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ABSTRACT

One of the frustrations students new to intercollegiate competitive oral interpretation experience is having to learn the "unwritten rules" for the events. These rules are neither intrinsically negative nor positive. Any of the practices embodied in these rules may be used effectively by a student performing an oral interpretation of literature. Ten of these "unwritten rules" are: (1) "teasers" are mandatory; (2) ways to use a manuscript (subdivided into eight additional rules); (3) times to use movement and blocking; (4) minimum time is relative to genre; (5) literature should "fit" interpreters; (6) literature should be new/undiscovered; (7) program oral interpretations manuscripts should follow a compiled script format rather than the format of a traditional program; (8) no transitions; (9) no self-authored literature; and (10) dramatic duo interpretations should only feature two characters unless the work is of an avant-garde nature. Appendixes contain event descriptions of the American Forensic Association and of the National Forensic Association. (RS)

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The Unwritten Rules in Oral Interpretation

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
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THE UNWRITTEN RULES IN ORAL INTERPRETATION

Every year new students begin their intercollegiate forensic experience. Many of the students participate in the oral interpretation events including prose, poetry, drama, dramatic duo, and program oral interpretation. One of the frustrations they experience is learning the “unwritten rules” for the events. Students show up with possible selections, and are too often rebuffed by coaches and veterans: “You can’t do piece because . . .” [pick one of the following]: (A) “that piece is way overdone”; (B) “that piece was in the final round of nationals last year”; (C) nobody does classical literature in competition” (E) “it’s not a monologue.” The frustration over finding “good” material is soon exacerbated by the struggle to learn all the rest of the unwritten rules in oral interpretation.

Our purpose is to identify and illuminate the unwritten rules we have recognized operating within intercollegiate competitive oral interpretation. The rules we illuminate are neither intrinsically negative nor positive. Any of the practices we describe may be used effectively by a student performing an oral interpretation of literature. A problem develops when the practices move beyond possibilities a student may decide to incorporate into a performance and become standardized expectations of coaches-competitors-judges.

We have no “hard data” to verify the efficacy of the unwritten rules we contend exist in intercollegiate oral interpretation. We base our findings on more than 23 years of competitive intercollegiate experience.

We understand the unwritten rules we describe are not going to have universal applicability. Unwritten rules will have regional characteristics. Practices which are considered mandatory in one area of the country may be unheard of (or unacceptable) in other regions. We believe, however, the rules we explicate are commonly accepted across the intercollegiate forensic circuit.

The Evolution of an Unwritten Rule: A Twelve-Step Program

Unwritten rules do not just spring forth fully formed from pen of a forensic judge. Rules have a genesis inherent within the forensic practices in which we engage. The twelve steps articulated below describe the basis for the generation, perpetuation, and discontinuation of unwritten rules in oral interpretation.

1. A talented student tries something new/different;
2. talented student is rewarded by judge for a strong performance (judge may not even have liked the new approach, yet votes for student because overall performance was strong);
3. student continues to win at a variety of tournaments;
4. other students observe the winning student and attribute success to the new/different approach;
5. other students adapt the new approach into their performances;
6. judges see "everyone" doing the new approach and assume this is how it is supposed to be done;
7. judges start expecting everyone to include the new approach;
8. judges start penalizing students who fail to include the new approach;
9. students believe they *must* include the new approach to be competitive;
10. seniors graduate;
11. Forensic alumni return (as either graduate coaches or hired judges) the next season and employ the "unwritten rules" they learned as competitors in order to render decisions;
12. the unwritten rule is perpetuated by the community until we return to Step One when a talented student tries something new/different.

The Unwritten Rules

Rule No. 1: Teasers are Mandatory

A teaser is a short segment of a prose-poetry-drama piece presented before an introduction designed to “tease” the audience about what is yet to come. The teaser is a relatively new phenomenon in oral interpretation. Traditional practice began the performance with an introduction. The teaser, when first introduced, was a shock to many in the forensic community. Students received ballots with the scribbled comment “where is your introduction? Did I miss something? You really need to have an introduction to introduce us to the material. . . . Wait, now you’ve closed your book for an intro. Well, what was that thing before the intro? I’m really confused.” Then a talented student started winning with (or in spite of) a teaser. Other students saw the practice, assumed the success was tied to this thing called a “teaser,” and pretty soon teasers were everywhere in interpretation events.

