

"But Seriously Folks..." Suggestions and Considerations for Writing the Competitive After Dinner Speech

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Coaches and competitors who observe the event of After Dinner Speaking throughout the forensics season may eventually come to the conclusion that never have so many been entertained by so few. After Dinner competition, especially the final round, typically attracts a large number of students and coaches as audience members. Despite the potential for large audiences and making people "roll in the aisles with laughter," relatively few students compete in After Dinner Speaking (ADS). A survey of both the National Forensic Association's and the American Forensic Association's National Tournaments reveals that After Dinner Speaking is surpassed only by Rhetorical Criticism/Communication Analysis in having the fewest competitors.¹

When attempting to determine the reasons for the dearth of competitors in ADS, one may arrive at the conclusions that there are a lack of talented and creative students or that good, humorous material is too difficult to develop. Perhaps a more realistic reason is that both students and coaches experiences frustration when trying to decide what makes a good ADS and how to interpret the rules of the event.

In 1973, forensics coaches who wanted to make After Dinner Speaking a national event were delighted with the prospect of having competitors perform enjoyable speeches designed to make the audience laugh. In 1973, the National Forensic Association rules for After Dinner Speaking stated that "a contestant will present an original speech whose point is to make a serious point through use of humor, should not be a saring of jokes, but an organized speech."² It can be argued, and justifiably so, that the rules for ADS are quite clear. What is not clear, however, are the reasons for so many different interpretations of the national rules for ADS. What is mean by "original"? What does a "serious point" actually mean? Is it permissible to have a

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¹Based on entries at both the AFA National Individual Events Tournaments and the NFA Individual Events Nationals, 1980-86.

²Taken from the National Forensic Association's Individual Events National Tournament invitation, 1973.

"string of jokes" if the jokes are related to the topic of the speech?

Many forensics competitors become frustrated with the event because they don't understand what it takes to be "successful." Even those students who are fortunate enough to have the audience reach a euphoric state of laughter look to their coaches in amazement when they discover that they received the lowest rank in the round. These students may then ask the question "What does it take to be successful in ADS?" Some coaches and competitors believe that a "funny" topic is necessary or that a "punched-up" oratory is just as good, while others believe that a string of jokes along with a smooth delivery is enough.

The purpose of this essay is to present recommendations concerning three major aspects of After Dinner Speaking: 1) organization of the After Dinner Speech; 2) treatment of the serious point; and 3) thematic vs. presentational styles. These three areas of discussion were chosen because they are elements common to the event rules of both national tournaments. The National Forensic Association and the American Forensic Association rules for After Dinner Speaking are the following:

Contestant will present an original speech whose purpose is to make a point through the use of humor. Should not be a string of jokes, but an organized, developed speech. Limited notes are permitted. Qualifies from Humorous Speaking, Speaking to Entertain, etc.; event must have required an original, unified, thematic speech whose purpose was to entertain or use humor.³

An original humorous speech by the student, designed to exhibit sound speech composition, thematic coherence, direct public speaking skills and good taste. The speech should not resemble a night club act, an impersonation, or comic dialogue. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. Manuscripts are permitted. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes.⁴

The essay will also make a distinction between After Dinner Speaking (ADS) and the Speech to Entertain (STE), a popular two-year college event.

³Taken from the National Forensic Association's Individual Events National Tournament invitation, 1985.

⁴Taken from the National Forensic Association's Individual Events Tournament invitation, 1985.

Organization

Some students and coaches believe that because ADS is a humorous speech they can develop an "anything goes" attitude regarding structure/organization or that they can neglect organization altogether. However, a review of the event description of both national tournaments indicates that the ADS should be organized. The NFA description states... "should not be a string of jokes, but an organized developed speech," while the AFA description reads... "Contestants should exhibit sound speech composition and direct communicative public speaking principles."

