DO SOURCES IN EXTEMP MAKE EXTEMPERS BREAK?
A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF SOURCES USED
AT THE INDIANAPOLIS NATIONALS

by N. Andre Cossette

Author Mark Twain once said, "There are three types of lies: lies, damn lies and statistics." Twain knew what he was talking about. Statistics often lead one away from the truth rather than toward it. However, they can be useful in explaining phenomena. This study uses statistics to examine relationships between extempers who broke at nationals and two variables: number of sources cited and types of sources used.

What this study does not do is explore all of the variables that make extempers victorious. The statistics do not take into account speaking style, use of humor, adherence to the topic, judge preference, and the hundreds of other factors which influence critics' decisions. Be careful not to commit an ex post facto fallacy when reading the conclusions. Just because the extempers who broke used certain sources does not mean that if you use them you will also become a finalist. Success at extemp cannot be narrowed down to only these two factors; nothing can replace hard work, good coaching, an organized file, quality speaking technique, and practice.

The study took place during the preliminary rounds of the 1993 National Tournament at Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana. I watched forty extempers, twenty foreign and twenty U.S. speakers, twelve of whom made it past round six. I took notes during each of the speeches, making careful note of sources used and number of source citations. My hypothesis about these categories before I began the studies was that the best extempers used a larger number of sources of higher quality.

Does quantity of sources make an extemper break? National U.S. Extemp participant Sarah Stucky does not think so: "Judges want quality, not quantity. They don't want an encyclopedia." However, the data disagrees. The twelve extempers who broke used a total of 70 sources, an average of 5.83 source citatations per speech, while the twenty-eight also-rans quoted 94 sources, or 3.36 sources per speech. The extemp gods and goddesses used an average of over two and one-half more sources during their speeches.

Does the type of sources used influence speech scores? For this part of the study I counted the number of times a speaker used a source from *Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report,* and *Time*, the three most commonly used journals that two-time National qualifier Sean Mangan calls "The Big Three." The statistics show a startling difference between extempers who broke and those who did not. Of the 94 sources cited by the less successful extempers, 44 were "Big Three" sources, a figure of 46.8%. The extempers advancing past round six cited the "Big Three" 10 times out of 70 sources, an occurrence of 14.2%. If I throw out the anomalous data of one finalist who cited 7 of 13 "Big Three" sources, far more than any other extemper from either group, the percentage of "Big Three" sources used drops to a paltry 5.2%. Clearly, the data suggest that the more successful extemporaneous speakers at Nationals quote from more obscure journals and books, showing a depth of knowledge and research beyond what one can obtain by reading three common news magazines.

I should also note that I attempted to examine two other factors during this study but abandoned the data: thesis statements and areas of analysis. With both, the numbers of subjects, forty, was too small an amount to bring conclusive results. Additionally, it was difficult to determine into how many areas the extempers actually divided speeches. For instance, a speaker would include an answer to the question as an area while the next speaker would answer the question in the conclusion, so two nearly identical speeches would have a different number of areas. Perhaps these two topics could be examined in a future study.

This small study implies that two keys to success in extemporaneous speaking are quoting more sources and using material of a less common variety. Be careful not to generalize too hastily and assume these two factors guarantee success, especially since judges base decisions on so many other factors. To commit this fallacy would prove Mark Twain correct.

	Sources Per Speech	%Common Sources Cited
Finalists	5.83	14.2%
Non-Finalists	3.36	46.8%

*Time, U.S. News, Newsweek

(N. Andre Cossette coaches at Gonzaga Prep. in Spokane, WA)