

CHAPTER 5

Impromptu Speaking

After completing this chapter you should be able to:

- ☐ Define impromptu speaking
- ☐ Present an impromptu speech on a proverb, quotation, or word
- ☐ Understand and use organizational strategies for an impromptu speech
- ☐ Speak with ease on many topics with limited preparation

New Terms To Learn In This Chapter

Limited Preparation

Proverbs

Kernel

Abstract Words

IMPROMPTU SPEAKING

Impromptu speaking is one of the most challenging and interesting speech events. It is similar to extemporaneous in that one draws a topic and speaks on the topic for the round. However, impromptu is a very limited preparation event. One has to learn to speak only minutes after drawing the topic. Forensics competitors find this event to be a true test of the "gift of gab," and a great deal of fun as well!



The National Forensic League offers the following explanation on the impromptu speaking ballot. It states:

The Impromptu speech should be regarded as an original interpretation by the speaker of the designated topic as supported by varied materials and gives a contestant opportunity to be creative and imaginative. An impromptu speech should reveal the student's ability to organize his thoughts quickly and in a logical manner.

The contestant should be held accountable for strict adherence to the topic drawn and discounted severely for shifting to some other topic on which s/he might prefer to speak. The information presented should be well-chosen, pertinent, and sufficient to support the central thought of the topic.

The material should be organized according to some logical plan to produce a complete speech within the time allowed. Delivery should be free from marked defects in the mechanics of speech-poise, quality and use of voice, enunciation, fluency, bodily expressiveness-and should be effective in enlisting and holding the interest of the audience.

The best impromptu speech combines clear thinking, good speaking, and interesting presentation with respect to the subject chosen. Notes are not permitted.

There is no minimum qualifying time. Do not penalize a contestant for brevity unless he fails to cover his subject adequately. Maximum time is five minutes. Impose no penalty for overtime unless it is excessive.

There will be a five-minute preparation time. Impromptu topics will be chosen from proverbs, ordinary things, abstract words, events, quotations, and famous people.

That description provides an excellent starting ground for the impromptu speaker. Essentially impromptu is a **limited preparation** event. It is similar to extemporaneous in that one draws a topic and must speak on that topic shortly. Impromptu is not necessarily the study of current events. The preparation time is very short compared to the thirty minutes in extemporaneous speaking. A student should get a good understanding of what to do in the speech before attempting this event. Some impromptu speakers sound like extempers making references to books and magazines. Some are totally personal, discussing anecdotes from their lives. Many combine elements of both academic content and personal references.

The **format** of impromptu varies from state to state. A common form consists of a five minute prep time and a five minute speaking time. Another popular format is a seven minute prep and speaking time combined. For example one might use one and one-half minutes to prepare and five and one-half minutes to speak. Other states provide one minute to select the topic, one minute to prepare, and five to speak.

The **topic** can be proverbs, quotations, words, objects, people, or other forms of language that can be interpreted. Whatever the topic is, one should use his or her own knowledge in constructing a speech analyzing the topic.

Strategies for writing the speech include the following elements. Address the topic via showing significance to the audience. You can do this by personalizing the topic through your analysis. Demonstrate how your topic may affect each of our lives or the role it may play. Using the idea of "personal significance" as a main idea, general structure might be developed in the following way.

I. Introduction

- A. Attention getter
- B. Preview of major points

II. Body

- A. First area of analysis
 - 1. example
 - 2. explanation/relevance to topic
- (Repeat for sub-point B and C)

III. Conclusion

- A. Review of major points
- B. Refer back to attention getter and conclude

Now let us look at what can be included in each component of the impromptu speech. Consider first the body and areas of analysis. There are a number of directions one can go in selecting areas of analysis. One possible structure is to focus on the possible **benefits/harms** of the topic. This can be very effective for topics based on concepts (i.e. freedom, motivation, justice, poverty). You can provide the point of view as your major topic area and then give an example to back up or prove your point. Consider the following example on the topic of "freedom."

I. Intro

- A. Attention getter-provide an example showing how freedom may have an impact on our lives. Also, briefly introduce the topic and state your view of its overall significance.
- B. Preview-list, in order, the headings of your major points. In this case, your points might be how freedom can be beneficial on an individual basis, and how it may be harmful, and how it may be beneficial to society as a whole.

II. Body

- A. How freedom may benefit the individual
 - 1. give a basic overview of the concept
 - 2. provide an example to back up your analysis
 - 3. restate your basic thesis and explain relevance of example to topic
- B. How freedom may be harmful at times
(repeat steps 1-3 above for first point)
- C. How freedom is generally beneficial to society
(repeat steps 1-3 above)

III. Conclusion

- A. Restate topic and reiterate that it is significant to all of us
- B. Review major points
- C. Refer back to attention-getter in concluding statement.