The teaser slowly moved from something one might do, to something someone was expected to do. Students without teasers started receiving comments such as, “where is your TEASER! You really need to have a teaser before the introduction!” (We posit judges mandating unwritten rules often have a tendency to back up the necessary inclusion of the standard with a series of exclamation points; helps to reinforce the necessity for including the unwritten standard in a performance.)

Students now take the first 30 seconds to 45 seconds of a prose-poetry-drama, stick it in front of the introduction, and call it a teaser. Most of the teasers, however,

fail to “tease.” Judges should encourage students to forget about using a teaser—unless it really teases the audience—and just begin their performance with an introduction.

Rule No. 2: Know how to use a Manuscript

The second unwritten rule in forensics is the use of the scriptbook. We wish to draw a distinction between using a script and using a *scriptbook*. The written rules for AFA and NFA clearly state interpreters must use a manuscript during their performances; the written rules do not require the performer to place the manuscript into a specific-type of binder. (See appendix for the written rules of the AFA-NIET.) Unwritten rules dominate the use of the manuscript in interpretation events, including:

Rule No. 2a: Use a Little Black Book

Competitors are required to place their manuscripts inside a little, black, 3-ring binder measuring 6-1/2" x 8-1/2" by 1". All descriptors of the binder are essential to follow. The binder may not be any other color than black, no bigger than 6-1/2" x 8-1/2" by 1", and must have three rings to hold the manuscript. A manuscript mounted on construction paper (of any color or size) is sure to draw a look of bewilderment and (internal) chuckling from the judge and other competitors. The judge will surely comment on the ballot, “place your manuscript in a little, black book!”

Rule No. 2b: Use Plastic Sleeves

A more recent unwritten rule development is the requirement a manuscript must be carefully placed inside protective plastic sleeves. The serious competitor may no longer just use plain, white typing paper, nor may they mount the script on construction paper, large notecards, or other backing. The script should be carefully slid down inside a protective sleeve.

Rule No. 2c: Have a Lot of Pages

The plastic sleeves help to satisfy the third condition of scriptbooks: Thou shalt have a *thick* scriptbook. A competitive interpreter has a little black book bulging at the seams. The underlying assumption of the rule: the thicker the book, the more competitive the student.

Rule No. 2d: "Snap!" Your Page Turns

The use of firm pages in a scriptbook provides students with an easy unwritten rule to follow. Transitions of time, transitions of scenes, transitions of selections (e.g., POI), transitions of characters, transitions of any type, way, or form should be loudly announced to the audience with a highly stylized "snap!" page turn. Competitors have been known to "snap!" a page as many as 20 times during a 10-minute performance.

We find the "snapping!" of page turns problematic. We believe a purpose of an interpretive performance is for an audience to forget it is listening and watching a person with a little black book at the front of a classroom. A powerful performance has the potential to remove an audience from the "here-and-now" and

metaphysically transport it into the prose-poetry-drama interpretation. The “snap!” page turn is counterproductive to this goal. Each “snap!” draws an audience away from its involvement in the interpretation, returns locus to the here-and-now, and focuses attention on the person standing at the front of the room holding a little black book. The power of the performance is diminished with each “snap!” page turn.

Students have other options available to indicate to an audience a transition has occurred. Students may indicate a transition using numerous methods more conducive to enhancing a performance, including altering vocal qualities (e.g., tone, pitch, timbre, speed, volume/projection) and/or altering physical qualities (e.g., stance, gestures, facial expressions, eye contact). The qualities we list above serve far more to strengthen the overall impact of the performance; a “snap!” page turn serves far more to distract from the potential of a performance.

Our stance against “snap!” page turns should not be construed to mean we are against the use of the “snap!” page turns in all interpretations. (Indeed, such a stance would constitute an attempt on our part to establish an unwritten rule.) We suggest the “snap!” page turn may be effectively used in comedic performances or in a program to indicate an abrupt rupture between selections. We contend students should have a performance-specific reason for using the technique in an interpretation.