Based upon these descriptions, one may conclude that the ADS should be organized, but what patterns of organization are appropriate for this event? A suggestion is for students and coaches consider structuring the ADS as a humorous, persuasive speech, attempting to make a point by changing attitudes or behavior. This suggestion seems consistent with the NFA philosophy that the speech should make a point through the use of humor. Another argument in favor of this suggestion is that a number of tournaments are specifying in their event descriptions that the ADS should not be a "funny informative."⁵ Finally, most coaches and judges would probably agree that the ADS should contain a "serious point." Structuring the ADS as a humorous persuasive or speech to convince assists with establishing a serious point.

If one accepts the premise that the ADS should be treated as a humorous persuasive speech then speakers will want to use a method of organization that is appropriate with persuasive speeches such as a problem-solution format. When writing the ADS as a humorous persuasive, speakers should first concentrate on the purpose or goal of the speech. In many instances it appears that speakers become so obsessed with the creation of humorous material that the basic elements of content and organization are sacrificed for the sake of making the audience laugh. If speakers present a problem in the early stages of their ADS, they should first define the problem, and then they can present the significance and causes of the problem.

A recent example of an ADS employing a problem-solution method is a speech concerning military recruiting. The student explains that a problem now exists with the recruiting of men and women to serve in the U.S. Armed Forces. The recruiting officer's attitude of "we'll take anybody" has made the screening of our military personnel obsolete. The cause of the problem

⁵Several tournaments specify that the After Dinner Speech should not be a "funny informative."

is a quota imposed by the Defense Department that "x" number of new recruits must enlist each month. The student attempts to demonstrate the nature of the problem through humorous examples:

My recruiter told me that if you join the army you learn a lot of great songs and have a great time too. Little did I know, he didn't care about me at all. He just wanted to meet his quota of four recruits a month. I should have gotten the hint when he started to tell me about the programs and facilities.

Recruiter: We'll have you up early in the morning with a fantastic, strenuous exercise program. Then you'll be tutored in the culinary arts, cleansing detail is next, and finally, a recreational ten mile run in order to work off all that fun you had earlier. And that's just by 9 a.m.!

Recruit: Wait! What I'm hearing you say is... I'm going to be dead meat by 9 a.m.

Recruiter: No, you misunderstood. What I'm saying is that in the army, we do more by 9 a.m. than most people do all day.

Recruit: Thanks for clearing that up for me. (Never use reflective listening on an army officer).

The student continues to address the problem by giving the audience some exaggerated examples of what can happen when unqualified and dangerous people enlist in the Armed Services, including references to a Drill Instructor named Sergeant Manson, a recruit who confuses the command to "abort launch" with "abort lunch" which causes him to complain because he missed breakfast, and an instructional film about naval adventures produced a la "Love Boat." The student then tries to solve the problem by suggesting ways in which the Armed Forces may appeal to those who are qualified. Some of these persuasive appeals included endorsements from *Vogue Magazine* telling recruits about their new matching uniforms and "luggage," all-purpose black shoes, and khaki as the "color of the '80s." Other incentives may include your own company transportation (Jeep or Sherman tank) and choice vacation areas such as Fort Dix, Fort Bragg, and Fort Bliss.

Following the humorous, exaggerated examples, the student attempts to involve the audience with the topic by having them consider the military quota system as a problem and an issue that needs their attention. While this audience involvement step

may be labeled "the serious point" of the speech, the student has addressed the serious point throughout the speech by integrating factual content with some of the more humorous examples. Factual sources in this speech are syndicated columnist Jack Anderson and past issues of *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Assuming that After Dinner speakers are able to organize content in a logical and coherent manner, speakers may then turn to the task of treating the serious point within that pattern of organization.

Treatment of the Serious Point

For many observers of ADS, the words "but seriously folks" have become something of a dreaded cliché. The first mention of a serious point in many After Dinner Speeches occurs sometime during the last thirty seconds of the speech after a long succession of humorous bits and jokes. Once again, the event rules of both national tournaments state that After Dinner Speeches should attempt to make a point as well as entertain the audience.

