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## So, You're a New Forensics Coach?: Establishing an Oral Interpretation Program and Culture of Success

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*Invited Article***So, You're a New Forensics Coach?:  
Establishing an Oral Interpretation Program and Culture of Success**

*Note: While this article was written expressly for high school coaches in South Dakota, when viewed generally, it contains valuable insights and experience that can aid new coaches in any state and at multiple levels.*

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As many new English and Speech instructors quickly realize, their first teaching contract will most certainly include forensic extra-curricular activities. By the simple virtue of training to become fine arts teachers, administrators and principals may assign the coaching of Debate, One Act Plays or Oral Interpretation to their contracts, even though the individual may have had no experience in any of those activities. In my first secondary school contract, I was required to coach Oral Interpretation, three One Act Plays and the spring All School Play. My drama background consisted of a knowledge and appreciation for Shakespeare, yet with no performance experience at all. However, after my first precarious year of coaching, I became addicted to directing the Oral Interpretation program. I now look back on my 30 years of coaching Oral Interp as the most rewarding and memorable experience of my entire teaching career. Oral Interpretation provides the students the chance to 1) showcase their artistic expression, 2) learn control over physical and facial expressions, gestures, voice and movement, 3) better understand literature and the author's purpose and intent, 4) indulge in unlimited creative possibilities, 5) be competitive by practicing until the character becomes perfect (or real) and 6) achieve individual and team success. Directing the Sioux Valley High School (SVHS) Oral Interpretation team in Volga, SD, has been a blessing in disguise and afforded me with memories of hundreds of outstanding performances.

**Setting Up a Program**

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<sup>1</sup>*Barb Kleinjan coached Oral Interpretation and One Act Plays at the high school level for over 30 years, beginning at Arlington High School and then for 28 years at Sioux Valley High School in Volga, SD. During that tenure, her forensic students won 256 State Superior trophies at State Interpretation Festivals, placed first as a team in the Region Contest for 15 years running and won every team Class A tournament championship in which they competed for 18 consecutive years. Dozens of her students later starred in Midwest collegiate forensic or theatrical performances. Presently, Barb is a Communication and Studies Instructor at South Dakota State University where she continues to teach interpretation and readers' theater in her Honors Communication courses. She has received the Honors College Teacher of the Year award and has also been selected as Alpha Lambda Delta Teacher of the Year. Just recently her Honors Readers' Theatre teams returned from the National Collegiate Honors Conference after receiving Drama Master Class Showcase awards.*

*The following steps form a brief introductory guideline for establishing an Oral Interpretation program in your school district. Most importantly, read every word of the South Dakota State High School Activities Association (SDHSAA) Speech Handbook or similar materials provided by your state carefully. If you have questions, immediately contact the SDHSAA office in Pierre, SD, (or similar associations within your state departments of education) or feel free to call or email any coaches listed in the handbook.*

- #1 Go to the South Dakota High School Activities website or the equivalent site for your state site and print the entire Speech handbook. If your state does not have such materials, please feel free to utilize our resources and contact our organization to help you get started in setting up your own.  
**<http://www.sdhsaa.com/finearts/speech/speechmain.asp>**  
Read every explanation, by-law and rule in the “Oral Interpretation” section. Make a copy and keep in a binder during practices until you have the rules memorized. Otherwise, your lack of knowledge, understanding, or abiding by of the state regulations may force judges to disqualify your students during a tournament.
- #2 From the same website print the contest dates section, district or regional alignments, general rules of participation, and all online forms.
- #3 Check with your school administrators to confirm scheduled contests and budget limitations (setting up these processes will be discussed more fully in a later section). Also, be sure to schedule school busing/transportation on the contest dates.
- #4 Attend a state scheduled and sanctioned rules meeting. The list of available sites and dates are found in the Speech handbook.  
**<http://www.sdhsaa.com/finearts/speech/speechmain.asp>**  
Head coaches must attend or the school will be assessed a fee. Take your rules binder with you to the meeting as certain guidelines and expectations will be clarified.
- #5 Attend the *Speech Communication Association of South Dakota (SCASD)* or your state’s equivalent state meeting. SCASD’s annual meeting is usually held the second Friday and Saturday of September. Two rules meetings will be held during the convention and many excellent workshops on coaching forensic activities will be available. <http://www.scasd.k12.sd.us/speecon.html>
- #6 Organize an Oral Interpretation sign up meeting for your students. At that meeting review significant rule/guideline changes, announce when practices will begin and available time slots, review team goals, fill out individual information and goals sheets, select performance categories, formulate reader’s theatre teams and hand out a schedule of all tournaments and contests.

