

Speech Contest Judging

A handbook for Toastmasters Speech Contest Judges

Originally published by Toastmasters District 70.

A Judge's Promises

Congratulations on accepting the challenge to be a Toastmasters speech contest judge. We trust that this booklet will help you prepare for the role.

As a judge, you will accept a number of obligations. These can be expressed as a series of promises

To the contestants:

I will be fair, impartial and objective. I will consciously remind myself of the barriers to effective judging and commit to a dedicated performance of my duties.

To Toastmasters International:

I will uphold the reputation of Toastmasters, our District and our officers who depend on my excellence in conducting speech contests. I will avoid bad judging which creates animosity and tarnishes the reputation of Toastmasters.

To the audience:

I will give the audience a good speech contest with fair and unbiased judging. I realise that otherwise the audience may be discouraged from attending or participating in future contests.

To myself:

I, as a Toastmaster, will perform my duties as a contest judge to the best of my ability. I will make well thought-out decisions when judging as part of my own commitment to self-improvement.

To pick a winner:

I will make a confidential decision which I will not under any circumstance discuss with anyone else. I am not there to evaluate speakers at the time so I will not explain or justify my decision to anybody.

Qualities of a Judge

There are five qualities that good judges must display and use if they are to make a wise and informed decision in a Speech Contest.

Judges need to be

- **Accurate**
Good judges are dedicated to making a well thought out decision. They fill out the judging form correctly and total points carefully.
- **Fair**
Good judges are totally impartial. Good judges don't allow friendship, affiliation, age, sex, race, creed, national origin, profession or disapproval of speech topics to interfere with their decision.
- **Trustworthy**
Good judges realise the contestants, contest officials and the audience have entrusted them with the responsibility of selecting the best speaker as the winner. They live up to that trust. Unfortunately, there have been cases where judges have marked down better speakers so a favoured speaker could place. Good judges would never dream of doing such a thing.
- **Knowledgeable**
Good judges know the current contest rules. They study the rules before each contest and they make no exceptions to the rules. They are familiar with the judging form and they know how to judge properly.
- **Good listeners**
Good judges listen carefully to each speaker. They don't daydream or become distracted.

Judging checklist

When you asked to be a judge for a speech contest, this is what you must do:

- **Confirm that you are not or will not be competing in the particular contest at any level.**
- Note the date, time, and place of the contest. Check directions and leave early.
- Take a notepad, pen, pencil and eraser.
- Be on time for the briefing by the Chief Judge. Let the Contest Chairman and Chief Judge know you have arrived. Check if there is any seating allocation for judges. If not, find a suitable position where you are not seated close to other judges.
- If selecting your own seat, go where you can see the lectern but do sit not at the front.
- Attend the briefing with a program and pen. Note the speaking order. Don't talk during the briefing even if you have been to 100 before. Other judges haven't.
- During the contest, listen and look but don't eat, drink or talk. Take notes for each speaker and put in marks on the judging form.
- On completion of each speech, total your marks and compare them with previous speakers. Try not to listen to any conversation around you.
- On completion of the contest, fill in ballot form nominating 1st, 2nd and 3rd, remembering that no ties are permitted. Sign and print your name.
- Tear off the ballot, fold once and hold high in the air to be collected by the counters.
- Sit back and enjoy the rest of the proceedings.
- Note the results and compare them with your own.

The Methodology of Judging

The purpose of Speech Contest Judging is to **PICK A WINNER**, nothing else. That is, to select the speaker who has given the best speech on the day, without deciding whether it was necessarily a good or a poor speech. This is quite different to evaluation. A judge is not at a contest to help speakers. So a judge must not explain, justify, evaluate or advise speakers! A judge's decision must remain **confidential**.

It is very important to understand that speech contest judging is very different from judging events such as gymnastics, ice skating or wine tasting. In those events, performances are judged **in isolation to each other**. This is **standard based judging**. An equivalent in speech contest judging would be to cover up each speaker's marks after they are scored, comparing each speaker's performance to some hypothetical standard of excellence. As this is impractical because we lack such a model, this method of scoring should not be used.

However, it is necessary to have some sort of pre-determined standard based on your experience in order to allocate marks to the first few speakers. This should not be the first speaker, since this may set your scoring too high. But equally, as you are not judging against some absolute standard the exact marks given are not important. For this reason, do not put emphasis on the column headings of Excellent, Very Good, Good and Fair. Rather select points ranges to help you in the comparison task.

