

A GUIDE TO **IMPROMPTU**

SPEAKING

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So you want to learn Impromptu Speaking. Awesome! The following guide should serve as a starting point for collegiate competition. However, while Impromptu Speaking events are relatively standardized, norms and rules may differ based on region and tournament. I would encourage you to consult with your coach or a tournament organizer to ensure you understand any specific rules the guide may not cover.

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Rules Overview

Impromptu Speaking is a limited-preparation speech event. Competitors are expected provide an analysis of a prompt, typically a quotation. Competitors are given two minutes to prepare their speech. During the two-minute period, they will outline their speech on a notecard. Once their two minutes have elapsed, competitors will proceed to deliver a five-minute speech.

Speech Format

While Impromptu Speeches can be formatted in multiple ways, the following guide will explain two-point speeches. Two-point speeches demand the speaker to provide an interpretation of the prompt in the form of a thesis and come up with two differentiated points providing reasoning for their interpretation. Within each point are two examples to illustrate the point. Examples can be just about anything, provided they are nonfictional: pop culture, history, sports, politics, and science are just some of the avenues competitors can pick examples from. The speaker attempts to defend their interpretation of the prompt through their use of the examples. The below outline walks through the general structure of an Impromptu Speech, with explanations for each section provided below. The notecard section advises as to how the structure can translate onto a notecard.

Outline

Introduction

Attention Grabbing Device

Link to Prompt

Prompt

Thesis

Agree/Disagree

Point 1

Example A

Analysis

Example B

Analysis

Tieback

Point 2

Example A

Analysis

Example B

Analysis

Tieback

Conclusion

Review

Return to AGD

Explanations

Attention Grabbing Device (AGD) – Your AGD is the first of five examples in your speech and is typically the example most strongly related to your analysis. The AGD should ideally incorporate aspects of both of your points and will segue nicely into the quotation.

Link to Prompt – The link to prompt involves the speaker moving from their AGD to the prompt they are analyzing. While different speakers will find links they feel comfortable deploying, the link will address the general theme and connect the AGD with the quotation. For instance, “It is this notion that sometimes things are not always what they seem that is reflected in today’s quotation...”

Prompt - Once the speaker links their AGD to the prompt, they should introduce the exact prompt they were presented with. Almost always, the prompt will be a quotation to be read verbatim and credited to the author (listed on the provided slip of paper). When linking to the prompt, the speaker should read directly from the slip containing the prompt. Doing so ensures you do not inadvertently misquote the quotation. Try to read the

quotation slowly and with some gravitas, allowing the quotation to be clearly understood by your audience and judges.

Thesis and Analysis Preview – After reading the quotation, the speaker should read their thesis. The thesis should be a single sentence interpreting the prompt by discussing the general claim the prompt makes (typically one about human nature, society, morality, or some other sufficiently broad concept). The speaker should attempt to interpret the prompt in a way so as to not lose the spirit of the prompt (avoid overly generalizing) but is not so specific as to make narrowing down points and examples impossible in the short two-minute preparation window.

Agree/Disagree – The agree/disagree section is not intuitive, and is easy for new speakers to forget. The competitor must specify if the audience should agree or disagree with the prompt as interpreted. The speaker claims the prompt makes an argument – the thesis. However, the speaker has the option to disagree with the thesis, and in turn disagree with what the prompt is claiming. If so, the speaker must offer a null thesis - an alternate thesis going against the original thesis' interpretation. So, for an agree speech analyzing the quotation "A house divided against itself cannot stand.", the speaker may say "What Abraham Lincoln is expressing in this quotation is that it is only through unity that we can achieve prosperity. We can agree with this, for two key reasons...". For a disagree speech analyzing the same quotation, the speaker may say "What Abraham Lincoln is expressing in this quotation is that it is only through unity that we can achieve prosperity. However, we can disagree with this, and instead conclude that sometimes prosperity is best achieved by force rather than compromise. This can be understood through two key lenses of analysis..." In the second example, the speaker offers a null thesis rejecting the claim the quotation is making (as interpreted by the speaker). After the competitor agrees or disagrees with the quotation, they should preview their two points. "We can agree with this for two key reasons. First, because common goals are the most powerful motivators. And second, because we can only see true progress through collective effort."

Points – After the preview, the speaker will launch into their first point of analysis. The speaker should reiterate the point tagline once more "First, common goals are powerful motivators." Then, the speaker should provide two real-world examples to back up their point. For example, given the above first point of "common goals are the most powerful motivators", the

speaker should provide two nonfiction examples of common goals serving as motivators. After providing and explaining both examples, tie the examples back to the point being made: "So, through the examples of the Philadelphia Eagles 2017 Super Bowl run and the War of the Bucket, we can see that common goals serve as powerful motivators." After the first point, the speaker should move to the second point, using the same formula as the first.

