

An Introduction to Extemporaneous Commentary



Event Description

Extemporaneous Commentary is a public speaking event where students draw topics on a range of societal, political, historic, or popular interest and in 20 minutes prepare a five minute speech which responds to the selected prompt. Students may consult articles and evidence during their preparation time. During the speech itself students are seated behind a desk or table and provide perspective on the given topic. Typically students advocate for a particular position, argument, or opinion during their five minutes, citing sources in the development of the speech for support.

Considerations for Commentary

While most students in Commentary are interested in current events, often the topics have a unique twist or perspective based upon the wording or phrasing. Participants in this event may exhibit creativity or exercise their sense of humor as a result. A prompt could be a question, such as “Who’s afraid of the big bad unions?”, or a single word, such as “Oprah.” Students in Commentary should read widely, from news articles to editorials and columns, with a variety of different sources expressing a range of opinions. In addition to current events, Commentary students often enjoy history, philosophy, popular culture, and discussing social issues.

Traits of Successful Commentators


When considering what event you should choose, or which direction to point a student when selecting an

event, here are some traits of successful Commentary students to keep in mind:

- Enjoys discussion of current events
- Willing to argue a range of social and political issues
- Dynamic verbal delivery skills
- Passionate in expressing opinions
- Open-minded
- Confident
- Engages an audience

Samples of Past Commentary Prompts

- The Final Glass Ceiling
- World War I, Meet The Year 2014
- Talented People or Talentless Pretenders
- The Rogue States and Their Leaders
- Education...Schmeducation
- The Wild, Wild World of Sports
- Shhh! Mother Earth Speaks!
- Political blunders, bleeps, and boo-boos

Learn More! The National Speech & Debate Association is the leading provider of competitive & educational resources to aid students and coaches as they explore our competitive events. For Extemp Commentary, we have videos of past national final round performances. We have a full-length textbook on Extemporaneous Speaking with many exercises and practices that can be cross-applied to Commentary. We also have a webinar specifically designed for comparing Commentary and Extemporaneous Speaking, in addition to many other general competition and coaching resources, such as webinars, activities for class or practice, and more! 

Find Your Voice

Through extemporaneous commentary, I was provided an experience that taught artful presentation and intense competition, and introduced me to countless brilliant individuals - an experience that culminated in one of the grandest moments of my life, a national championship.”

— Will Thompson, Association Alum

Supplemental and Consolation Events Guide

Extemporaneous Commentary



Basic Understandings

Extemp Commentary, often simply called Commentary, is an original speech created as a result of a prompt such as a question, statement, or single word/short phrase. Topics for the prompt are drawn from historic, social, political, and popular contexts. Students report to a preparation room where all of the Commentators gather at tables, set out their files, and await their turn to draw prompts. A staff member in the prep room calls out student codes based upon a pre-assigned speaker order. When a student's code is called, the student will approach the draw table and take three prompts. The student will then select one of those, return the other two, and prepare for 20 minutes to deliver a speech responding to the chosen prompt. When prep time is up, the student reports to the competition room to deliver a 5 minute speech.

Students may access research brought with them to the tournament during the preparation period. Research may take paper or electronic form. During preparation time, students review their files on the prompt selected and outline arguments that will be made throughout the speech. Some students outline with notecards; others use legal pads. Students should document the source of their research on their notes so that they can cite the materials while they speak.

Students must present from a seated position and typically speak with a table or desk in front of them. The emphasis of Commentary is centered upon advocacy and argumentation. Much like a TV news commentary or editorial, students present an opinion or viewpoint which takes a position on the topic presented and defends that position with analysis and supporting material. The speech is presented from memory.

Research

Students should read widely and file articles frequently, both on topics of personal interest as well as on issues that they struggle to understand. Because the topics are so diverse and can be framed in many ways, students should keep up the news by reading print or online versions of various newspapers and magazines. Commentators should spend considerable time reviewing



both editorials (position of a publication, editor, or editorial board) and columns (opinion pieces written by columnists). Students may encounter the phrase “op-ed” for opinion or editorial sections of websites and print material. Columnists in particular often focus their writing on specific issues such as education, the environment, or government policy. Students not only learn a lot about issues but also identify effective means of establishing an opinion and supporting it. Students should take care to read international sources from all parts of the globe to examine a wide array of perspectives and ideas.

There are various methods to organizing team Commentary files depending upon the format chosen. Students should file news articles and opinion pieces from reputable newspapers, magazines, and electronic resources. Students may not access the Internet while they are in prep; thus, all articles must be printed or stored on a laptop prior to entering the room. If a service such as Dropbox is used for digital files, all of the online files must be synced with the downloaded versions prior to the start of the tournament.

Students should cite sources during their speeches. Typically, the name of the source and date are a minimal requirement, although sometimes speakers may want to provide additional source credibility. For example, “I agree with Janet Yellen, chair of the Federal Reserve, who argues in a column in *The New York Times* of September 6, 2014, that even more job creation is needed to....”