What is important is that your scores must be based on comparative (**reference based judging**) and not absolute judgements and thus should indicate relevant differences between speakers in each section of the judging form.

Thus the process of picking a winner consists of comparing performances and deciding which is better, without attempting to rate them.

The Judging Process

Carefully judge each section of the form. Study the form. Think of the sections clearly and individually. Do not let a good delivery influence your judgement in the content section for example or the use of inappropriate language influence your marks elsewhere. At the same time block out personal prejudices as best you can.

Pay special attention to audience reaction and the achievement of speech purpose. The main speech purposes are to inform, persuade, inspire and entertain. So ask yourself, What is the speaker's purpose? That is, What is the speaker talking about and why? You need to do this, because an important part of the judging process is deciding

- Was the speech of interest to this audience? (Something they needed to know or could do something about.)
- How did the audience react to the message?

Sub-total the Content (50% of marks), Delivery (30% of marks) and Language (20% of marks) sections for each speaker. This aids addition and comparison. **You should review your totals and sub-totals after each speaker to be happy about your relative ratings.** In this way you can resolve ties as you are judging. This is the advantage of using a pencil and an eraser.

You should always take plenty of **notes** during the speeches. The aim is to try and record the speaker's outline and organisation. Refer to your notes at the end after totalling, especially if you have a tie or very close scores. This helps you to compare two speakers who you may have scored similarly during the contest but who were separated by a number of other speakers. You should do this note taking even in a simple contest at Club level, because it is excellent practice.

Note - From Division level upwards, judges tend to look for areas where speakers should lose marks in order to sort out winners and losers. In general such higher level contests are mainly decided on differences in the content section.

The Judging Form

A reminder that the purpose of Speech Contest Judging is to **pick a winner**.

It also means making a selection that is compatible with that of other experienced judges officiating in many other contests around the world at the same level. This is best achieved by use of the standard Toastmasters International Judge's Guide, reviewing a speaker's total performance in the **three key areas** of effective speaking.

Content Delivery Language

After making our assessment, it is **good practice to sub-total each of the three areas** to help in the comparative process before then making a final total and comparison.

The Judge's Guide provides **prompts** to assist us in making our assessment. These prompts give clues to the types of questions we should ask ourselves about a speaker's performance as shown below.

1. Content

The substance/purpose of a speaker's message

SPEECH DEVELOPMENT

Structure, Organisation, Support Material

- How was the speech structured?
- Did it have a clearly defined **Opening, Body and Conclusion**?
- How was the speech organised? Was it easy to follow? Did it have a logical sequence?
- Were there natural transitions?
- Was the **Purpose** clear and well defined?
- What support material was there?
- Were facts, examples, illustrations or humour used to enhance the message?
- Was there too much material, overwhelming the audience with facts for example?

EFFECTIVENESS

Achievement of Purpose, Interest, Reception

- What was the purpose? (Inform, Persuade, Inspire, Entertain)
- Was the purpose accomplished?
- Was it of interest to the audience?
- Was it relevant to the audience? Something they should know or could do?
- How did the audience respond? Did they understand the goal?
- Was the nature of the audience/occasion considered in the speech preparation?

SPEECH VALUE

Ideas, Logic, Original Thought

- What ideas were presented?
- Was there a clearly defined message?
- Did the message develop logically? Did it lead to a conclusion?
- Were the ideas original or a re-hash of other material?
- If it was a time worn subject, was it treated in a new way with flair/imagination?
- Was it in good taste?
- Did the message contribute to the listeners' knowledge, their growth, and stimulate their thinking processes?

2. Delivery

The mechanics of presenting the message

PHYSICAL

Appearance, Body Language, Speaking Area

- How did the speaker look? Neat? Professional? Compatible with purpose, adding credibility to message?
- Did the clothes/accessories/colours enhance or detract from the effectiveness?
- How was the stance? Alert, erect, lifeless, swaying?
- How was the speaking area and lectern used?
- Did the body language contradict or reinforce the message?
- Were the gestures effective/meaningless/stilted?
- Did the eye contact cover and hold the audience?
- Were the facial expressions friendly, revealing the emotional side of the speech?

VOICE

Flexibility, Volume

- Did the voice convey the correct feelings/attitude for the message?
- Thus was it **firm** to show strength, **assured** to show confidence, **warm** to convey friendliness, or **pleasing** to win the audience for example?
- Did it have variations of rate and emphasis?
- Was the volume adequate and varied and was the microphone used effectively?

