

COACHING COMMUNICATION STYLE - VERBAL

Every speaker has his or her own style, and that's a good thing. Whether you try to or not, you will have your own unique signature as a speaker. This offers a bit of choice, however. On the one hand, you want to have a distinctive style. On the other hand, you don't want to be so distinctive that it becomes a distraction to the judge. Style is part of substance. Your body language, volume, speed, variety all say something about your credibility. Some qualities have proven more effective in general than others.

Clarity

Effective communication depends importantly on your clarity. Your style choices are crucial in determining the clarity of your communication. Volume, speed, variance, language choices are all factors in your clarity. Start by understanding yourself what you want to say. Use concise statements – short and to the point – whenever you can. Limit the jargon and technical language when required by your audience.

Volume

If you are too loud your judge may resist your message and shut down their listening. If you are too soft it becomes too difficult for you judge to pay close attention. Your room may have bad acoustics based on the room size or shape. You want to sound energetic and enthusiastic, which requires some volume. You also want to raise your voice sometimes for emphasis. You can often look to your judge for feedback on volume.

Pitch

Your voice can be so high that your judge finds it grating. It may be so low that it becomes distorted. If you have just one tone (monotone) you become boring. You also want to avoid a repetitive inflection of rising or falling as your sentence goes on. Relaxing will help your pitch. Don't have a fake "debate voice" or inflection. Be yourself and be conversational in pitch. If your pitch is too high, project from your stomach, not your throat or nose.

Rate

When you first start debating you may be "too slow." This "problem" generally takes care of itself as you become more experienced. Most debaters go too fast for their own clarity. They go so fast they begin to garble their words. Speed without clarity is harmful to your ability to persuade the judge. Debaters often fail to recognize that while they can understand 100% of their own spoken words, the judge understands a much smaller percentage. Most debaters would actually effectively communicate more ideas per minute if they slowed down a little bit.

Articulation

The concept of articulation refers to the distinctiveness or clarity of the words that you say. Some times articulation problems are caused by a debater trying to go too fast. Other times it is due to a mush-mouth. The easy solution to this problem, besides slowing down a bit, is opening your mouth wider and putting effort into finishing your words.

Pronunciation

It is important to have correct pronunciation – saying your words correctly. It can greatly undermine your credibility if you don't pronounce your words right, or you confuse two words that sound alike. Don't over-reach on your vocabulary. Listen to how other speakers say certain words. You can also look up in a dictionary to see how words are pronounced.

COACHING COMMUNICATION STYLE – NON-VERBAL

Think of the first day of school. You're sitting in the classroom waiting for your teacher to show up. When that teacher walks in the room you look at her. Before she says anything you make judgments. How well is she dressed? Does she seem confident, energetic? Does she seem friendly and smile? Does she look right at the class before she starts?

These are just a few examples of how speakers communicate without saying a word. Non-verbal traits are crucial for conveying honesty, respect, and competence. As important as first impressions are, many times they are non-verbal. The way judges evaluate debaters follows this pattern.

Appearance

It is important to have your own sense of style, and that includes the way you dress. On the other hand, you do not want your appearance to be distracting to the judge. If you are underdressed the judge will think you aren't professional and don't take the activity seriously. If you have poor hygiene (messy hair, unshaven) it will convey the same lack of respect. What do you think of your teacher on that first day of school if they walk in without combing their hair?

Gestures

Speakers are told – you must have gestures. As a result, many gestures are forced and look stiff, they are poorly timed, they seem random and unconnected to the message, and gestures can become repetitive and even distracting. Despite these concerns, debaters should not fear gestures. As long as the gestures are natural, modest, and connected to their message, they can be an effective way to underline what they are saying.

Body Language

The way you stand, walk and move during your speech conveys information to the judge. If you seem hesitant getting prepared to speak, it sets a bad tone. If you seem eager to finish your speech and sit down, it makes the judge think you are dissatisfied with what you said. If you slouch, pace nervously, or sway, it sends a bad signal to the judge or is distracting. Debaters should stand up straight. Walk up to the podium and back from the podium in an upright, confident way.

Eye Contact

In our culture, eye contact is one of the most important aspects of communication. How do you react to a sales person who looks down at their shoes when they are talking to you? What do you think of your teacher if they look above the class the entire time? In our culture, evasive eye contact is interpreted as lying or insincerity. Debaters should establish eye contact at the start and conclusions of their speech, as well as many times in-between. This enables you to make a connection with the judge. Eye contact is also a crucial way for a debater to receive feedback.

Facial Expressions

Some debaters think they need to be a stone-face to convey seriousness. Others take facial expressions to such an extreme they are phony. As with most other "rules" of communication, just being your normal self is the best strategy with facial expressions. Debaters should convey a sense of friendliness and goodwill by smiling before they start to speak. Don't force your facial expressions.

12 MINUTES UP FOR GRABS: COACHING CROSS EXAMINATION

Cross-examination, also referred to as "CX" or "cross-ex," is a question and answer period that follows every constructive speech where the speaker answers questions about their speech.