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Structural Components

As there is such a range of prompts used in Commentary, students have a great degree of freedom in terms of choices they may make for a given speech. Although sources are used to support the students' ideas, the focus is on advancing a perspective and providing strong arguments for that point of view.

Let's look at an example to see how we might be able to structure a Commentary. We'll use the prompt of "France and Germany: BFFs." This prompt clearly wants the student to examine the relationship between the two countries. However, within that prompt there are many different perspectives that could be forwarded. A student might look at their political impact on Europe and argue that, indeed, these two countries are destined to be best friends forever. Another student might argue that they have not been best friends in the past and that their relationship will eventually dissolve. Still another might argue that they are really "frenemies" based upon a need to appear as friends in public but in fact many of their economic policies are not in alignment with each other.

Any of these perspectives can be advanced provided students provide arguments in support of their position. Let's take the "frenemies" response. A student might argue in the first point that France needs to be friends with Germany due to Germany's powerful economy and political clout. The student might argue in the second point that they will in reality be enemies as long as they take opposing views on so many economic and foreign policy issues, such as austerity measures and Europe's role in conflicts such as those in the Middle East.

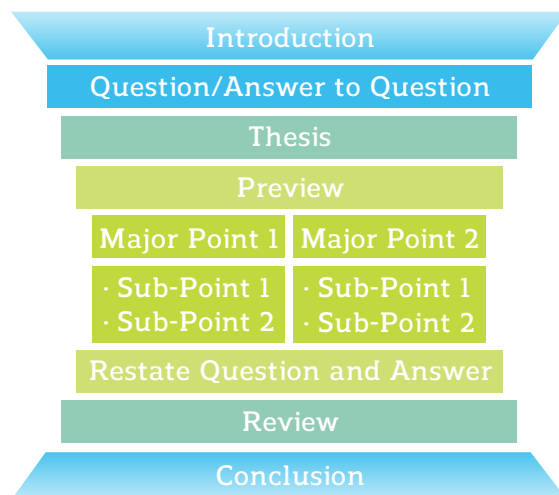
Students are not judged on how "right" their perspectives are; instead, students are evaluated based upon their ability to create a strong thesis with appropriate arguments in their sub-points and sufficient evidence to back up their claims.

Organizing

Most Commentary speeches feature an introduction that gains the audience's attention, sets up the speech, and transitions to the prompt the student selected.

This is followed by a thesis statement for the speech which expresses the opinion being advanced by the Commentator. Speeches typically have a preview statement after the introduction that summarizes the key points the student will make in the body of the speech. Students then organize the body of the speech with major points and sub-points. Speeches also typically feature a review of the major points, a restatement of the prompt and thesis, and a conclusion. Students should practice with a stopwatch to determine how long they should speak on each section. Each major point should be roughly equal to another to keep the speech balanced.

Here is a sample outline:



Standing it Up/Practicing

Commentators need to start with the basics. Beginners should spend considerable time reading credible news sources on a range of topics. Beginners should receive practice prompts and take the time to review them, talk through potential responses, and focus on creating excellent thesis statements.

Beginners could start practices with a notecard and perhaps focus on one major point. A great beginning strategy for Commentary speakers is to deliver their first speech with unlimited prep time. Following this presentation, coaches can gradually reduce the amount of prep time used until the speaker reaches 20 minutes.

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It is easy for students to be intimidated by Commentary. As with any skill, practicing will take some of the anxiety out of approaching the event. Students should not wait to stand it up (or, in the case of Commentary, sit it down) -- if the student knows a lot about a particular topic of interest, speech practices can take place right away. Students do not have to know everything about every possible prompt to get started. After a number of practices, students can spend time working on language selection, smoothing out their verbal delivery, and filling in the gaps of their knowledge base.

Performance Tips

Due to the nature of Commentary, competitors will find that each round is unique. Some questions are incredibly challenging, either due to the specific wording or lack of background knowledge of the topic for the extemper, and others seem incredibly easy. Every competitor will encounter a round where there simply are no files on a given topic. Commentary speakers need to accept that some rounds are excellent and others are not and to learn from every speech. Some advice for students:

Ask questions. If you don't understand a topic area or prompt, be sure to ask coaches, teachers, and teammates. The unique, often "tongue-in-cheek," phrasing of

Commentary prompts may lead to some interesting points of analysis. Ask if you are unsure!

Take notes. If your files are missing something important, make a note of it and either fill the gaps or talk to your teammates so that everyone is on the same page.

Practice language. Commentators often use the same types of language for transitional material. Practice with this language so that you aren't struggling to come up with something fresh in every speech. As you gain experience, you can mix it up, but at the outset, just get comfortable with the format of the speech and the language to get you from point A to point B.

Line-by-line. Save your notes from your speeches and revisit them. Give sections of speeches, or entire speeches, over and over again to improve argument quality and language considerations. If you struggle with vocalized pauses and fillers, such as uhms and likes, you can redo lines of your speech repeatedly. Memorize one point of your speech at a time so that you get comfortable with the process of memorizing both the argument as well as source citations.

Resources

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