Another ADS cliché that often appears on speakers' ballots is the judge's comment, "I really like how you weave the serious point throughout your speech." If this "weaving" of the serious point is such a desirable characteristic, how can a speaker accomplish this goal? While coaches and judges may define "weaving" the serious point in various ways, basic speech composition principles suggest that the serious point could be introduced and reintroduced throughout the presentation.

Again, following the basic rules of speech organization and composition, the speaker can introduce the major thrust or point of the speech in the thesis statement. As in the case with any good public address, speakers should alert their audience as to the purpose of their presentation and what the audience can expect during the next few minutes.

An After Dinner speaker may also emphasize and reemphasize items that support the serious point the speaker is attempting to make. A recent example of an ADS that provided its listeners with several variations on a theme regarding its serious point was a speech concerning the inadequacy of our Civil Defense plan in the event of a nuclear attack. The speech included actual elements of the government's Civil Defense plan such as "even-odd" license plate evacuation, shielding oneself from a nuclear blast by digging a hole and hiding in it under a mound of dirt, and traveling to towns designated as government safety areas (the strange aspect of this part of the government's

plan was that the towns designated as safety areas were not notified by the federal government of their designation). These actual examples, coupled with original humorous material, helped to demonstrate the absurdity of the government's Civil Defense plan and the need for change. Original humor probably has more impact on the audience if it is combined with actual situations or some justification as to why the speaker chose to include a particular joke or bit. This principle is well known to comedians as the "set-up." In most cases, the better the "set-up," the more effective the accompanying gag. The original piece of humor delivered "out of the blue" may elicit laughter from the audience for that particular moment; however, the total impact of the speech may be lost when compared to speeches that are more unified or thematic in their approach.

Thematic vs. Presentational Styles

Both the AFA and the NFA National Tournaments are consistent in their preference for a thematic approach as opposed to a presentational style of delivery. A thematic speech is one that has a strong central idea or nucleus with the content of the speech eventually leading to a point or goal. The presentational speech is one where humor is the primary function of the speech and making a point is secondary. The presentational style ADS tends to rely heavily upon humorous devices such as characterizations or "bits," impressions, overt movement, visual props, and sound effects.

Since both national tournaments express a preference for the thematic ADS, does this mean that students' presentations should contain large portions of exposition devoid of any of the above-named humorous devices? Probably not. Humorous bits and gags can assist the speaker in clarifying and solidifying the serious point. These types of humor should be used to illustrate and enhance points in the same manner as do case studies, examples, and visuals in traditional public address. They should not, however, become the dominating force or *raison d'etre* of the presentation.

For example, several years ago a speaker had modest success with a speech that discussed the work of cartoonist Gahan Wilson (popular *Playboy Magazine* artist) and the unique manner in which Wilson views people and things. The speech was a series of visuals (examples of Wilson's cartoons) discussed by the speaker with little or no original material. The visuals were, in essence, the speech.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, both the AFA and NFA rules support the thematic development for ADS. If one were to take these rules literally, it would appear that humor for humor's sake does not a good ADS make. A speech event that is intended to explore different types of humorous devices is the Speech to Entertain (STE). The STE is a popular two-year college event introduced by the Phi Rho Pi national two-year college speech organization.

After Dinner Speaking vs. The Speech to Entertain

Some may feel that if the "rigid rules" for ADS were followed to the letter, then creativity, innovation, and "just plain fun" would never materialize. Frustrated competitors have asked the question, "Isn't trying to be funny enough without the burden of a serious point?" The answer to this question must have been a resounding "yes" because of the creation of an event similar to ADS—the Speech to Entertain (STE). There is some confusion concerning the rules for STE and ADS. The Phi Rho Pi national speech organization describes STE as the following:

This should be the original work of the participant, the primary purpose of which is to entertain. There should be a central topic, theme, or thesis statement which the speaker develops. This event is not merely a series of jokes or a "stand-up" routine. Time limit: 10 minutes maximum.⁶

The rules for STE differ from those of ADS in that there is no mention of the "serious point." Instead, the focus is on a central topic, theme, or thesis statement. Is there a difference between the serious point of ADS and the central topic, theme, thesis statement approach of the STE? Much like baseball manager Billy Martin in the Lite Beer commercials, one may "feel very strongly both ways."

