

An Introduction to Impromptu (IMP)



Event Description

Impromptu is a public speaking event where students have seven total minutes to select a topic, brainstorm their ideas, outline the speech, and finally, deliver the speech. The speech is given without notes and uses an introduction, body, and conclusion. The speech can be light-hearted or serious. The speech can be based upon prompts that range from nursery rhymes, current events, celebrities, organizations, and more.

Considerations for Impromptu

Students who do Impromptu take their prompt and organize a speech following a basic structure. Students consider the use of humor, personal anecdote, historical perspectives, news stories, and logic to help formulate their ideas when preparing the speech. The speech should be easy to follow with a central thesis and supporting points.

Traits of Successful Impromptu Performers

When considering what event you should choose, or which direction to point a student when selecting an event, here are some traits of successful IMP students to keep in mind:

- Spontaneous
- Engaging
- Logical
- Quick Thinker
- Confident
- Knowledgeable

Samples of Past Impromptu Prompts

- When I grow up...
- NFL
- Barack Obama
- Chicago Cubs
- Pepsi v. Coke
- An Apple a Day Keeps the Doctor Away
- Chinese Fortune Cookies
- Political Cartoons
- Happily Ever After
- Money isn't Everything

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 **Impromptu**, we have videos of past national final round performances at the middle and high school levels. Additionally, there are other resources such as webinars, activities for class or practice, and more! Take advantage of the amazing benefits of being a member by using our resources to help you advance yourself in competitive speech and debate activities. Visit www.speechanddebate.org for more information. 

Find Your Voice

Impromptu speaking is like jumping into public speaking head first. It forced quick confidence and helped me grow as a speaker by giving me the skills to prioritize my decision making to prepare an organized and meaningful speech."

— Alex Baranosky, Association Alum

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Basic Understandings

Impromptu is a public speaking event that tests a student's ability to analyze a prompt, process his or her thoughts, organize the points of the speech, and deliver them in a clear, coherent manner. Students' logic is extremely important. They must be able to take an abstract idea, such as a fortune from a fortune cookie, and put together a speech that has a thesis and supporting information.

Research

Students should be knowledgeable about current events. This is true for two reasons in Impromptu speaking. First, prompts are often based upon current events or people and organizations found often in the news. Second, knowledge of current events can assist the student in generating ideas for the speech. Having a solid understanding of what is occurring domestically and abroad would be important. Students should stay up-to-date by watching news or reading sources like *The New York Times*, *The Economist*, *World Affairs*, BBC, and more.

Students can also do research to broaden their understanding of unfamiliar subjects. Given the broad scope of potential Impromptu prompts, it is beneficial to learn about things you are unaware of or uncomfortable with. Ask friends or family to list a bunch of topics they know about that you may not. For example, if a student is not aware of alternative energies, they could research examples. Students could find information on historical events, scientific discoveries, policy options the government is considering, trends in social issues, pop/cultural references, and more. Although sources are not formally cited in Impromptu, students should speak about a range of topics with comfort and credibility.

Structural Components

In an Impromptu round the speaker draws three prompts from an envelope. After drawing the three prompts, the student must select one and begin brainstorming their ideas for the speech. In total, a student has seven minutes. This seven minutes may be divided up by the student however they see fit. For instance, they could brainstorm and outline their ideas for 3 minutes and then deliver a

speech for 4, or brainstorm and outline for 1 minute and speak for 6 minutes. There is no minimum amount of time required for brainstorming and no minimum amount of time for speaking. Therefore, the student should work to develop the best possible structure and reasoning in as short amount of time as possible. Sometimes kids think that it's more impressive to speak for longer, but if the ideas aren't clear or well developed, it can detract from the overall performance.



Organizing

An Impromptu speech follows a basic structure where a student presents an introduction, body, and conclusion.

The introduction is an opportunity for the speaker to grab the audience's attention. This can be done in a number of ways, including a startling fact, relevant humor, current event, or a narrative. After getting the attention of the audience, the speaker should establish a clear thesis that relates to the Impromptu prompt. Finally, the introduction should provide a preview of the points that the speaker is going to cover.

