

You Be The Judge

By Mark Kudryk

You've just arrived at your first speech contest in the capacity of Chief Judge. For the next 2-3 hours, speeches will be heard, contestants interviewed, ballots counted, and winners announced. How smoothly the event will run will largely depend on you. You're the boss: the Chief Judge. To help you succeed as a Chief Judge, this essay will chronicle a contest, and provide tips on how to make your job easy at a contest.

The first step before arriving at the contest is to be prepared. Once you arrive at the contest, you will be constantly interrupted with questions from the organizers and contestants; you'll be trying to find the judges to brief them; and you'll be making sure that the contest is in order. Before you arrive, you should have done the following: reviewed the rules thoroughly so that you know them cold; recruited judges and organized your judges briefings; obtained all of the necessary forms and made sufficient copies of them (back-ups too); and pre-filled out the Notification of Contest Winners form (but not the winners names yet). Do not expect a photocopier to be present at the contest. How a contest unfolds can be unpredictable; the more advanced preparation you do, you'll be better able to handle the situation you encounter. As Chief Judge, you need to be the corner stone of the contest – the one with a steady hand on the wheel - because some contests will have the appearance of being run by the Swiss, others by the Greeks¹.

A Chief Judge needs volunteer judges to effectively run the contest. You should endeavour to have all of your judges recruited as part of your advanced preparation. If one or two judges fail to show up, you'll be able to easily draft someone at the contest, but drafting an entire slate at the contest is too much to expect.

Recruiting volunteers takes time and effort, and there are no shortcuts around this fact. The most effective way to recruit volunteers is to call people, or ask them in person. People are more likely to say yes than no when speaking with someone directly, and more likely to forget about your email they received with the 10 other daily spam-mailings. Once you've recruited your judges, then use email for reminders.

The commitment of your volunteers will guarantee the success of your contests. Volunteers are contributing their time and efforts out of a sense of community involvement; volunteers are not paid. Always treat your volunteers like gold, and thank them often. A "Thank You" is the acknowledgement that volunteers want. Thank them when you first recruit them; thank them in your reminders; thank them when they arrive at the contest; thank them when you brief them; thank them at the end of the contest; you can never over thank a volunteer. This will contribute to a good rapport with your volunteers, which will come in handy if you need to ask them again to judge for a later contest.

¹ Please refer to any news article on the 2004 Olympic games preparations in Athens.

The second step is to show up at the contest well ahead of when it starts. Giving yourself extra time will allow you to set up and get yourself collected, before everyone else starts to interrupt you. After arriving, you should find a table or area that you can use as your “office”. You’ll be able to spread out contest forms here, conduct the judges’ briefings, and complete the Notification of Contest Winners forms. Most contests are in the evening, and the host club will have arranged to bring in dinner. Before the majority of the people arrive, have a bite to eat first.

The next step you should find the judges and contestants and introduce yourself. A good rule is to stand near the sign-in table as people arrive. This way, the judges and contestants will effectively find you.

There are only a few things to do when briefing your judges. First, have them read the guidelines on the back of their ballots. Second, remind them they are judging the quality and effectiveness of the speaker, but not the speakers’ opinions. Thirdly, for all contests but the evaluation contest, judges should be vigilant for any plagiarism. You will also need to pick one judge to be the tie-breaking judge. The tie-breaking judge typically has judged before, and therefore will be comfortable in ranking all of the contestants.

Lastly, at the start of each contest, you as Chief Judge will brief the contestants and the audience on the contest rules. To do this, it is important that you know the rules well; most of rules are straightforward, a few are not. The rules briefing should summarize only those rules that are immediately pertinent to the contestants, otherwise your briefing will consume the contest. Reciting the rules is as exciting to the audience as when flight attendants review emergency procedures; the rules are already known by many, and the audience will tend to ignore you. Spice up your briefing by adding in a *neutral* joke or two.

The Chief Judge typically announces the speaking order of the contests during the rules briefing. This task appears simple on the surface, but a lot can go wrong. First, when announcing the order, take the extra time to clearly pronounce each name twice. The judges will use this order on their ballots, and may not have a contest program from which they can read the contestants’ names. Secondly, use *neutral* language to announce the order of a speaker. For example, “The first speaker will be John Doe” is preferable to “The first placed speaker will be John Doe”, or “The fifth speaker will be Jane Doe” is better than “The last speaker will be Jane Doe.” In both examples, the first phrase is neutral, but the second phrase is suggestive. While the nuance may be trivial, it may not be amongst anxious contestants and their supporters. The neutrality principle applies to all of your communications with the audience and contestants.

The location of the timing lights can also be an issue for the contestants. In all of the contests that I’ve attended or presided over, the lights are usually located right in front of the speaking area. But depending on the size of the lights being used (some clubs use small Christmas tree lights), and whether the speaking area is elevated, some contestants may not be able to locate the lights during their speech. It is advisable during your briefing to point out the location of the lights.

The overall goal of the Chief Judge is to maintain fairness, so regardless of the outcome all participants and the audience will consider the results fair. The contestants will have spent many hours preparing for the contest, and their heightened stress level will make them more aware of any irregularities. By being well prepared beforehand, confident in your role, firm in your decisions, and steady and impartial in your actions, the contest will be sure to run smoothly.

Let the contest begin!

Mark Kudryk
Division J Chief Judge, 2003-2004

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