you like a plague:

"Should Kareem Abdul Jabbar have retired?"

"What?! Are you kidding me?" you ask, as the extemp Czarina warns you that you may be ejected from the draw room if you don't keep the volume down. Let us hope that there is better luck with the second topic question.

And, thus, we begin. Let's face it; some extemp topics aren't so hot. At times, one is left wondering what planet the question writer was on when the topics were constructed.

It is when the topics are bad, though, that good extempers truly shine--and that's what this article is about: how to make you a better extemper.

Before we get into that, though, let's discuss what extemp is, and what extemp questions can be.

Extemp: The Basics

Extemporaneous speaking, or more simply "extemp", is an event in which the contestant is given three topics to choose from. A single topic question is chosen and the speaker is allowed thirty minutes to prepare a seven minutes speech.

The subject matter for

extemp usually includes anything considered a current event, from politics to economics to social issues. As a result, preparation for extemporaneous speaking is very important, since a familiarity with the major headlines and newsworthy issues will only help you over the course of the competitive year.

A great deal of time should be spent away from the tournament reading pertinent information and keeping up with current events. As a minimum, an extemper should read one full *real* newspaper at least once a week. Real newspapers include the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *Christian Science Monitor*, or other similar publications with a national scope.

Additionally, I suggest reading one of the major weekly publications, like *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *Newsweek*, or *The Economist*.

Occasionally, you should pick up the more serious and diverse sources, such as the numerous journals available in foreign affairs. Particular attention should be paid to WHAT IS IN THEM. If you know where you can find it, you'll be half way through your preparation process.

Extemp Questions

Extemp topic questions can be divided into two broad types: "open questions", and "closed questions".

Open questions are those types which do not demand a particular answer. These questions allow a wide range of answers, and usually begin with "what" or "how".

Closed questions demand a particular answer from a closed set. These questions usually begin with "can" or "will", and usually demand a yes or no answer.

In addition, extemp topics tend to fall into three categories based on how many subjects are addressed: monadic, dyadic, and triadic.

Monadic questions deal with one subject, and are usually very straight-forward. For example, "How is Clinton doing so far?"

Dyadic questions deal with the relationship between two subjects, and usually require a bit more specificity. For example, "How has Alan Greenspan affected the role of the Fed?"

Triadic questions are a bit more difficult to deal with, and address interrelationships between three subjects. For example, "What should be the role of the U.S. in mediating the tension between North and South Korea?"

As a tournament progresses, the topic questions usually will become more difficult, or more precise.

At the tournament, after drawing your three topic questions, choose one of the topics based on the following criteria:

1. Which topic is most important to me?
2. On which topic do I have the most and best information, either in my head or in my files?
3. Which topic could I make the most interesting?
4. Which topic has the most significance?
5. Which topic would best demonstrate my ability?

Bad Topics

It is sometimes the case that you may draw a topic question which does not meet any of the above criteria. Some topics do not seem interesting or significant, or are simply out of date.

When that happens, remember the following rule, paraphrased from the play "Tom Jones":

There are no bad questions, only bad answers.

Yes, some questions are not as appealing as others, but the worse the question, the more difficult the answer, and the better your chances of creating an interesting and unique speech.

Topic writers go to great pains to find topics that are unique, up to date, and challenging.

Unfortunately, though, topics usually can not be written on the day they must be selected. As a result, sometimes bad topic questions pop up.

For example, last year at the Phillips 66-NFL National Tournament, a very good extemper chose a question asking whether Shimon Peres could stabilize the peace process with the PLO. Unfortunately, as of the topic draw, Benjamin Netanyahu had defeated Peres and was the new Prime Minister of Isreal.

In the round, the student introduced the speech and stated the topic, and then remarked that the topic was flawed and should actually read, "Can Netanyahu stabilize the peace process with the PLO?"

While the change of the question was creative, and perhaps accurate, the student broke the cardinal rule of extemporaneous speaking: Answer the Question. The student realized this after the fact, but by then it was too late. Always answer the question, and make sure that you answer the question drawn.

In this particular case, the answer might have been: "No. Peres no longer holds power, having been defeated by Netanyahu last week, and Netanyahu, the new Prime Minister, probably won't help either, for three reasons."