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Another way to organize is to label your areas of analysis as the *example* which you are going to talk about. This method may not give the impression of an in-depth method of analysis as compared to the first method.

With this approach you do not have to take a stance on the topic. However, it is important to give the judge/audience a reason to listen, and creating the significance underlying the topic may do this.

There are many forms of *examples*. Examples may come in the form of anecdotes, stories, or trivia. Many prefer to utilize examples which come from their own experience and knowledge. *Personal experiences* are the most obvious place to get examples. It is probably best to use just one per speech. One strategy is to use personal experiences in the introduction, followed by more standard examples for the other points.

There are innumerable additional categories for examples. *Philosophy* has been popular on the collegiate level. It enables a speaker to establish a value criteria for analyzing a topic. The *Historical* example is also quite popular. History is full of examples for a view on any topic. It is important, however, to have your facts straight. Inaccurate descriptions of historical data will not please your audience. *Literary* examples are another popular type of example. Literature is full of examples to exemplify topics. Consider plays, novels, short stories, or poems. Other areas may include politics, current events, sports, or movies. When using examples, remember to relate examples to the topic and/or the stance you are establishing in your speech. Also, make sure that you make them interesting. Analysis is important, but you need to grab and hold the interest of the audience through examples.

HOW TO DEAL WITH PROVERBS OR QUOTATIONS

In addition to abstract concepts, many tournaments offer famous proverbs and quotations. This presents a more difficult challenge. It is much easier to deal with one word or concept rather than an entire sentence. Hence, it is a good idea to base the speech on your interpretation of the quotation, rather than attempting to deal with the entire quotation itself. Such an interpretation should be extremely brief (one word, a short phrase) and should be very clearly worded. Interpretation should really focus on the central meaning or "heart" of the quotation. It can be called the "**kernel**," as in the central, essential part.

The kernel should be established and reaffirmed throughout your speech. Link your examples and analysis to your kernel. Simultaneously, you should link your kernel back to the quotation. This will help with clarity and also further convince the judge that your interpretation of the quotation is correct. Although there may be several possible kernels within a quotation, find the one that best represents your interpretation of the quotation. Any interpretation of a quotation is legitimate as long as it is a reasonable development of the quotation and is justified within your speech. The kernel should be no more than one or two words, or a brief phrase. Such a limitation helps with the clarity of your speech and it also gives a very specific focus. It is advisable to choose a kernel that shows some sort of holistic analysis of the quotation. Do not pick any word. Be selective in the interpretation.

Sample quotation:

"I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." — Voltaire.

Possible kernels on Voltaire's quote might be:

- Freedom of speech
- Freedom
- Open mindedness
- Respecting others
- Common enemies

After you have determined what the central theme (kernel) is, structure your speech as you would normally around that topic.¹

Unified analysis also applies to impromptu speaking.² All information presented by the speaker should provide justification or support of the thesis. A vital step in impromptu is extrapolating a thesis. With a quotation, phrase, or proverb, one must provide an interpretation. If the topic is a word, one must define and explain it. If the topic is a person or place, the speaker must briefly identify who, where or what it is and explain why it is important.

Here Is A Second Example Of Structure For The Impromptu Speech

I. Introduction

A. Attention-Getter

¹ Brian White, Coach at Buhler High School and former member of the Wichita State University I.E. Squad.

² Robert Carroll, "An Introduction to Impromptu Speaking," to be published in *Rostrum*.

- B. Lead in to Topic
- C. Statement of Topic
- D. Thesis (interpret/define/identify the topic)
- E. Preview (for two reasons: A and B)

II. Reason A

- A. Explanation of Logic
- B. Example to Illustrate
- C. Another example to illustrate
- D. Discussion of the relationship of the examples to each other and to the topic

III. Reason B

- A. Explanation of Logic
- B. Example to Illustrate
- C. Another example to illustrate
- D. Discussion of the relationship of the examples to each other and to the topic

IV. Conclusion

- A. Review Statement
- B. Restatement of Topic
- C. Restatement of Thesis
- D. Restatement of Attention Getter

Here Are Examples Of Structures For Impromptu Speeches

Type of topic: famous person

Name: Jerry Garcia

Thesis: Jerry Garcia, the recently deceased vocalist/songwriter/ guitarist for the band *The Grateful Dead*, was a significant figure in contemporary American society;

- I. Because he was an influential musician.
- II. Because he lived a self-destructive lifestyle.

Type of topic: place

Place: Mount Everest

Thesis: Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, is a significant place in the world:

- I. Because it is isolated from most of humankind.
- II. Because it is extremely dangerous to climb.

