

Can I Shake My Binder?

by Travis Kiger

I was a senior in high school when I first dabbled in a wonderfully foreign mode of performance called Oral Interpretation. I was to hold a binder and read from it—50% of the time. I was not to move my lower body. I was to never act and I was to never...never use the binder as a prop...because that was against the rules. “Well,” I thought, “that’s pretty complicated.” Ten years have gone by since that confusing time, and I’ve heard of lots of rules. Unfortunately, most of these “rules” have been just that...hearsay.

Now, still dabbling in Oral Interpretation (OI), this time as a coach, I still encounter these rules...this time as written by judges of my students and used as a platform for OI protests. I see the comments: “Cannot move lower body.” “May not pop.” “This is not an acting event.” “Not reading 50/50.” “CANNOT USE THE BINDER AS A PROP!” After seeing these comments on ballot after ballot, I decided to look at the actual rules for myself. To my surprise, none of these “rules” were listed in the very handy and accessible organizational handbook. I did find a rule that read, “No props of any kind are permitted with the exception of the speaker’s manuscript.” Well, this led me to think, “Maybe we are meant to use the manuscript as much as possible.” After all, it is the presence and emphasis on this manuscript that inherently prevents oral interspers from acting. As long as the binder is present, the student is exhibiting a presentational mode of performance...where they present, albeit similarly, life experiences and themes, but they do not represent them as an actor would...unless the character presented was holding a binder at the time. When my students have rumbling in their literature, I

tell them to shake the heck outta that binder. This is performing an interpretation of the literature. Why wouldn’t the student use the binder? It’s there. Is shaking it to symbolize rumbling any different than turning the page to symbolize transition? I find that judging competitors by convention, rather than rule, inhibits very important components of our forensic culture: fairness and innovation. As forensics is a capitalistic device of research, these components are the building blocks by which the activity was built, and each is essential to the success of our scholastic competitive oral tradition.

When I discuss such bylaws with fellow coaches, I often hear, “Well, the rules are subject to interpretation.” But I don’t think they are at all. Certainly, interpretations can be derived from the rules by applying practiced conventions...but this gets dangerous. When coaches apply convention as rule in determining round outcome, students get hurt. Challenging or penalizing the outcome of a student’s performance based on a convention creates an unfair system. The conventions are not taught in all classrooms, and the students only have the rules to go by. We can only responsibly judge performances using the rules given. If you are a coach that has only experienced this activity through an oral passing down of conventions, then perhaps it is time to dust off that old internet and search the NFL and CFL bylaws.

As many of us have been involved in this activity since the beginning of forever, we have certainly seen some amazing things, perhaps even astonishing ourselves once in a while. One of the moments that got me hooked on forensics is when I first saw a student do something that made me think, “Wow! That was cool!” We are constantly

looking for new ways to communicate with each other. And we compete so that we can capitalize on this amazing marketplace of ideas we call forensics. This exchange of creative capital can only move forward with the support of innovation. Each year, new students are thinking of performance devices that I never knew existed. They are reading the rules and testing them. They are pushing competitive performance to the limit. This warms and inspires me. Focus on innovation pushes our students to think beyond what has been done before. It pushes them to think beyond what they once thought was possible. When we enforce old performance conventions, we stifle this innovative spirit and we narrow the potentially amazing marketplace of ideas.

As we move forward in forensics together, and old conventions dissipate into washes of myth, I hope we continue to focus on education. I hope that coaches will join me in allowing conflicting conventions to “play out in the round” by rewarding performances of merit with accolade, rather than punishing them with reprimand. I hope we engage this wonderfully subjective activity with honorable consideration for the rules, and not contempt armed with convention. I hope that when your own student asks, “May I shake my binder?” you answer, “Yes. Shake the heck outta that thing.” ■

About the Author

Travis Kiger has been a forensic coach since 2000. He is currently in his fourth year coaching at Nova HS, FL. He also coaches at the Florida Forensic Institute. As a student, Kiger competed at Fountain View HS in LA and at Louisiana State University.