

“CUTTING THROUGH IT”

by

Gina and Scott Jensen

The Analysis, Editing, and Introducing of Oral Interpretation Performances

Oral interpretation events are unique in the world of forensics. While all other events are largely the original work of students, performers of literature have little flexibility in the content of their performance. Events like debate, extemp, and oratory have as their focus the use of evidence as support for original analysis and claims made by students. Interpretation events are, with the exception of the introduction and transitions, entirely the work of a third party who is then represented by the student performer. While this reality may seem stifling to students’ creativity, preparing oral interpretation events actually affords students a great deal of opportunity for

tiquing intercollegiate trends, argues that “intercollegiate forensics tends to emphasize style and practice with little thought regarding the philosophical and theoretical assumptions that justify or refute performance choices” (p. 2).

The person who has worked and worked to eliminate that last 15 seconds from a humorous interpretation can understand the care it takes to prepare successful oral interpretation performances. What follows is a three-tiered process for preparing literature for performance—analysis of the literature, editing to event constraints, and introducing the literature for audience appeal.

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Analysis of the Literature

Analysis as the initial step in the preparation of literature for performance is essential. Too often a student might be motivated to find a piece that simply appears to be “within time” or one that has a particular type of character or tone. Taking the time to analyze the literature will actually contribute to a better interpretation, including aesthetic choices that are sincere. Yordon (1989) writes in her book, *Roles in Interpretation*, that analysis of literature should be both external and internal. Within these two levels are suggestions for specific steps.

displaying their creative, advocacy, and performance skills.

Students should not be fooled into thinking that preparing literature for competition is a quick and easy process. The performer who thoroughly prepares oral interpretation events engages in a great deal of analysis, in addition to some frustration. In fact, we argue that a linear relationship exists between thoroughly preparing literature oral interpretation events and the quality of the performance itself. Even further, the very integrity of the literature itself—something that is supposed to be central to oral interpretation, is preserved only when students and coaches devote the time necessary to truly understand and appreciate the literature being performed. Students who focus on only the performance choices of their oral interpretation event shortchange what is most special about oral interpretation itself. Commenting on collegiate interpretation trends, Koeppl and Morman (1991) wrote a decade ago that “Often we see an increased emphasis on the aesthetic components associated with the performance of literature and little attention paid to the argumentative and communicative elements of the event” (p. 141). More recently, Perlich (1999), again cri-

External Analysis

This level of analysis integrates the text and outside influences. This analysis might, for example, include an examination of the historical period in which the literature is written or in which it is set. External analysis might also include the student performer integrating their own field of experience with the literature. Students make efforts to draw from their own experiences and visualize the dynamics of the text. For example, a student interpreting prose or dramatic literature that focuses on concentration camps in World War II Germany would not have first-hand experience with the theme. The student could, however, read about the Holocaust, watch films dealing with the Holocaust, and/or reflect on personal experiences of profound tragedy or persecution.

Internal Analysis

This level of analysis incorporates the text and its content absent any outside influence. Internal analysis might include a line by line dissection of the literature, allowing for a more mechanistic understanding of the selection. Internal analysis will also often entail the answering of several questions concerning the dramatic elements of the text. These questions include...

-Who is speaking?

- To whom is s/he speaking?
- About what is s/he speaking?
- Where is s/he speaking?
- When is s/he speaking?
- How is s/he speaking?
- Why is s/he speaking? (Yordan, 1989).

A complete internal analysis will allow for the student to have a full objective understanding of the text, thereby allowing for the author's intent to be maintained and performance choices to be grounded in text-driven motivations.

Editing to Event Constraints

Perhaps the most difficult step in the preparation of literature for oral interpretation forensics events is the editing, or "cutting" of the text. While some texts are brief and fit nicely within time constraints of events, most literature requires students to pick and choose from the entirety of the literature in order to create their final edited cut. It is helpful to remember that students have a great deal of freedom in their editing process. Texts can be altered as long as the original author's intent is maintained, characters' genders remain as originally presented, and words not appearing in the original text are not added by the performer. What follows are ten steps we advocate for engaging in this editing process—steps that should be followed in this particular order.

1. Read the Literature

While this should seem obvious, there may be temptations to find particular selections of the text that appear to fit within the event constraints. Similarly, students may have a cutting from a larger text, or a scene from a book of scenes for auditions. While these options will generally fit within time constraints of events, they don't allow the performer to get a complete sense of the literature—something that is essential in order to make informed editing and performance choices.

2. Select a Plot and Character(s)

Many texts will have a number of plots and characters. Even monologues may have several scenes or plots within the single text. Students should determine, after a complete reading of the text, which plot and character(s) they want to present. The selected plot and character(s) should be appealing to both the performer and audience as indicative of a meaningful message that can be taken from the text being communicated.

3. Cut Sub-Plots and Peripheral Characters

Once the primary plot and character(s) are selected, the first major edit is any plot or scene, and characters that are not a part of what the student wants to communicate. These peripheral dimensions of the text should be cut.

4. Eliminate Unnecessary Details

Even after eliminating peripheral plots and characters, details not essential to the message being communicated may remain. Overly descriptive prose or verbose dialogue can often be minimized or eliminated entirely.