Type of topic: word

Word: Liberty

Thesis: Liberty is the freedom from control and the right to act on your own:

- I. Because it signifies freedom for individuals, it implies people are not subject to absolute restrictions from the state.
- II. Because it signifies responsibility for one's own actions, it implies people may act in their own best interest.

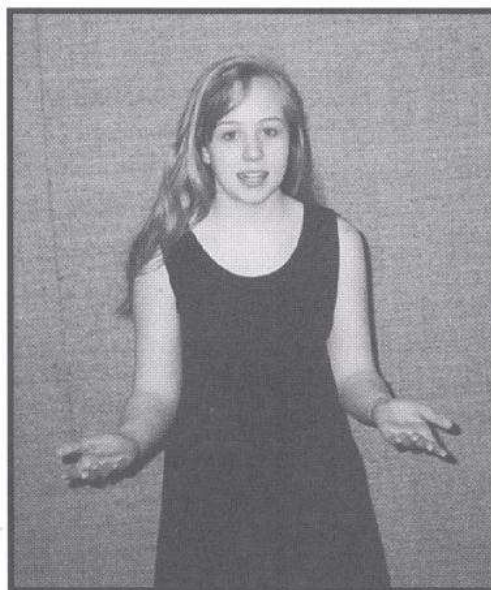
Type of topic: proverb

Proverb: Revenge is a dish best served cold.

Thesis: Revenge is best achieved in a cold-blooded manner:

- I. Because revenge is not taken in the heat of the moment — it is planned.
- II. Because revenge is not a crime of passion — it is a crime of retribution.³

Impromptu speaking will enhance your creative potential through its emphasis on spontaneity. Like extemp, it helps you to improve your fluency by speaking without previous preparation. Practice with proverb or quotation books, or make a list of **abstract words** such as freedom, hate, or envy. Study a bit of history; keep up on current events; read literature carefully in your English classes; and just be informed about the world around you, from the lives and careers of movie stars, to the political figures that run our world.



³ Robert Carroll

REVIEW

TOP NINE TIPS FOR SUCCESS IN IMPROMPTU SPEAKING

1. Begin reading books of quotations or proverbs.
2. Make a list of abstract words to interpret.
3. When writing an impromptu speech, show how your topic affects the lives of your audience.
4. Study the three part structure of an impromptu speech. It should have an introduction, body, and conclusion.
5. Realize that the main areas of analysis can be either showing the benefits/harms of the topic or by showing examples of the topic.
6. Examples can be found in personal experiences, philosophy, history, literature, or in current events.
7. Proverbs need to be interpreted in one word or short phrase.
8. Practice determining the "kernel" of the quotation.
9. Practice giving impromptu speeches with peers or your coach.

ACTIVITIES

1. Make a list of words and quotations. As a class, try writing sample speech outlines on the same topics. Share your outline with the class. This will demonstrate the many creative ways a topic can be approached in impromptu.
2. Ask one of your peers to write a topic for you. Give a speech to your peer. Then reverse the process and write one for your peer. He or she should then deliver a speech to you.

SAMPLE TOPICS and WORDS

Remembering your childhood.

Monopoly
Dr. Seuss
Scrambled Eggs
Checkers
Father
Band Aids
Wallpaper
Candy
Frisbee
Haircut
Questions
Respect
Plaid
Cotton
Denim
Music

The random

Cannibalism
Paper
Cults
Mouse traps
Tabloids
Fossils
Bootleg
DNA
Blindfolded
Army
Signature
Tranquilized
Wheelchair
Deja vu
Imagination
Altruism
Apathy

The abstract

Sanitized
Light
Finances
Hibernation
Violation
Listen
Gambling
Understanding
Thought
Freedom
Responsibility
Infinity
Virtue
Marriage
Routine

QUOTATIONS

"There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it." — George Bernard Shaw

All things are less dreadful than they seem.

Zeal is fit only for wise men but is found mostly in fools.

A book that is shut is but a block.

Don't hang a man and then try him afterward.

A cloud cannot cast a shadow unless the sun is shining.

"I may disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." — Voltaire

"I have great faith in fools- my friends call it self-confidence." — Edgar Allen Poe

"Most of the time I don't have much fun, the rest of the time I don't have any fun at all." — Woody Allen

"Always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much." — Oscar Wilde

"Man is a political animal." — Aristotle

"You can be on the right track, but if you sit there too long, you'll get run over." — Will Rogers

"There's a big difference between good, sound reasoning, and reasoning that sounds good." — Burton Hillis

"A man always has two reasons for doing anything — a good reason, and the real reason." — J.P. Morgan