Many competitors and coaches believe that the "serious point" implies that one must demonstrate through humor that some dreaded, ironic, sad, and/or urgent problem exists that requires immediate attention. This point often comes in the last thirty seconds of the ADS. So, isn't this the same as the central topic? No, because a central topic, theme, or thesis statement merely implies that the content of the speech should be consistent throughout the discussion and that the speech should not ramble with a series of unrelated jokes or other material. Also, the central topic theme or thesis statement must be clarified at the start of the speech, usually in the introduction.

⁶Taken from Speech to Entertain rules, Phi Rho Pi, 1985.

To illustrate this difference between the serious point and the central topic, theme, or thesis statement approach, it is necessary to discuss how these two principles of humorous speaking impact on topic selection. In many cases, a topic that is performed as an ADS can be adapted to an STE; however, this is not always true when performing the STE for ADS competition. For example, if one wanted to perform an STE on worms, he/she would be justified in doing so if it were made clear from the start that the entire discussion would be aimed at presenting humorous material about worms. On the other hand, if one wanted to perform an ADS on worms the question may be "What is the serious point?" and "What exactly is the problem with worms?" The central topic, theme, or thesis statement approach seems to be a tactful way of suggesting that material should be organized and related throughout the speech.

There is another issue involved. Over the past eight years, two-year colleges have frequently attended competitions at four-year schools. A "gentlemen's agreement" that ADS and STE are the same event seems to have emerged even though the events may have some differences. One important difference may be the purpose of each speech format. STE states that "the primary purpose is to entertain" whereas ADS states that its purpose is to "make a serious point through use of humor."

Does this mean that the STE should be judged primarily on the amount of laughter that a speaker receives through a variety of humorous devices? Should other factors besides laughter be used to judge the success of ADS? Based on informal observation at the national level, STE does seem to be judged primarily on the amount of laughter generated. In terms of performance, the STE speaker seems to apply more devices such as props, visual aids, movement, and sound effects than does the ADS participant. In many instances, the STE also appears to be less structured than the ADS.

A growing number of judges are beginning to judge ADS on factors other than laughter. Such elements as structural development, statement of the serious point, and good taste are also being evaluated. In view of the differences between ADS and STE, one can begin to see why frustration and confusion exists among coaches and competitors. In an attempt to clarify differences in STE and ADS performances, the following suggestions are offered:

1. Coaches should read the rules listed in the event description when going to a tournament with what appear to be different event categories.

2. Students who transfer from two-year colleges or graduate from high school should familiarize themselves with the rules appropriate for intercollegiate tournaments.
3. Coaches and judges should judge STE's using STE rules and criteria and the same should hold true for ADS.

Conclusion

Organization, treatment of the serious point, and the difference between thematic and presentational styles were the major points of discussion concerning the event of After Dinner Speaking. A distinction was made between the After Dinner Speech and the Speech to Entertain along with recommendations to coaches and participants in the event of STE.

By introducing these issues and suggestions, the authors hope to initiate more discussion regarding ADS that will assist students in preparing for the event while also establishing criteria for coaching and judging the event. Laughter and audience response are convenient barometers for evaluating After Dinner Speeches; however, the rules for both national tournaments clearly state that there are other elements to consider when judging the event. But seriously folks, the authors hope that in the not too distant future both coaches and competitors will be able to remark that now many are being entertained by at least a few more.