Rule 2e: Pray to the Interp Gods

A student involved in “praying to the interp gods” is a humorous unwritten rule to observe in a performance. The rule states a student should stand at the front of the classroom waiting till the audience (i.e., judge) is ready. The student then raises the little black book to a level point between chest and abdomen. The book remains closed while the student reverentially stares at the cover and offers up a quick prayer to any observant deity. The prayer complete, the student whips the cover open to begin the performance.

Rule 2f: Love your Little Black Book

An interpreters believes the little black is the heart and soul of the performance. The book should, therefore, be cherished at all times. The love and devotion an interpreters bestows on the little black book is evident by how closely one hugs the book to the bosom.

A problem exists when a student holds the book close against the body. The student cannot possibly read the manuscript contained within the little black book. The inability to read the manuscript is evident every time a page must be turned. The student is required to make an exaggerated motion to move the book away from the body, turn the page, and then return the book back to the bosom. The implications in terms of the audience are similar to the “snap!” page rule. The attention of the audience is drawn to the little black book—the attention is drawn back to the here-and-now.

Rule 2g: Use Military Precision in Handling the Little Black Book

The focus and attention bestowed on the little black book by an interpreters extends to the crispness by which it is handled. The little black book should not flow elegantly through a performance, but rather demonstrate a precision in managing. The book should, for example, pop open in an interpreters hands with clean, hard lines. The rule of military precision is brought to the forefront in dramatic duo. Partners will carefully control their books in exactly the same manner including, being sure the books are held at the same angle before popping open with precision timing.

Rule 2h: Use the Little Black Book as a Prop

The little black book provides a distinct opportunity to incorporate it right into the performance. The little black book has served, for example, as a steering wheel, newspaper, notebook, mountain ledge, baby, weapon, television, vase, photo album, phone book, telephone, door, window, life jacket, body armor, wall, day planner, etc. A drawback to using the little black book in such a fashion is how the audience is enticed into noticing the little black book itself and is, therefore, pulled back to the here-and-now.

A more difficult issue is the use of the little black book as prop in dramatic duo. Duo is the only interpretation event to specifically bar the use of props. The event description for dramatic duo states, in part, "no costumes, props, lighting, etc., are to be used." The use of book as a prop, even if only in a symbolic/representational fashion, raises issues yet to be fully addressed by the forensic community. The degree to which a duo team may use their little black

books as props is contingent on the unwritten rules prevalent in the geographic region where the tournament is held.

Rule 3: When to Use Movement & Blocking

Movement and blocking are controlled by two very different set of unwritten rules in the interpretation events. The number of persons performing an interpretation is the factor for determining which set of rules are used. The first set applies to a solo performance (i.e., prose, POI, poetry, DI). The first set clearly states blocking and movement must be constrained at all times. A solo performer should imagine oneself standing in the middle of a hoola hoop. All movement and blocking are to remain inside the imaginary hoola hoop. The second set of unwritten rules for movement and blocking are far more liberal and apply only to dramatic duo. The second set of rules for blocking and movement *require* the students to incorporate blocking and movement into the performance. Students may exchange places, face the wall with their backs to the audience, stand one person in front of the other, face sideways, walk, dance, bend over, kneel, etc. The degree to which blocking and movement are accepted is contingent on the geographic region where a tournament is held. Differing degrees of acceptance may exist across the forensic circuit, yet blocking and movement are still expected virtually everywhere.

Rule 4: Minimum Time is Relative to Genre

All of the interpretation events set a maximum time limit of 10 minutes including an introduction. None of the interpretation events has a written minimum time-limit requirement. Unwritten rules do, however, establish a minimum time length for a performance. A unique property in these unwritten rules is the connection between minimum time and interpretive genre.

Intercollegiate competitive interpretation recognizes three genre forms: prose, poetry, and drama. Prose, POI, and drama (including DI and dramatic Duo) are accorded the longer minimum time standard. Prose, POI, and DI are expected to last a minimum of 8". Poetry is provided, on the other hand, with the largest room for maneuverability with regard to time. Our experience indicates a poetry interpretation should never be shorter than 7:30" (but one right at 7:30" is acceptable). We attribute the difference with the expression: "Poetry? The faster it's over the better. Nothing more painful than a long poetry program."

