

# ORATORICAL DISCLOSURE

B Y

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"...the orator must be truthful. Any non-factual reference, especially a personal one, MUST be so identified."

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NFL Oratory Ballot

All judges have experienced those oratory rounds. The competitor is speaking eloquently about a disclosure...the end of the speech when the student reveals, "I know, because this happened to me." The student proceeds to expound on the tragic events of her life.

This article is in no way meant to belittle the real emotional pain that these students have endured. It does, however, hope to call into question the appropriateness of such a disclosure in the forum of a competitive speech event.

The purpose of an oratory is to either inform the audience of a problem that exists in society, an issue that is not widely understood, or to persuade the audience about the truthfulness of a particular point of view. Topic selection, therefore, is critical to the success of the presentation. Coaches generally tend to counsel students against various topics such as abortion, capital punishment, or some other equally controversial, highly publicized topic.

There is another area of speeches that occasionally we as coaches and judges ought to warn our students against, or at least counsel a great deal of caution when they are selecting a topic--personal experience. Though not rampant, it is not uncommon to find a student speaking on a topic such as abuse or growing up in an alcoholic family because they themselves have been or are in that situation.

While the ultimate goal of the competitive speech program should be to provide students with skills that carry them through life, another goal that our students strive for is to succeed competitively. Selecting a very personal topic for an oratory places that goal in jeopardy for a variety of reasons.

The judge of any public speaking event evaluates on many factors: logic, organization, development, as well as a variety of public speaking skills. When a student "bares her soul," it becomes very difficult to accurately and fairly assess these

factors. The heart of this difficulty lies in the fact that a personal disclosure evokes such a strong emotional response--a response *toward the speaker*--that both the speech and the presentation take a back seat in the mind of the judge. All judges should strive to disassociate their own personal, preconceived views on a topic from their view of the speech being presented, but personal disclosure makes this objectivity very difficult to maintain.

After hearing the revelation, the judge is left with two options:

Option 1) The judge is wary of the veracity of the personal disclosure. The judge knows that this competitor could make up any personal story to add ethos and drama to the speech. Some students might say **ANYTHING** to score better in a round--even if it means embellishing or even fabricating a personal tragedy. At the same time, the judge feels guilty for even **SUSPECTING** that this speaker would stoop to lying in an original oratory. After all, the kid looks so nice!

Option 2) The judge is squirming in her seat. She feels that the speaker is (or may be) revealing the heart-wrenching truth and is both touched and uncomfortable. The judge has no previous personal relationship with this student that would warrant such intimate knowledge about the student.

Being in a position to have to utilize either of these options to rank a student is difficult. Option One can never be verified. Thus the benefit of having verifiable sources. Option Two is where the difficulty really lies. The judge is left to wonder, "How do I possibly rank this student now? How do I say on the ballot, 'Your story was moving, and you've obviously been through hell, but overall I have to give your speech a 5.'" The judge is being asked to assign a numerical value to someone's trauma or experience. Thus the real intent of the oratory speech is lost. No longer is the judge ranking the speaking, the logic, the organization, or the speaking skills, but rather the emotional value of that individual's ordeal.

Not only should the student consider the potential discomfort of the judge and fellow competitors, but additionally, how she will feel if the speech receives a low rank. Herein lies the problem for the student: "Did that judge rank me so low because they think I am a bad person for having been through this? Coaches need to consider this potential impact on the student when working through topic selection. As professionals working with students, it is sometimes our duty to guide students away from decisions that may harm the student's self-esteem.

There are forums for such disclosure that are cathartic to both the speaker and the audience, but these are forums where there is an understanding that this kind of intimate confession will take place and a supportive bond can be formed. Competitive speech events are not such places. In an original oratory round, judges (and often members of the audience) feel uncomfortable engaging in lengthy discussions after the round with the competitors. The judge usually marks the ballots in silence, and the competitors quietly file out of the room.

Coaches need not dissuade students from selecting topics of strong personal interest, and using an appeal to ethos is an excellent strategy; however, attempting to evoke a strong emotional response from a judge or audience by using personal disclosures can have unexpected negative repercussions. Students should be encouraged to appeal to ethos through the use of examples or stories which are not (or at least not identified) as personal disclosures.

*(Teri Robinson is currently the head debate and speech coach at Green River HS (WY). In high school Teri was a competitor in original oratory. Jonathon Lever has been coaching Lincoln Douglas debate at Green River HS (WY) for the past two years. Both individuals have been judges for numerous speech tournaments and currently Green River HS holds the Leading Chapter Award for the Wind River District.)*