

MANNERISMS

Debaters tend to pick up an array of nervous gestures and verbal tics. They may click a pen or twirl their hair, or they may use “um” or “Ladies and Gentleman” in place of commas throughout the speech. The speaker is often unaware of using them, but they can seriously annoy the audience. If you’ve picked up any of these unfortunate habits, try having teammate clap every time you use one unintentionally during practice. Usually such an approach breaks the habit very quickly by making the speaker aware of what she’s saying.

Remember the Audience

Your speech—both style and content—needs to be appropriate to the setting. Comments that might be appropriate in a practice debate with classmates simply don’t work in a setting with an adjudicator you’ve never met and an audience you don’t know. Just as determining the content of your speech too much in advance is dangerous, so, too, is having a set tone. A good speaker should adapt to the subject matter at hand. In part, this means treating serious matters with the gravity they deserve and reserving a more lighthearted approach for less sensitive issues. Always remember that what may be just another issue of public policy or moral philosophy for you—say same-sex marriage or euthanasia—may be very personal for the gay couple or a member of the adjudication panel or audience who has a dying relative. Even were that not the case, these are serious discussions and should be treated with respect.

A good rule is if you’re not comfortable with a certain style, don’t use it—you will convey your discomfort to the audience and make them uncomfortable as well. “In-jokes” make anyone who is unaware of their meaning uncomfortable, as do political or religious pronouncements in a context where they are not shared. Likewise, if the previous speaker has just delivered a blistering intellectual broadside, standing up and starting off with a funny story is unlikely to be your best move. (Although, if done properly, it can be devastating.)

Generally, a tone of quiet authority will sit most happily with any audience. Avoid both ranting with too much self-confidence or endlessly apologizing for what you are saying. Most of us can feel when the room is becoming uncomfortable because our remarks are inappropriate; if you begin to sense that feeling, move on quickly to new territory.

Finally, show a degree of sympathy with the listener. If you need to work through some dry and complicated data to illustrate a point, take pity on the audience and give them time to absorb what you are presenting. Although silence and repetition can be the sign