5. Time It

Once these cuts have been made the student should time what remains uncut. It can be a mistake to cut excessively from an original text. Over-cutting can leave a final edited text lacking in descriptiveness and character development. Consequently, students want to remain abreast of how well their editing fits within the event's time constraints. When the editing fits comfortably within these time constraints, there may not be any reason to continue the editing process.

6. Tighten the Text

If editing is still necessary, the student should cut sentences and elements of the plot not essential to understanding the message being communicated. Lengthy stories told by a character might be shortened. "S/He said" statements can be eliminated. If it was originally decided to keep more than one scene for the final cut, it may be necessary to further narrow the number of scenes for the final edited text.

7. Re-Time the Text

It is likely that the editing process has reached a point of frustration. Because of this, having a clear sense of how well the edited text fits within the event's time constraints is essential. By the time the student reaches this step, relatively important parts of the text are being considered for editing. As has already been mentioned, students can avoid these difficult decisions if they know at what point their text meets the event's constraints.

8. Remove Repetition

It is at this point that the student is looking for anything that can be eliminated. Students should remember that they are able to edit out portions of sentences as long as the intent of the text is maintained. Likewise, other "s/he said" statements can be eliminated. Additionally, sentences with a great deal of repetition can be shortened. The character who says, "Okay, okay, okay..." can be changed to say only one "Okay."

9. Find a Fresh Set of Eyes

By now the student has devoted a great deal of time and energy to narrowing the text to a cutting that will work for competition. A dynamic that often occurs is a limiting of perspective. The student may attach him/herself so tightly to the text that possibilities for cutting are missed. A person who has not become so integrated with the text may see opportunities for editing that would otherwise be missed by the student preparing the text for performance.

10. The Final Timing

With any luck, this is indeed the last step. If the worst-case scenario exists and the selection still exceeds the event's time constraints, the student should go back to removing repetition or finding a fresh set of eyes. Realistically, even a text that remains too long should be within seconds of being within the prescribed time constraints. Additional small cuts can bring the text to the point desired by the student. If this is not the case, the student should go back to the first step and make new decisions about what plot(s) and character(s) to include in the final text they perform in competition.

Introducing the Literature for Audience Appeal

The final step in preparing the non-delivery dimensions of literature for oral interpretation forensics events is the introduction. Students should note that this is the only dimension of the performance in which their own words are shared with the audience. It is the introduction that establishes for the audience the message of the text, and the motivation that should be felt by the audience to listen to and appreciate the text being interpreted. Ultimately, as Rice (1992) writes, "An introduction may present sufficient information to the audience so they may be acquainted with the material and be able to critique the student on his or her interpretative choices without revealing so much as to destroy or call attention away from the interpretative experience" (p. 23).

Effective introductions should include a number of elements as explained below.

An Attention Getter

Like a good speech, students should grab the audience's attention with a story, striking statement, or other such attention getting device. This attention getter should relate directly to the text and its message so as to allow the student to keep the introduction brief and not have to engage in a lengthy effort to connect the opening statement with the text.

What is the Essential Information in the Text?

Students should make the audience aware of characters' names, along with a sense of the plot being communicated. These descriptions and introductions should only be as detailed as is necessary to follow the cutting made by the student.

How Does the Text Relate to the Audience?

Students should communicate a clear relationship between the text and their audience. Forensics is its best when messages communicated within events have significance beyond that round of competition. It is the responsibility of the student to make clear the thread that connects their text with their audience. Even more significantly, the student should attempt to provide a statement of actuation—what happens to the audience member(s) as a result of listening to the text being performed? Do they become more aware of a cause, or more appreciative of a condition? The more integrated with the text an audience member feels, the greater then communication that has occurred between the student and that audience member.

Identify Author and Title

Introductions should end with an identification of author and title. Even if this information is provided earlier in the introduction, placing this information the end of the introduction creates a solid point of transition into the text itself.

The Teaser

An option available to the student performer is the use of a teaser. Teasers are brief excerpts from the text that grab our attention while creating a tone for the text. Teasers work in the same way trailers work in movie previews, or scenes in television shows that appear before the title and credits are shown. Teasers can be creative ways to begin interpretation performances, but students

should use caution in how their teasers connect with the body of the text being performed after the introduction. The edited text being performed should bring together the teaser and the remainder of the text in a way that seems congruent to the audience when the performance is completed. Likewise, the teaser should allow for a smooth transition into the introduction, with the student's comments being clearly connected to what was heard in the teaser. While the student won't necessarily mention the teaser per se, the introduction should allow the audience member to make a mental connection between these two elements of the interpretation.

Final Thoughts

Interpretation events are unique in the delivery choices they afford students. Often the focus of interpretation is the way in which students portray characters and emotions. While these are critical to any quality oral interpretation, the work that must precede those performance choices is perhaps the most significant of the entire oral interpretation preparation. Students who analyze their literature, make careful editing decisions, and establish solid audience/text relationships within their introductions are likely to enjoy success that is both competitively and pedagogically rewarding.

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(Gina Jensen is Assistant Director of Forensics and Adjunct Professor in the School of Communications at Webster University in St. Louis, MO.

Scott Jensen is Director of Forensics and Assistant Professor of Oral Communication at Webster University.)