

# WHEN A PODIUM ISN'T A PODIUM

by David Mezzera

Back in the "good old days" when I taught Public Speaking to ninth graders, I would occasionally encounter minor discipline problems (and who wouldn't?) which would call for minor disciplinary action. For example, if a student interrupted a classmate's speech, I would ask the offending student to complete a written assignment that required some level of research; thus, the punishment would hopefully become a learning experience for the transgressing student. Typically, I would assign the student a list of words or terms which were related to public speaking or forensics and would require the student to investigate the meaning and significance of the terms.

Tops on my list of assigned terms was debate-related vocabulary or jargon such as: *status quo*, *prima facie*, *fiat*, *quasi*, *analogy*, *false*, *inherency*, or *solvency*. I also had a list of politically-related lingo which I could assign: *parliamentary procedure*, *parliamentary "second"*, *unicameral*, *becameral*, *agenda*, *filibuster*, *cloture*, or *gerrymander*. But the glossary I most enjoyed assigning for students to investigate was the following list of seemingly synonymous terms: *podium*, *lectern*, *rostrum*, *ambo*, *pulpit* and *dais*. I especially liked to befuddle students with this list because of the universal misuse of the term *podium*; plus (as an NFL coach) I had a special place in my heart for the concept of the *rostrum*--coincidentally, the official magazine of the NFL! Before you read on, try *your* hand at differentiating the meanings of the above six terms. When is a *podium* not what you thought a *podium* ought to be?

How many times have I heard debaters -- not to mention debate coaches -- erroneously refer to "standing behind the *podium*" or "speaking from the *podium*"? The reality is that the word *podium* comes from a Greek root ("podos") meaning "foot," thus making a *podium* a foot stand or raised platform upon which the conductor of an orchestra would stand while directing. Another context of the word signifies a low wall serving as a ped-

estal or foundation serving to separate the seats from the arena in an amphitheater. In a traditional classroom setting, a teacher's desk would be placed upon a podium, thus raising the teacher further above the level of the students desks. Thus, a speaker could be seen and heard standing *upon* a podium -- but never *behind* one!

The actual object upon which a speaker would place notes (and hide behind?) is a *lectern*, a word of Latin derivation from the origin "lectus," past participle of "legere" ("to read"). A *lectern* is thus a reading stand or desk upon which notes are placed to allow one to read. Typically in a library, a dictionary would be placed on a lectern for passersby to peruse and read. To this day, I insist on using the parlance "speak at -- or from -- the *lectern*" rather than "speak from behind the *podium*."

**. . . podium, lectern, rostrum, ambo, pulpit and dais. I especially liked to befuddle students with this list. . .**

I especially enjoy the word *rostrum* due to its historical significance: The prows of ancient fighting ships had curved, beaklike projections used for ramming enemy vessels. When the Romans would capture such an enemy war galley, the "*rostrum*" (Latin for "beak") of the boat would be ravaged and returned to Rome as a war prize. These *rostra* from vanquished ships were used to decorate around the speakers' platforms in the Roman Forum. When a returning naval hero would be honored in the Forum, he would receive his accolades and would orate in view of the spoils of his triumph -- the beak of the conquered ship. A raised speaker's platform (what we might now call a *pulpit*) thus came to be associated with a *rostrum* or speaker's ornate delivery location. In the vernacular, *rostrum* also refers to "public speakers collec-

tively," and thus, *Rostrum* is a name well-chosen for this very publication!

*Ambo* might be the least frequently used term of the six. In Greek, the word originally referred to a platform or stage, but now applies almost exclusively to a church fixture serving as a reading stand or *pulpit* (there's that word again) used to preach and proclaim during a religious service.

So what *is* a *pulpit*? From an old French word ("pulpite") meaning a stage or scaffold, a *pulpit* is a raised platform -- sometimes mounted by a ladder or stairs -- from which a clergyman preaches in a church. It even refers collectively to preachers or to preaching in general. Thus, one could "take to the *pulpit*" as one would "take to the soapbox" to proclaim or lecture.

And never a "Friars' Club Roast" would go-by without referring to the guest of honor as being seated at the *dais*. The origin of this term can be traced easily to a middle English word ("deis") meaning a high table in a castle's hall. And that's exactly what a *dais* is: a table or platform raised above the floor at one end of a hall or room such as a banquet room or a classroom . . . and now we're back again to *podium*! I hope you've enjoyed my fanciful "tour of terminology," and I hope you may have gotten a new idea for an assignment or two. But most of all, I hope you will never, ever again tell a debater to "get out from behind the *podium*" when he or she speaks!!

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