# THE CATCH-PHRASE IN THE WRY

# by Kristen Drolshagen, Manu Hegde, and Doug Wilkins

Sometimes we really wish we weren't "live," sometimes we wish we were on Memorex. This little phenomenon is particularly true when we open our mouths and cliches, bromides, and pat profundities spill out like so many sad clowns from a grimy Volkswagen. If only we were carving out our existences on videotape: we could rewind the good parts, fast-forward past the colossally humiliating, and we could edit and revitalize our impromptu utterances.

Since the majority of us do not have the ability to "rewind and tape over ourselves," it becomes somewhat imperative that we don't sound like a standard-issue defensive lineman from Generic State U. when we are called upon to speak impromptu. What follows are a few stabs at instruction in this not-so-martial art.

To begin with, we are going to assume that the majority of you have, via operant behavior if not common sense, some working familiarity with what does and does not "fly" in impromptu. We will take it for granted that you know that only a first-time neophyte artlessly starts the impromptu speech with the assigned topic; we will automatically assume that you know better than to tell a five-minute story about sitting on the back porch of your grandma's house eating cake and drinking lemonade; we will not insult you by noting that "a shopping list" is not an acceptable method of organizing the impromptu speech in you lil' pointy head.

"So what works?" We hear you sneer.
To answer your bit of skepticism, we suggest that a few myths need to be dispelled.

Myth #1: Impromptus are miniextemps.

Impromptu is to extemp what foxbats are to Clydesdale drafthorses. Both are mammals (warm-blooded, bear live offspring, etc.), but they have few traits in common. The topics alone are different enough that impromptu is bound to act differently from its current-event intensive cousin.

Myth #2: Impromptus are "Dull City."

Sure, videotapes of one final or another may reveal people playing a defensive, no-mistakes-in-the-Super Bowl strategy, but the road to the National finals, but the road to the National finals usually involves a great deal of risk-taking, wit, color, and creativity. There's nothing wrong with

being entertaining.

Myth #3: (The Big One) Impromptu prep lasts five minutes.

Balderdash! Bilge! Blasphemy! Impromptu prep lasts (has lasted) as long as you have lasted. Unless you are a member of one of the minor food groups, you have a few experiences, you have read the backs of a few cereal boxes, you have learned a few things which are more interesting than the standard fare of an afternoon with Oprah. You never know what you will use, but much of what you know is useful. Maybe you will quote Pericles or John Lennon or your mom. Maybe you will recall something you learned during a short and ill-fated stint with the Brownies. Impromptu prep started over a decade ago, at least.

So much for the incantations to break way to let your audience know this! Any To begin with, we are going to asthe voodoo notions. What ingredients will good impromptu speaker develops favorthat the majority of you have, via opimprove the impromptu brew? ites like this, one hopes.

Eye of Newt: Tell a Story (or Two)

Ever since our ancestors were swinging by their tails from trees, members of the human race have enjoyed a good story (sitcoms are another matter). Stories make a good lead-up to a topic, stories build up the body of a speech, they keep the audience from wondering if spaghetti is going to be on the menu tonight. On our squad we constantly swap stories, look for especially good ones, and, best of all, argue over which ones are the most insightful, have an impact, teach a lesson, have a moral. Learn stories and analogies. Store them in your cerebrum (or wherever). People who criticize using "canned" introductions (or whatever) don't know what they are talking about. Really, there is nothing wrong with using things you have learned. WE prepare for every other event, impromptu should be no different. Besides which, there's nothing wrong with being entertaining.

Toe of Frog: Memorize Your Topic.

It's easier than it sounds. Your mind works faster than you might imagine. You will have plenty of prep time. Honest

Wool of Bat: Learn Quotes.

They don't all have to come from Bartlett's. Probably they shouldn't all come from FM rock stations either. Maybe they should be profound or something.

Tongue of Dog: Avoid Talking about Yourself.

A teenager should, as a general rule, avoid talking about himself/herself, or MTV,

or hairspray.

Scale of Dragon: Give Us Some Historical Examples.

These should be significant enough to impart some kind of lesson, but they should also be entertaining enough to keep interest. The trick here is to demonstrate some prowess in academia while still keeping your judge entertained enough to keep him from fantasizing about you being overwhelmed by attack dachshunds prior to your second main point.

Tooth of Wolf: Read Voraciously, Remember Selectively.

If you have actually read a book with a title such as The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind by Julian Jaynes, by all means, find a way to let your audience know this! Any good impromptu speaker develops favorites like this, one hopes.

Root of Hemlock: Commit Some Organizational Patterns to Memory.

Some people, the bulk of them being cute little thirteen-year-olds with nicknames like "Twinky," figure that "past, present, future" is the only way to go here. Yeah, and the monorail is the only ride at Disneyworld. There are many ways to organize information into the classic "three main points" format.

Make the Gruel Thick and Slab: Use a Binding Metaphor.