Rule 5: Literature should "fit" Interpreters

Interpreters should choose literature which portrays characters who reflect the physical and social characteristics of the interpreter. These characteristics may include biological sex, physical attractiveness, ethnicity, demeanor, and sexual orientation. This rule varies greatly by the genre of literature being interpreted, and by the competitive event for which the literature is interpreted.

Selections of prose, poetry, or dramatic monologue should feature a main character who is of the same biological sex as the interpreter. This is one aspect which is rarely challenged. Secondary characters in a first-person selection may be of the opposite sex, but the person telling the story must fit the interpreters sex. This rule does not generally apply when an interpreter chooses a selection of prose, poetry or dramatic monologue which is written in the third-person. The narrators of these works are rarely gender specific, so the sex of the narrator is assumed to be the same as the interpreter's. However, this rule should be applied when the sex of third-person narrator is indicated.

Prose, poetry, and dramatic monologue selections should also feature a main character who is of a similar ethnic background to the interpreter. The specific

ethnicity of many interpreters is not known, though, so this rule does feature some flexibility. Caucasian and Asian interpreters are generally able to portray characters who are either European, American, Northwest Asian, or of a Jewish background. The rule appears to be that Caucasian interpreters can portray Asian characters, but this practice is not encouraged. Interpreters who are of an ethnic background which features darker skin and hair, as well as other "ethnic" features are also able to portray a wide range of ethnic characters. For example, an interpreter of a Persian ethnicity could probably portray either a Latin American, North African, African, Middle Eastern or Far Eastern character without violating this rule.

Prose, poetry and dramatic monologue selections should feature characters who feature similar physical and social characteristics to those of the interpreter. Large, or obese characters should be portrayed by large or obese interpreters. The same is true of characters who are written to be very plain or unattractive. This rule says for a thin or highly attractive individual to portray a character who is not thin or attractive is simply unbelievable. However, this rule does not seem to apply as strongly when larger and less attractive interpreters portray thin and attractive characters. This practice is discouraged, though. This rule does not seem to apply in the case of a non-impaired interpreter who chooses to portray characters who are physically, cognitively, or emotionally challenged. The same is true of physically, cognitively or emotionally challenged interpreters who choose to portray characters who are not similar to themselves in these ways.

Interpreters should also choose literature which features characters with similar social characteristics to those of the interpreter. Extroverted interpreters should portray characters who are also extroverted. The opposite is true of shy, or reserved interpreters. Characters with any strong social disposition should be

portrayed by interpreters with a similar disposition. The issue of sexual orientation presents an interesting dimension to this rule. The general rule seems to be if the interpreter can "pass" for the sexual orientation of the character, this is acceptable. One reason for this is probably that the sexual orientation of most competitors is not known by most judges. However, a secondary rule applies when an interpreter becomes associated with portraying homosexual characters. Interpreters who frequently portray homosexual characters should diversify their literary choices. This rule is enforced more strongly when the interpreter is known or perceived to be homosexual. This rule does not, however, apply to heterosexual or ethnic characterizations.

These rules apply differently to selections of dramatic literature which feature multiple characters, and to the event of program oral interpretation. The dominant character, if there is one, in a dramatic dialogue should reflect the physical and social characteristics of the interpreter. One, of not more, of the characters in any selection of dramatic dialogue should be similar to the character, or the performance will probably not be perceived as believable. These rules apply very weakly to the event of program oral interpretation because contestants are encouraged to include as diverse a range of characters in their performances. However, the rule seems to be the theme or argument of the program should be relevant to the physical and social characteristics of the interpreter. Nearly any interpreter could perform a program on a universal issue like interpersonal violence. However, the range of appropriate interpreters who can perform the program is more limited if the theme is narrowed to interpersonal violence in African American relationships.