- #7 Contact the SDHSAA <http://www.scasd.k12.sd.us/speecon.html> or your state's high school activities association for the name of your district or region chairperson. Then email that person and introduce yourself. The chair will need your contact information to keep you updated on the district or region contest preparations.
- #8 Return necessary forms by given deadlines. In South Dakota, this means returning the "Intent to Participate" form to the SDHSAA in Pierre, SD, by the deadline listed on the schedule. Be sure to indicate participation in all seven categories of Interp. Failure to do so will affect the number of students allowed to compete at the State Oral Interpretation Festival in December. Study the formula used to advance students to the state tournament provided in the Speech handbook.
- #9 Note the deadline dates for entry in the various contests. All approved tournaments are listed in the Speech handbook. Generally, all entries must be submitted a week in advance of the contest. Read all tournament rules carefully. Each interper may enter only two events. Entries may be sent in via fax, email, mail or through the Joy of Tournaments website. <http://www.joyoftournaments.com/>. Most invitational directors include pages of specific instructions on all details of the contest. Read and follow all directions carefully to avoid causing a situation which could harm your team's chances of success.
- #10 Carefully calculate all students' entry fees and judging fees. These must be paid upon arrival at the tournament. Most high schools require a signed purchase order with all costs detailed at least a week in advance. At every contest you will need to hire judges (1 judge per 5 entries) from the tournament director or from within your own system. Be sure to include all judging costs. Graduated interpers, parents, former coaches, drama teachers and college forensic team members may all be excellent judges. However, give them each a copy of the interpretation rules and especially note any recent changes. Finally, the best judge is yourself!! Don't sit and correct papers at a tournament; go out and judge as many categories as possible. That is the best way to learn, listen to outstanding performance selections, follow new trends in style and set goals for your own students to achieve. Judging is one of the best ways to become a good coach.
- #10 Begin selecting material, cutting pieces to 10 minutes, writing memorized introductions and working on understanding characters, movement, vocals, gestures facial expressions and poise. Oral Interpretation includes the following categories: Plays, Prose, Non Original Oratory, Duo Interp (two interpers), Poetry, Humorous, and Reader's Theatre (3 to 6 interpers). Each interper may be in three categories provided that one is Reader's Theatre. **KNOW THE RULES AND LIMITATIONS FOR EACH PERFORMANCE CATEGORY.** Always select challenging literature of good literary merit and be aware of your community standards to avoid possible controversies.