The key to effective cross-examination, just like any other part of debate, is hard work and preparation. Those debaters who put considerable thought into their cross-ex strategies will be much more successful much better than those debaters who don't plan ahead for the questions they want to ask. Those who prepare for cross-exam periods will win them, and consequently, more debates. The 12 minutes of CX in the debate are literally up for grabs.

Cross-examination Style

First, stand-up and face the judge. This is an important part of being credible. Second, be forceful and clear. You want the judge to be able to hear every question and answer. Third, maintain eye contact with your judge. They are your target audience. Finally, do not be rude or evasive in cross-examinations. Question and answer sessions reveal more about you as a person (and as an advocate). Judges will be evaluating your personality as much as the content of your questions or answers

Using Cross-Ex for Clarification

Both the affirmative and the negative can **use cross-examination for clarification**. These questions usually are the first ones you would ask in cross-examination. Ask clarification questions first if your partner is relying on that information to help them prepare their upcoming speech. If you need to ask for evidence do so at the start if your partner needs it. Ask for the evidence at the end if it is for you to read. Clarifying questions are important because they allow you to be sure what your opponent is arguing.

Strategy for Cross-Ex

Cross-examination can be used effectively as a **strategic tool to set-up arguments** that you will make later in the debate. Using cross-examination in this manner requires some preparation and pre-round planning. Preparation for cross-ex periods really pays off. Cross-ex can be a very valuable tool for making good arguments even better.

Do not expect your opponents to concede anything important in the cross-ex period.

Matlock is a fictional TV show. Very few debate teams break down and admit that their plan is not topical in the cross-ex. Do not expect concessions. Use the C-X to lead the other team to the edge of the cliff, push them over during your subsequent speech.

Do not dwell on the same point for the entire cross-examination period. Very rarely does it help to spend more than one of the three minutes pursuing a particular line of questioning. Ask your question once or twice and if you are not getting satisfaction from the answers you hear, go ahead and move on. Count on the judge being frustrated with you.

Answer questions fully, but do not be obnoxious about consuming lots of time. Make the C-X period an extension of your earlier speech, with additional explanation, if possible. If you try to be evasive or run on and on your judge will recognize it and reach a negative conclusion.

Finally, **answer and ask questions only for yourself, not your partner**. Don't interrupt your partner's answer just because you think you have a slightly better answer. At most, just write down what you want your partner to say and show it to them. When one partner hogs the cross-ex it undermines the credibility of the other half of the team.

COACHING INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE SPEECHES

Like in most other competitive activities you can get better at debate by practicing between tournaments. Beyond researching, writing blocks and organizing your evidence you can improve your chances for success by practicing your speaking. There are some drills that are designed to improve your speaking skills, others that focus more on the content of the topic.

Speaking drills are for everyone. Debaters from novices to top varsity can benefit from practicing. As some have said, speaking drills are like preparing for a marathon – you don't practice once or twice and then run a marathon. You have to train every day, even after you win a marathon, because there is always another race to run. Get in the habit of doing speaking drills every day. Even 10 minutes a day can make a huge difference.

Speaking Skill Drills

In general, delivery problems are usually caused by a lack of familiarity with your materials. Begin the habit of reading your briefs as you file them. Repeat the practice for important blocks. You also could practice by reading materials that are unrelated to your debate topic. This will help you focus on the mechanics of speaking, not the substance. Start your speeches a little slowly and build up your speed.

Warm up before rounds if you have the time. Read out loud on the way to the tournament in the morning. Find a place at the school before your rounds to read through some blocks.

To correct breathing problems (huge gasps of air) you should practice by breathing at natural pauses in evidence, such as at punctuation. You can also practice by breathing at natural break points in the speech such as after the tag, after a piece of evidence, or between arguments. Practice breathing from your stomach not your throat or nose. Stand up as straight as possible.

To correct enunciation problems you should practice by reading your evidence slowly and exaggerate hitting all the syllables. Slowly build up your speed. Have someone listen to you and see if they can understand every word you say. Open your mouth wider, to an exaggerated degree.

To correct choppy speech try reading ahead a few words further. Push yourself to have your eyes read further and further ahead of what your mouth is saying. Ignore any stutters or stumbles, don't bother going back to repeat a word you might have messed up. Use a natural voice pattern. Try slowing your speaking a little bit.

Record and review your speeches, both audio and video if you can. Download the video to your MP3 player or computer to watch it over and over to learn your areas for improvement.

Rebuttal Reworks

For advanced debaters, you can practice the substance of debate rounds by **reworking your speeches from previous tournament** or practice rounds. Take the flow of your old speech and completely rewrite your entire speech. Add arguments and evidence. Typically you will find that you can give the same speech in much less time. If that is the case, write out more arguments (don't repeat anything) and give the speech again. You can do this over and over until you've added a huge amount of new arguments. This practice technique enables you to see your greatest potential. Every once in a while you'll have a debate at a tournament that is a repeat of a previous round. If you have practiced your rebuttal from that debate you'll be awesome the second time around. Do as many rebuttal reworks as you can.