Rule 6: Literature Should be New/Undiscovered

Interpreters should select literature which is new or undiscovered. Literature should not be recognizable to the audience. Literature which has been interpreted to any degree of success by a former competitor should be avoided. One guideline which is subsumed by this rule is if a particular text was performed in a national out-round, the literature is no longer appropriate for interpretation. The same is true for literature which has been performed to any degree of regional success. The literature is appropriate outside of the particular region of its success, but is not appropriate within that region.

The statute of limitations for this rule seems to be when others no longer remember the successful performance. Most competitors are around for four years or less, so this can be used as a minimum time frame. However one should consider several issues when deciding if enough time has past. Judges and coaches who have seen the previous successful performance may be around for many more than four years. However, the number of performances any judge sees in any single year, let alone four, will likely cloud his or her memory of any single performance. Some competitors will pursue careers in forensics, and will be likely to remember particularly impressive performances from their competitive years.

Some performances receive so much acclaim they seem to take on a life of their own. These reputations may last longer than any competitor or judge, and literature which is associated with these reputations should be avoided. The same is true of literature which has developed a reputation for being done repeatedly, but poorly. Few people in forensics haven't heard horror stories of the year sixteen freshman women interpreted night, Mother at the same tournament. Literature which has developed such a strong reputation for being done either well or poorly

should be avoided for several reasons. First, many audience members may have already heard the literature repeatedly, and so the interpreter is faced with developing a fresh perspective. Second, a performance of literature which has a reputation for being performed well will likely result in the interpretation being judged against those other performances. Conversely, a performance of literature which is associated with being performed poorly will most likely result in the performance being tainted by the reputation of the literature.

This rule transcends whether a particular literary work is known because it has been used for forensic competition. Interpreters should not select literature written by well-known authors. This rule governs all interpretation events, but dominates poetry interpretation. A premium has been placed on not only discovering new works, but also new authors. This literature is perceived to be fresh, and somehow more relevant and insightful. Interpreters may choose literature which is written by a very contemporary author who has recently become quite well known, but should always avoid the works of the "old standards." One could, for example choose a poem written by a well known, yet new author, like Stephen Dunn or David St. John, but could not choose a work authored by Carl Sandberg.

Interpreters should not choose either "classic," or "classic sounding" literature. This unwritten rule builds off the previous few by adding that if the form, style, or feel of the literature is familiar to the audience, the literature should not be selected for interpretation. One example of this is the bias against rhyming poetry. When interpreters choose literature which sounds classic, they often counter this fact by cutting the literature or interpreting the literature in a manner that ignores

the literary devices an author may have employed. This trend has led to a newer set of unwritten conventions.

Poetry, drama, and program interpretations should sound similar to a prose interpretation. Poetry interpreters often type their poetry selections out in a paragraph format so that they are more easily able to make the literature sound like a short story. One contemporary trend in dramatic interpretation is to choose literature which is either a monologue, or which features long sections of monologue by multiple characters. Sometimes interpreters will cut drama selections so that they intersperse short sections of dialogue into the narrative monologue sections. The difference between this type of a script and a typical first-person prose selection is that the prose manuscript probably includes the "he said," and "she said." However, most prose interpreters cut those directives out of their prose manuscripts and communicate which character is speaking through physical and vocal delivery. The existence of this rule becomes more apparent when one considers the event of program oral interpretation. Audiences often leave these performances wondering which selections of literature represented which genre of literature. Interpreters give their laundry list of authors, genres, and sometimes even titles, but that is this only way most audiences know more than one genre of literature is represented in a program. The effect of this rule is not that interpreters are producing poor quality performances, rather these interpretations ignore literary genre. The educational function of forensic competition may be undermined when competitors are learning how to make poetry and drama sound like prose, rather than how to effectively interpret these text using the literary devices the authors have used to communicate their messages.