- #11 Encourage students to practice with the coaches and at home. Ideally, I want my interpers to practice 2 to 3 half-hour slots per category per week with the coaches. Sioux Valley's practice schedule runs from 7:15 to 8:15 each morning and 5:00 to 10:00 each night and from 9:00 to 6:00 every free Saturday. I have an assistant coach and usually have 40 interpers on the team. Almost every SVHS interper performs in at least two events.
- #12 Attend as many tournaments as possible before the elimination contests. At each tournament, the students will perform their selections three times to three different judges through Rounds 1, 2, and 3. At the end of Round 3, results are tabulated and the top six interpers from each category will enter Finals. Those interpers will then perform one more time in front of three judges for the final placing. At the end of the tournament, the coach will receive the judging sheets and individual rankings for each round. It is very important to carefully review the comments and rankings with each interper to promote growth and improvement. Also, encourage your students to share their evaluations with their parents.
- #13 Proper attire helps performance rankings. While the students may not gear specific costumes to their characters, dressing professionally impresses judges and lets them know that you have prepared all aspects of your presentation. Do not wear blue jeans, tennis shoes, flip flops, sandals or tight or ill-fitting clothing. Most importantly, your attire should not detract from your performance (wildly colored hair, extreme nail polish, extreme make-up, excessive jewelry, hair in eyes, dark glasses, etc.) Many interpers wear dark colored clothing to minimize distractions for the judge. Care about your appearance and understand that it reflects your poise and self-confidence. In Reader's Theatre the students may dress in similar colors or fashion, but still may not costume.
- #14 None of the seven categories of Oral Interpretation may be memorized performances. All students must use a selection either placed in a binder or on black paper or upon a music stand. There are no size restrictions; however the physical manuscript of the selection must be referred to, yet not distracting.
- #15 Local Elimination Contest. This process may vary from school to school. Since the District and Regional contests only allow one entry per the seven categories of Oral Interp, Sioux Valley hosts an in-house showcase/contest for our competitors' parents and our community, while also hiring judges to select which performance in each category will advance to the Class A regional contest. We normally have 4 to 5 interpers in every category (sometimes up to 12 in Duo Interp) who have been competing all season together at the invitational contests which permit several entries per category. While that multiple entry process ensures team success and sweepstakes trophy points, it certainly makes this contest a pressure filled event. Once the final region entries are selected, the students' name, category, selection, author, and all publishing information (except Reader's Theatre which may be scripted by the students) must be sent to the region chair

and to the SDHSAA by the listed deadline in the Speech Handbook. Your local contest must be scheduled before that deadline. Read the rules carefully.

- #16 From the District contest through the Region, the competition format changes. During these contests the students will perform only once before three judges (who are all either highly respected high school coaches or college drama and interp directors). The students are given a rank by each judge (but no rating), which is then placed in a formula to announce which contestants will advance to the state festival. (During the invitational tournament season, the performers are given both a numerical rank and a rating: superior, excellent, good or fair.)

At the State Festival, the students again perform once before three judges, but are now given a rating, but not a rank. If the interper is granted two superior ratings, he or she will receive a Superior trophy and recognition during the final awards. The region chairperson will inform you a few days in advance about contest costs for both the region and state level.

- #17 Post Season Awards. We host an awards night for our Oral Interpers and give out over 50 plaques which include the following: Most Outstanding Interper, MVPs per category, Most Improved, Tournament Finalists (which can sometimes be over 30 plaques), Double Event State Awards, Reader's Theatre plaques, Four-Year Interp awards and team awards. This ceremony not only recognizes the diligence, effort and talents of your team, but allows parents and community members to see how successful your students have been as individuals and as a team. As a coach this is one of the most important items to complete if you wish your program to grow and attract other talented students within your school district.

- #18 Budgeting for the Next Year. First, determine which contests your team may participate in without scheduling conflicts with other activities. At Sioux Valley our budgets and purchase orders are usually due to our principals in March of the preceding year. Here is how our budget is listed.

a.	New plays, novels, poetry and script material as needed:	\$300
b.	Binders for manuscripts:	\$60
c.	Supplies for the Local Contest:	\$75
d.	Award plaques and trophies:	\$550
e.	Drama pins:	\$30
f.	Speech Convention expenses for 2 coaches: hotel, meals, dues, mileage	\$337
g.	Student entry fees for 7 contests x 40 students:	\$1250
h.	Judging Fees for 8 contests (includes Local Contest):	\$2375
i.	Meals for coaches and students at the State Festival:	\$488
j.	Hotels for the State Festival:	\$948
k.	State entry fees:	\$110
l.	Gas money and van rental for State Festival:	\$500

- m. Busing costs: To be determined by the Business Manager
- n. Coaching salaries To be determined by contracts

Our average budget is approximately \$7700 for the program per year (without coaching salaries)

\*The budget is largely based on the size of your team. This is a 40 member team budget. If you have fewer participants, the actual expenses may be reduced significantly.

- #19 Attend the spring Speech Advisory committee meeting or your state's equivalent (South Dakota's is held in Pierre each April). At that meeting you will learn about possible rule changes, selection of judges for the State Festival, potential controversies and be allowed to give your input on any suggested changes. Stay informed and good luck!