

A Student's Perspective

by

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One of the perks of being in the open division in the state of Washington is the opportunity to judge novices. Don't get me wrong, I'd much rather be moved to tears or laughter by a Nationals interp veteran, but there is something irresistible about watching "The Newbies" stumble through their first impromptu rounds, or speed read their half-page debate cases. Of course, as one of their first judges, I am also in a position to gently correct and inform them of debate etiquette, and generally they are pretty good about remembering to wait until the speaker is finished to enter or leave the room or ask a question. However, at our district's first tournament of the year, I met some slightly more distressing breaches of courtesy.

I judged a section of novice orators who nervously listened to each other and gave their two-minute speeches nicely enough until the first controversial topic was introduced. I noticed a cell phone came out, watched heads go down, and felt the atmosphere of the room twist into condescending boredom. When the speaker was finished, only two or three of the other competitors clapped. The girl with the cell phone remained wrapped in her texting and barely gave the remaining speeches a glance. I diplomatically urged her to cease, explaining on her ballot that – particularly at the first tournament of the season – we support each other and give the other speakers the same respect they give us.

In my next round I made sure to clearly tell all competitors and observers to turn off their phones, and although one rang anyways the owner looked anything but indifferent and I felt confident it was an accident and wouldn't happen again.

We've all had rounds where either a competitor's, observer's, or even (God forbid) the judge's phone goes off, and felt that annoyance at their absentmindedness. No one is perfect though, and occasional lapses are to be expected.

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At my season opener, however, I presumed more from the seasoned varsity and JVs against whom I was competing. By a competitor's second or third year it seems logical he or she would have learned debate etiquette, either by personal experience or a coach's reminders. Again, I was surprised and proven wrong. Varsity congress opened with some rough and rusty speeches, and the rest of the room took them in stride which I in turn took to mean they were being respectful. It turns out, the speeches just hadn't become bad enough yet to elicit a response. During a particularly unfortunate speech the speaker gaffed badly, and a few senators quietly

snorted or furiously wrote a few lines in their notes, but I was floored when the Presiding Officer ostentatiously began laughing and made a showy pretense of covering it up with a smirk and some coughs. Later during the second session I was roused out of my note taking by an arm reaching across my desk to a senator two rows away from me. I didn't comment, taking the note-pass to be a one-time permissivity, but when my desk was converted into a note highway during a speech I looked at the senators and asked them to stop so the rest of us in the near vicinity, who were bothered, could concentrate. Since we were in the back of the room I forgave the parliamentarian for not noticing, but I seriously began thinking about how much respect or attention we actually owe to other competitors.

Most of us were taught from an early age to look at people when they talk to us, to acknowledge gifts with a "thank you" and to not interrupt others when they are talking. These are certainly good life skills, and can come in very handy for forming positive first impressions. Is it too much to ask that we carry these skills into debate as well? While a trophy or award might be tantalizing, the point of debate ultimately is to foster and develop communication skills. Part of successful communication is allowing our "opponents" to voice their stance or opinions so we can form accurate rebuttals and show respect for them and their opinions. While we might not agree with someone

or like their voice, dress, or manner of speaking, we still owe them the respect, which in turn we hope they show to us. No one likes debating a speaker who is rude, interruptive, argumentative, and shallow. Speaking from personal experience, judges don't like judging those speakers either. Polite and respectful listening is also vital to increase the confidence of those speakers who, perhaps, we don't find as gifted or interesting as ourselves. Just as having an HI which is hilarious where no one laughs at is demotivating, so too is struggling through a difficult speech while our opponents text or pass notes to their friends.

Judges also play an important role, because ultimately they represent the deciding factor and their demeanor go miles to either foster or decrease confidence in us as speakers. We all have judges we hate, and when I think about the particular traits consistent



This is what we want to avoid.

with those judges on my "dislike list" I find that most of them act bored, uninterested, and/or frostily execute the bare minimum required of them.

Debate isn't perfect, and there will still be rounds, even in varsity, where cell phones ring and competitors (and judges) show bias. However, since forensics is founded on developing the vital skill of communication, we should all try to engage in setting a good

example and striving to respect our peers and acknowledge we all are on this sometimes difficult path together. Each of us can influence the atmosphere of debate, and providing an encouraging environment for new and struggling speakers is crucial to giving them the confidence they need to develop their own communication skills.

And think about it: If you were to find out that stuttering novice with the controversial oratory would go on to become President, would you rather have been the peer who was bored and texting during the speech, or the peer who endured it patiently and clapped at the end to acknowledge the effort?

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