Rule 7: Program = Compiled Script

Program oral interpretations manuscripts should follow a compiled script format rather than the format of a traditional program. The traditional program of literature includes a variety of similarly themed selections which are interpreted one after another. However, the contemporary program oral interpretation compiled for forensic competition intersplices the selections of literature into one unified script. The effect of this is not poor performances or interpretations. Compiled scripts seem to reinforce the previous rule which says all oral interpretation should sound like prose interpretation. True programs allow the interpreter to focus on the art of one genre of literature for a substantial amount of time, then shift to a focus on the interpretation of a different genre of literature. Compiled Scripts tend to shift from one genre of literature to another so quickly any interpreter would have a difficult time shifting to the mind set needed to effectively interpret the literature using the devices intrinsic to the multiple genres of the literature. This rule also applies to poetry programs, but seems to say poetry programs that follow a compiled script format are more exciting, innovative, creative, and enjoyable than traditional programs.

Rule 8: No Transitions

Interpreters who perform a poetry program or a program of oral interpretation should use one introduction toward the beginning of the performance, and should not use transitional statements between the literature selections. Transitional statements break the continuity of a program performance, and also use extra time which could be used to interpret the literature. However, some interpreters could make a stronger argument using these transitions, but this option is not available because it does not conform to the contemporary

conventions of the activity. Transitional statements are also made obsolete when interpreters move from the traditional program format to a compiled script, because the compiled script would require the interpreter to use a transitional statement each time he or she moved back and forth between the interspliced literature selections.

Rule 9: No Self-Authored Literature

Interpreters should not perform literature which is self-authored or authored by another competitor on the forensic circuit. This practice is strictly prohibited, though it does not violate any explicit rule. However, the fact performing self-authored literature is not allowed, does not mean people do not do it. The secondary rule with this convention is to use a pen name so audiences do not know the selection is not self-authored. This rule should be followed even in cases where the literature is published in a book, magazine, or literary journal. This secondary rule also applies when the author is another competitor, coach, or judge. However, an interpreter must say the actual name of the author of a published work even if the literature is written by another competitor, because he or she does not have the option of reassigning credit for another's work. This is not to say, though, that they are exempt from the rule they should not choose literature authored by another competitor.

Rule 10: Duo has Two Characters

Dramatic duo interpretations should only feature two characters unless the work is of an avant-garde nature. The explicit rules in dramatic duo interpretation do not prohibit interpreters to portray multiple characters in this event. However, audiences seem to find this type of performance too hard to follow, or unbelievable. Avant-garde selections are expected to be nonsensical, unbelievable, or hard-to-

follow, so audiences are more receptive to dramatic duo interpreters choosing this type of performance.

APPENDIX A

EVENT DESCRIPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN FORENSIC ASSOCIATION

Prose Interpretation

A selection or selections of prose material of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings and poetry are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Dramatic Duo

A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. This material may be drawn from stage, screen or radio. This is not an acting event; thus, no costumes, props, lighting, etc., are to be used. Presentation is from the manuscript and the focus should be off-stage and not to each other. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including an introduction.

Program Oral Interpretation

A program of thematically -linked selections of literary merit, chosen from two or three recognized genres of competitive interpretation (prose/poetry/drama). A substantial portion of the total time must be devoted to each of the genres used in the program. Different genre means the material must appear in separate pieces of literature (e.g., A poem included in a short story that appears only that short story does not constitute a poetry genre). Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including original introduction and/or transitions.

Drama Interpretation

A cutting which represents one or more characters from a play or plays of literary merit. This material may be drawn from stage, screen or radio. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

Poetry Interpretation

A selection or selections of poetry of literary merit, which may be drawn from more than one source. Play cuttings and prose works are prohibited. Use of manuscript is required. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes including introduction.

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APPENDIX B

EVENT DESCRIPTIONS OF THE NATIONAL FORENSIC ASSOCIATION

Prose

The contestant will present a program of prose literature. Original introductory comments and transitional remarks are permitted. Programs may consist of single or multiple selections. Plays are not permitted. Manuscripts are required. Maximum 10 minutes.

Poetry

The contestant will present a program of poetic literature. Original introductory comments and transitional remarks are permitted. Programs may consist of single or multiple selections. Manuscripts are required. Maximum 10 minutes.

Dramatic Duo

A cutting from a play, humorous or serious, involving the portrayal of two or more characters presented by two individuals. This is not an acting event. Thus, costumes, props, etc., are not permitted. Presentation must be from manuscript and focus should be off stage. Maximum 10 minutes.

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