Conclusion – After the speaker goes over their second point, they should move to the conclusion of the speech. The speaker should begin by restating their prompt and thesis, then reviewing their points. "And so, in returning to today's quotation, from Abraham Lincoln – A house divided against itself cannot stand - we took this to mean that it is only through unity that we can achieve prosperity. And we can agree with this, because firstly, common goals are the most powerful motivators. And secondly, we can only see true progress through collective effort." Finally, the speaker should use any time remaining to return to their AGD, explaining once more how the example illustrates the thesis "it is only through unity that we can achieve prosperity".

Notecard

Notecard formatting is a crucial part of a well-structured impromptu speech. The notecard organizes the thoughts of the speaker as they prepare and serve as an outline for the speaker to reference during their speech. However, given the short time frame allotted to prep, competitors do not have much time to write on the notecard. Therefore, speakers should fill out their notecard with the structure beforehand and fill in the details such as examples and the thesis during prep. Additionally, competitors will often only have time to jot down key words and phrases before their preparation time expires. A typical impromptu card for a two-point speech may be formatted as follows:

AGD

Quotation – (don't write out, read from slip)

Thesis

Agree/Disagree – (pick one)

Null Thesis – (only if disagreeing)

Point 1 – Tagline

Example A

Example B

Point 2 – Tagline

Example A

Example B

The notecard is meant to serve as a reference point for the speaker, not something to be read verbatim. With practice, using the notecard minimally in impromptu speaking becomes second-nature. Doing so allows speakers to focus more time and energy on offering compelling analysis instead of looking down at their notecard.

The Prompt

In Impromptu Speaking, understanding the prompt is essential to delivering a successful speech. Typically, the prompt is formatted in the form of a quotation. However, in rare instances the prompt is not a quotation, but the form of the speech remains the same.

Types of Prompts

Generally, Impromptu Speaking Prompts are quotations. Quotations may be statements made by famous individuals, or proverbs not attributed to any one individual.

Examples of Impromptu Quotations include (but are not limited to):

“I know that I have died before – once in November.” – Anne Sexton

“Music with dinner is an insult both to the cook and the violinist.” – G. K. Chesterton

I had a purpose before everybody had an opinion. It’s not about anybody else.” – Jalen Hurts

“He who has been bitten by a snake fears a piece of string.” – Persian Proverb

“A fox is in trouble because of his own pelt.” – Afghan Proverb

While competitors will almost always be analyzing quotations, speakers may encounter two alternative types of Impromptu prompts.

The first alternative type of Impromptu Speaking prompt competitors should familiarize themselves with are single-word prompts. A single-word prompt provides the speaker with a single word to unpack and analyze. Much like a quotation-based Impromptu, the speaker will construct a thesis they believe reflects the prompt. However, doing so can prove difficult given the limited information the speaker has to work with.

Examples of single-word prompts include (but are not limited to):

Pretzel

Lackluster

Serendipity

Scientist

Forensics

The second alternative type of Impromptu Speaking prompt competitors should prepare for are object prompts. Object prompts require the speaker to analyze an object, constructing a thesis around what they believe the object signifies. Object prompts allow for significant creativity on the part of the speaker, as they often must explore beyond the bounds of what the object literally represents in order to create a compelling analysis.

Examples of object prompts include (but are not limited to):

Teddy Bear

Broken Foam Heart

Stapler

Orange

Hair Tie

Topic Flip

Impromptu Speakers will exit the room at the beginning of the round (unless they are the first speaker) so as to avoid gaining an unfair advantage by hearing prompts before their prep time. When their chance to speak arrives, the competitor will enter the room to find a slip of paper flipped upside-down. The slip of paper contains either one or two prompts. If the paper contains two prompts, the speaker may choose which one to respond to. Some speakers prefer to pick the shortest one and not both reading both. Picking the shorter quotation immediately is done to maximize time working on the speech, rather than deliberating on which prompt to take and spending extra time reading. Whether the speaker wishes to read both prompts is personal preference, but they choose quickly if they opt to do so. While some tournaments grant time to read the prompt(s) (typically around fifteen seconds), others may not. Once the competitor reads and understands the prompt, they should begin filling out their speech outline with a thesis, points, and examples. The competitor is not permitted to reference any resources during their preparation, and must pull examples from memory.

Examples

As previously mentioned, speakers are expected to provide five nonfictional examples per speech. Examples can be pulled from just about any medium and time period, provided they are true, appropriate, and interesting.

Finding Examples

Examples to be used in speeches can be found just about anywhere, with the internet serving as a great place to search for Impromptu examples. Wikipedia and r/TIL (Today I Learned) can both serve as solid starting blocks, but competitors should make a habit of keeping an eye out for examples as they go about their day. Examples can be logged in an example book, or in a notes app list on their phone. Furthermore, examples should be novel – a speech is made much more engaging by the speaker using new and unique examples to support their points. Speakers should avoid using commonplace examples. If they do use a widely popular figure as an example, they should bring up an obscure aspect of the figure. For instance, using Tom Brady's story of going from an unknown 6th round pick to the greatest NFL quarterback ever would be ill-advised. The story is common knowledge and would likely fail to engage judges. Discussing how Tom Brady fell asleep in the locker room before his first Super Bowl, or his film/television appearances, would be more acceptable as they are not as commonly known. Generally speaking, through, trying to find niche examples as opposed to common household names is advisable.