MANNER

Directness, Assurance, Enthusiasm

- Did the speaker appear sincere, concerned for the audience?
- Did the speaker appear confident?
- Did the audience **believe** the message?
- Did the style, pace and demeanour build a link with the audience?
- Were some aspects of the presentation distracting, artificial or stilted?
- Did the speaker show **enthusiasm** for the message?

3. Language

The choice of words and grammatical skill

APPROPRIATENESS

To Speech Purpose and Audience

- Was the language used compatible with the speech?
- Was it compatible with the audience? Did it clarify or confuse?
- Did the word pictures **sell** the speaker's ideas?

CORRECTNESS

Grammar, Pronunciation and Word Selection

- Did the speaker use correct grammar?
- If slang or misused grammar was present, did it make a point?
- Was it intentional or a mistake?
- Was the pronunciation correct and was the enunciation clear?
- Were the words chosen appropriate to the message?
- Were they appropriate to the audience?

Judges Beware!

Judging is a subjective process that we as judges must try to make objective. Each one of us has likes and dislikes which can unconsciously affect our decisions. You should be conscious of the following barriers to objectivity so that you can judge effectively and fairly.

First or Last Speaker Is Best

We tend to remember first and last speakers best so they have an advantage over other speakers. The first speaker because he or she becomes a reference point and the last because they are more easily remembered. As a judge we need to be equally attentive to the middle speakers.

Let's Help the Underdog

Do we need to give a break to the new Toastmaster? Resist the temptation to mark highly because a speaker deserves a win. Use the judging form scrupulously.

Halo Effect

A speaker with a **reputation** should be judged using the same criteria as we employ to judge other speakers. Resist giving high marks because the speaker dresses well or has a dynamic delivery but rather give high marks because the speaker is **good**.

Reverse Halo Effect

This is the association of one unfavourable trait with another unrelated trait. For example a speech which exhibits poor grammar does not necessarily mean the speech will be badly organised. Resist the temptation to downgrade a score in one area because you are not happy with the performance in another area.

Second Time Around

Even if you have heard the speech previously, it must be judged as if it were a new speech. Always judge as if this were the first time you have heard the speech and the speaker.

Give Someone Else a Chance

Even if a speaker has won a contest in previous years, that speaker is entitled to the same judging as other speakers. Past performance should never influence current performance.

Not the Norm

Outside the Speech Contest Rules, there is no norm for speakers. As a judge, consider what is usually the norm for a good speech. Ask yourself if you expect everyone to fit into that norm. If so, you may be out of step.

Prejudices and Personal Preferences

Tastes, beliefs, preferences, and prejudices are the most prevalent barriers to unbiased judging. Try to remember to judge not what the speaker is but what the speaker is saying.

The Unknown Judging Form

As a judge you need to be familiar with the judging form. If this is not so, you may spend time analysing and understanding the form instead of listening to the speakers. Study the form.

Speech Contest Rulebook

The speech contest rulebook spells out the duties of both the Contest Chair and the Chief Judge through the provision of checklists at the end of the book.

These checklists include the pre-contest briefing of the contestants by the contest chair and the pre-contest briefing of the judges, timers and counters by the chief judge.

Establishing the Winner

In Toastmasters, we do not rely on a single judge to determine the result of a contest. **Rather our prescribed method is to have as large panel of judges as possible at each contest level**, supported by a **special method of ballot counting**.

The **minimum** number of judges required is specified in the Speech Contest Rules (although frequently larger numbers are used) as follows;

For Club and Area levels - Five

For Division and District levels - Seven

For Regional, Inter-District and International - Nine

The theory of this method is supported in management literature, with the best treatise probably being “The Wisdom of Crowds” by James Surowiecki. This book supports the premise that the collective wisdom in a group is greater than the wisdom of any individual in the group.* The book further clarifies that when imperfect judgements are aggregated together they tend to produce a superior collective decision.

For this concept of collective wisdom to work, a number of conditions must apply, all of which are satisfied in Toastmasters Speech Contests.

- **Diversity** - There needs to be a large diverse group of people involved, which is why the judging panels get larger and more diverse the higher our level of contest.
- **Independence** – There should be no discussion between the people involved before they are asked to express their opinions, which is why our judges have to sit in separate places in our contests.
- **Aggregation** – There needs to be some system of aggregating the results in order to arrive at a group answer, achieved by having a panel of ballot counters separate to the judges.

* The classic demonstration of this theory is having people estimate the number of jelly beans in a jar. Only 1 or 2 will be closer than the collective average. If repeated 10 times with different size jars, the group's performance is always the best and the 1 or 2 who beat it each time are never the same.