It matters not how bad a question is. Answer it. Or choose another question, and then answer it.

Creating the Speech

Spend about 5-7 minutes collecting and skimming through the information in

your files, journals, and quality magazines. After re-searching your speech, you should spend approximately 5-7 minutes writing out both you sources and information. The additional 12-14 minutes should be spent actually practicing your speech, leaving a couple of minutes for you to get to your room. Obviously, there is room for leeway. Some topics will be harder to prepare for than others. Remember that the more time you spend practicing, the better these hard topics will be to deliver.

Structuring the Speech

I suggest an analytical approach which is known as "unified analysis," which means simply that the reasoning of your speech is linked directly to (or unified with) your answer to the question.

After answering the question with either a yes or no, or a general qualitative answer (see below), each of the main areas of your speech is devoted specifically to supporting your answer.

This is why you should never use the term "areas of analysis" when using a unified style. Your main areas are REASONS why your answer to the question is both correct and significant.

For example, if you were to analyze the following question:

"Will the independent states of the former Soviet Union survive the economic turmoil plaguing the area?"

A less effective way to answer: "In order to answer this question, we will look at three areas of analysis. First, we'll take a look at the recent changes in the market structures of the area. Second, we'll look at the economic problems they are having. And finally, we'll look toward the future of the independent states."

In this example, the student has neither answered the question, nor supported an answer to it. The student

puts off the answer, and the speech won't directly support that answer. While it is by no means *the absolute way*, a more appropriate way to answer the question would be:

"Yes, the area will survive the economic turmoil, for three reasons. First, the changes in the market structure are enabling the independent economies to adapt. Second, help from outside the area will facilitate economic development. And finally, economically, the area has already bottomed out, they can't go anywhere but up."

This example not only answers the question, but provides three direct reasons why that answer is correct. At the same time, the reasons are each in and of themselves major areas which can be expanded and elaborated upon.

There should be no doubt on the part of the judge's mind that the question has not only been answered, but supported with clear reasoning. There should also be no doubt that the speech is both structurally and technically sound.

Qualitatives

What exactly do I mean by "general qualitative answer?" When an open question is asked (e.g. "what" or "how" instead of "can" or "will"), you must give an answer which provides the scope of your reasoning. For example: What can Yeltsin do to stay in power? Well, Boris can do **quite a bit** (= that was the qualitative), but the three most important things he must do are, first, regain control of the Parliament; second, quash the opposition; and finally, get his health back. Or, if asked: How is NAFTA affecting US-Mexico relations? Well, NAFTA is having a **drastic** (= qualitative) effect on US-Mexico relations. In particular, three major effects have been: relaxation of export barriers; second, increased cooperation on illegal immigration; and finally, stabilization within diplomatic cen-

ters.

Sourcing

The most consistent problem in dealing with an extemp topic, good or bad, is to not give enough, or in some cases any sources. The reason you are given half an hour is to allow time to research your topic question and present an informed speech. Sources enhance your credibility and back up your claims. The second biggest problem is a lack of quality sources, such as reliance on *Time*, *USNWR*, *Newsweek*, or a single newspaper. These are all weekly or daily publications that everyone has access to, and they should append rather than comprise your source library.

As you improve in extemp, try to aim for a minimum of 5 sources, almost two per area, and a maximum of about 9 or ten, or three sources per area. Also aim for a diversity of sources. A *USNWR*, *CSM*, *NYT*, *Time*, *Nation*, and *Domestic Affairs Journal* would really round out a domestic speech. Additional domestic sources can be found in the *Economist*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Insight*, or others.

An international speech would be very well rounded with *Economist*, *Foreign Affairs Journal*, *Current History*, *WSJ*, *Harvard International Review*, and an occasional *Time*, *USWR*, or *Newsweek*. The *NYT* is also a great source for international topics.

Of course, not everyone has access to all of these sources. The point is to not rely on a single source or two. DIVERSIFY your sources, and prepare as much as you can. That way you can deliver a solid, clear speech--no matter how good or bad the topic.

Structural Outline for Extemp

Intro--Quotation or situational news **relevant to the question**.

Ask the question. Then
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