Using Examples

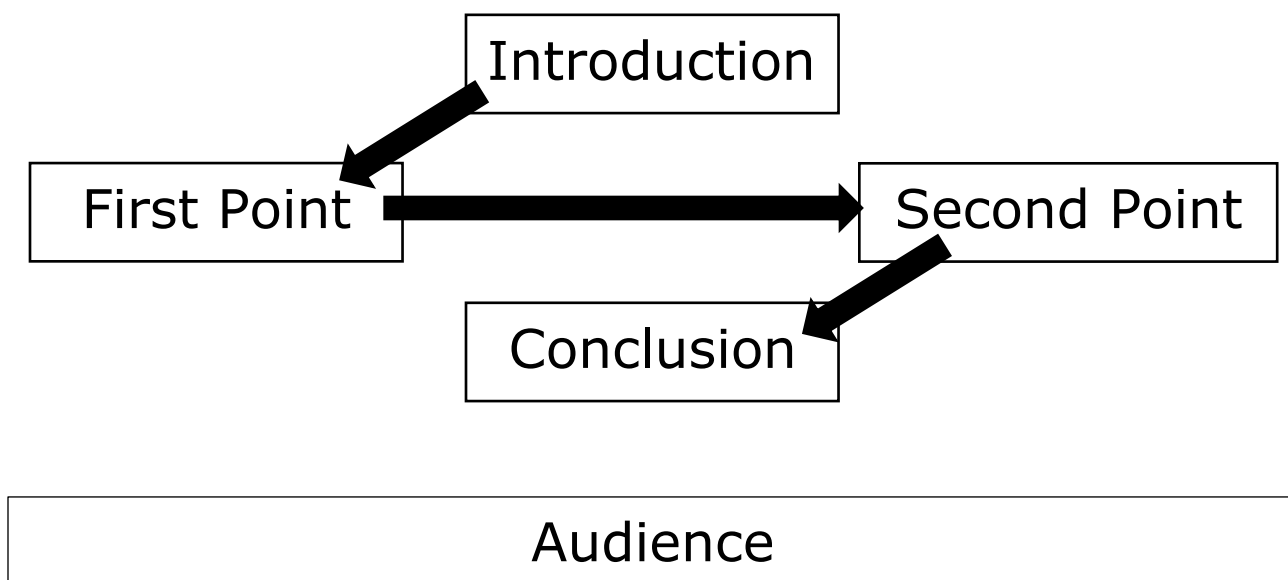
Besides being nonfictional and uncommon knowledge, speakers are expected to showcase a variety of examples. Speakers should not use more than one topic from a given category in a speech. For example, if a speaker's AGD is an NFL player, they should avoid using NFL players (and perhaps sports stars more generally) for the remainder of the speech. If a speaker uses a historical British monarch as their 1A example, they should avoid using British monarchs for the remainder of the speech. However, telling the speaker to avoid using, say, historical examples, would be prohibitively broad. However, speakers may not lean on any one specific category of example for a speech. Competitors should therefore research and compile examples covering a variety of categories.

The Speech

Once preparation time has elapsed, the competitor will stand and deliver their speech. They are granted five minutes to do so, and any additional seconds left over from preparation time will be added to the competitor's speaking time. For instance, if a competitor preps for one minute and thirty seconds of their two-minute preparation time, their speaking time would be five minutes and thirty seconds. Competitors should strive to deliver their speech confidently and seek to engage their audience.

Two-Point Walk

During their speech, speakers should be prepared to move (if able) at each transitional period during their speech. Movement gives a physical indication of the speaker moving to a new portion of the speech. For a two-point speech, speakers should move as they transition from introduction to first point, from first point to second point, and from second point to conclusion, a typical "two-point walk" should look something like the following:



Delivery

While giving the speech, competitors should make use of hand gestures deliberately to accentuate the speech. Speakers should avoid “rat gestures” (small hand gestures while the arms lie mostly at the speaker’s sides) and instead make use of the arm while gesturing. During the introduction, speakers should use a hand gesture for each major point they plan to cover, mirroring their walk. While intentional gestures may sound complicated and difficult, they quickly become a habit if practiced. Using the above two-point walk as an example, the speaker should gesture with their right hand when previewing their first point and their left hand when previewing their second point. Doing so creates parallelism with the audience –the speaker walks to their right for their first point, paralleling the speaker’s right-handed gesture. The above walk and gestures are not the only patterns speakers could make use of, and speakers will naturally gravitate towards a pattern they personally find comfortable. The goal, however, should always be to use hand gestures in a calculated and deliberate manner to enhance the speech.