Ideally, your opening story example is something to which you can return (without using the services of the impromptu equivalent of the crosstown bus). Beyond that, a truly artful impromptu carries that same metaphor throughout the speech (Example: the topic is "I Am Joe's Edsel," so your three main points are "the chassis, the engine, the wrecking yard"). Surely, this will enhance your chances in a round against a kid like Twinky.

There's nothing wrong with being entertaining.

We like impromptu. It is not unlike the Olympic 100 meters: whoever gets out of the blocks in the best shape usually finishes well, too. Impromptu types, like sprinters, need to practice to "stay in shape." Impromptu provides aerobics for the mind.

(Drolshagen and Hegde made the National final round in Impromptu. Wilkins was their coach.)

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# OFF THE WALL IMPROMPTU

# by Martha Kennedy

I have been experimenting this year with some new techniques to encourage impromptu skills on a beginning level with exciting success. I begin with several basic premises: first, that teenagers want more than anything not to embarrass themselves in front of a group of their peers; second, every student can and will learn to do the activity; third, every student does have ideas and thoughts to share; fourth, no one wants to share in an atmosphere of hostility or heavy criticism.

A beginning speech class should be built around an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance. This attitude makes students feel supportive of each other and helps the nervous student do his best. A safe, encouraging climate must be the aim from the first day, to set the scene for the impromptu unit. I ask each student to put in writing a one page paper about his philosophy of life. I keep this assignment very general to encourage a great variety of answers, and I try to explain that something of their personality and philosophy should be included in their impromptu speeches.

I am sure every speech teacher begins with suggestions such as Past/ Present/Future; Child/Teenager/Adult; Problem/Solution/Better Solution. My next step in teaching, however, instead of going for the eager volunteer, is to ask everyone to get out a pencil and paper and step to the edges of the room. We have used a small school auditorium instead of the classroom to begin this exercise. I stand in the middle of the room, ask for absolute silence, give an abstract noun, and ask for two minutes of thinking silence. At first, students are insecure about the silence which seems to be much more than two minutes, but then I say to stop thinking and begin speaking, talking to the wall. It was a great surprise to me that the first time I tried this, they actually followed my directions exactly, and the the stop watch and told them to come check their time when they were done, and sit down to write a critique of their first impromptu. In the critique they were to write down if they included a catchy opening, stated the assigned topic, a forecast, two or three main

points and an ending which tied up with the opening.

Eventually, the logical next step was to set up partners around the room and have the second impromptu listened to by only one person who wrote a similar, detailed critique, then traded places and did his own speech. The obvious result of this activity was that in less than 15 minutes, everyone had organized and tried the activity in a non-threatening way. Of course, there are some who are two self-conscious to talk to the wall for 5 minutes, but even one minute is a step forward, and the "off-the-wall" (excuse the pun) format of the activity makes it fun and different and positive. In short, when the times comes for speeches in front of the class, the fears are lessened and the ideas and personality starts coming buzz of speeches was all around me. I ran through. I am not saying every speech is fantastic or competitive, but the skills being practiced are invaluable, and the enthusiasm generated is contagious.

> (Martha Kennedy, Redlands (CA) HS, coached the 1989 and 1995 Impromptu champions.)

# IMPROMPTU

## by Shirley Keller

Impromptu is a spontaneous event. It is a speech that is developed in a very short time, and as such, the polish and smoothness of other speeches is not expected in this speech.

#### Preparation:

- 1. All of your planning is done in your head. If you want to sit while preparing or walk around, it is up to you.
- 2. Pick one of the three topics quickly -- base it on your personal knowledge. Once you decide, don't change!
- 3. Now, develop a general thesis statement. Decide what main idea you want to tell your audience.
- 4. Next, pick out two or three points to develop your thesis. You may want to use one of the following types:
  - a. Problem-Solution
  - b. Effect-Causes
  - c. Past-Present-Future
  - d. Mysclf-My neighborhood/My

Friends-Mankind

- e. City-State-National-International
- f. Pendulum Swing -- Show one extreme and the other extreme
- g. Journalistic -- What, Where, When, How, and Why
- h. Situation -- Pros-Cons
- i. Impact -- Politically, Socially, Economically
- j. Need-Plan-Advantages
- 5. Decide on an attention getting device for your introduction. Stories, illustrations, quotations, are always good.
- 6. Use remaining time to think of specific examples for each point in the thesis.

## Speech Format:

An Impromptu follows the same format as other speeches.

- 1. INTRODUCTION -- include attention getting device and thesis.
- 2. BODY Discuss main points. Give examples, facts, stories. Always expand and

prove your ideas but don't wander.

3. CONCLUSION - Simple summary with an effective ending sentence.

### Practice:

- 1. Read to find out current events.
- 2. Get ideas from quotation books.
- 3. Read the little stories in Reader's Digest. You can get great ideas.
- 4. Think of possible topics, write down thesis statements, then deliver the speech to a willing listener.
- 5. Practice giving speeches doing the organization in your head. Always use just the two minutes.
- 6. Practice, practice, practice. This event takes as much advance preparation as any other speech event.

(Shirley Keller is California Coast NFL Chair and host of the 1990 Nationals.)

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