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The body of the speech includes two to three points that are related to the thesis. The points should be logically developed with supporting details. The supporting details do not need to be backed up with quotes or evidence, like other events, because students do not have access to research. Therefore, a student's logical reasoning with analytics is sufficient in most cases. The student should identify a claim and provide a justification for why that's true before telling us why it matters (an argument!).

For example, let's say that your prompt was the Chicago Cubs. You don't have to be a baseball fan to know that the Cubs have long struggled to play great baseball and are often the topic of jokes. You might create a thesis related to how important it is to persevere in the face of adversity. You might use arguments and examples from history where perseverance mattered more than winning. Tie that back to the Cubs fans sticking with their team through tough times. You might argue in another point about how important it is to maintain a sense of humor in the face of adversity. Certainly Cubs fans have to maintain a sense of humor about their ballclub.

The conclusion of the speech provides a wrap up of what the speaker discussed. The conclusion should tie into the attention grabbing device, re-establish the thesis, and remind the audience of the main points that were addressed.

Standing it Up/Practicing

Delivering a speech on the spot, or with limited time to prepare your ideas, can be intimidating. Therefore, it's important to keep in mind that our brains are a muscle. The more time you practice memorizing, or simply memorize things, the better you become. Memorizing is a process, and getting comfortable with such a short amount of time to memorize your outline will get easier with time.

There are a number of activities you can do to practice. First, naturally, is to do practice Impromptu rounds. Have a coach or teammate give you sample prompts and time your prep and speech as if you were in a real round. Make notes of what went well and what could have been improved upon. Practice a wide range of prompts so that

you can be prepared for anything you might come across in a tournament. If there is an area that you are really comfortable with speaking on, practice that first and then get into the areas you are less confident.



Next, you can do improvisation games. Talk to interpretation students or coaches, or a drama teacher, to get ideas. One popular exercise is to have someone give you a random character, prop, and situation. For example, a doctor with a can of soup gets a parking ticket. The goal is to tie all of the elements together to create a story in a short period of time. You can also add a partner to make it more fun. The more you can prepare for spontaneous exchanges where you are thinking on your feet, the better.

Finally, think about common threads you can use on multiple topics. Is there a personal story that you can share and tie into multiple prompts or topic areas? Is there a statistic that can have various meanings? Is there a historical example that has different implications? Is there a book you love with an array of themes? It may be possible to think of a wide range of potential examples that you could easily adapt to various topics.

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It is important, especially after you have done Impromptu for awhile, not to “can” your speeches, even if by accident. Canning is the process by which students walk into a round with a speech fully prepared and just try to tie that complete speech to the topic. Canning speeches is a practice which goes against the purpose of the event, which is to have students think on their feet and respond specifically to ideas that can be derived from the prompt. There is a difference between preparation and canning. Students who practice Impromptu speaking understand their arguments and examples well enough to choose them wisely, based upon the specific prompt, and talk about that prompt throughout the speech.

Performance Tips

It may sound cliché, but confidence is key! If you’ve put the legwork in, you should feel confident in the product you’ve created. Walk into that round with your head held high, ready to show the world what you’ve got! Trust the process of your practice and enjoy the experience.

Pay attention to other performers. Smile, be a warm, inviting audience member. There is nothing worse than getting up to perform and having an audience that either stone faces you or won’t look you in the eye. A majority

of the round is not your speech; therefore, take the opportunity to listen, learn, and support your competitors.

Keep a notebook for between rounds. Sometimes, another person’s performance will inspire you, and it’s a good idea to have a notebook handy to write down new ideas. It’s also nice to know who you competed against in each round. This way, you have a better understanding of who your competition is. When you review your ballots after the tournament, you can go back through your notebook and compare your ballots to your notes.

Between rounds, figure out what room you will be performing in next. Congratulate your competitors on a good performance after the round ends, and make friends during downtime. Be gracious, and keep criticisms of other performers to yourself, even if someone else tries to start a negative conversation.

Resources

The National Speech & Debate Association provides webinars, classroom and practice activities, and final round performances for all members. There are resources specific to Impromptu speaking. Not only that, but the Association offers a number of other public speaking resources that can be beneficial to Impromptu speakers. From persuasion to delivery strategies to argument construction, there are unparalleled resources to assist member students and coaches.