

Frequently Asked Questions about the MLFA Forensic Judge Training Program

Why are we as an organization implementing this standardized judge training program?

While certainly the majority of our judges do an outstanding job, over the years coaches have consistently raised the problem of inadequate performance by some judges at MLFA speech meets, especially in relation to scoring disparities. Various strategies for addressing this issue have been proposed and the most promising have been tested. The solution of creating a standardized judge training program that must be used by all MLFA member schools was determined to be the most effective response. At the association's Spring 2011 Coaches meeting, this approach was formally approved by unanimous vote for implementation in the 2012 season.

Where did this standardize training program come from?

The creation of the initial PowerPoint was spearheaded by Scott Morgan, then the chair of the Judges Standards and Training Committee, during the 2009-2010 season. This PowerPoint was significantly reworked by that committee in 2010-2011 under the direction of Patrick Russell, who took over the chairperson role. During the summer of 2011, the Executive Committee revised the PowerPoint, selected the Judges Handbook materials, and determined the scoring range for the three student performances that are part of this training module. This version of the training materials was tested by Brian Galineau (chair of the Tournament Practices and Procedures Committee) during the new judges training session at the Fall Coaches Meeting this past October. Similarly, Patrick Russell (now President-Elect) and Mary Beth Vinohradsky (chair of the Judges Standards and Training Committee) provided at this same Fall meeting a session for coaches to review the training materials. Based upon the received feedback, the various elements of the training program were tweaked and expanded with the inclusion of a lesson plan and script that gives direction to the trainer on the use of the PowerPoint.

Why am I required to use these program materials when I already have a great training program?

That's marvelous news! And you are totally free to incorporate those materials or elements into your training session. However, you are required to use these new standardized training materials, as unanimously and formally approved by the membership at the Spring 2011 meeting.

Do we know that standardizing the judge training will solve the problem of inconsistent scoring?

An excellent question! Of course, the proof will be in the pudding. But the experience at the sessions with the coaches during the Fall meeting produced a rather startling result. Coaches were asked to judge the student performances that are part of the training program in order to confirm the normative scoring range established by the Executive Committee for each of these speeches. Surprisingly, scores for the Impromptu speech ranged from 39 to 29 and for the Humorous Solo performance from 40 to 30. Ten-point spreads in both cases! Further, the various scores were spread across these ranges, so the problem was not a few "outlier" coaches. So if experienced coaches are not of like-mind about the proper score for a student performance – and we are the ones doing the training – then the value of standardizing the judge training process so as to achieve judging consistency becomes evident.

Given that scoring disparity among coaches, can we have confidence that the normative scoring ranges set by the Executive Committee for the student performances in the training program are valid and "right"?

Another excellent question! While there was a wide range of scores for the performances, both the mean and median of the coaches' scores fell within the range established by the Executive Committee – and usually right in the middle of the range. So, while the scoring results from the Fall Coaches meeting indicate the need for a standardized judge training program in order to attain judging consistency, they also confirmed that there are – based upon averages and the medians – identifiable association scoring standards.

The PowerPoint establishes “normative ranges” for the sample performances. Does that mean that scores that fall outside of those ranges are “wrong” or “bad” scores?

Judging will always be more art than science. The normative ranges are provided to help new judges calibrate their scores more closely to a common standard. The goal is not necessarily that every judge will place every performance within the same three-point range. That would be unrealistic as different individuals legitimately perceive and differently weigh strengths/weaknesses within a performance. Student exposure to such variety is part of the learning process and makes them better speakers. They learn that not every audience is the same and will not react in exactly the same manner to the same speech. But the hope is that providing normative ranges will narrow scoring discrepancies among the association’s judges so that students and coaches have more confidence in the consistency of the assessment process at speech contests.

Are you saying I have to change my standards as a coach about what qualifies as a good speech?

Not at all! You, as a coach, have every right to maintain your assessment standards when it comes to teaching your students. However, when you are training your judges, then they must be trained to assess student performances in line with the normative scoring practices established by the association. This might require something of a paradigm shift for many of us, as we are used to thinking about judges as “our school’s judges.” But those judges are to function in conformity with the association’s rules, rubrics and scoring standards. An analogy might help see the importance of this understanding of the role of our judges. When the Packers go down to Chicago, the Bear’s coach cannot tell the referee, “Hey, I know the league rules are that the cornerback cannot bump a receiver after five yards, but that is not consistent with my coaching standards and what I think is true football. So, you should use my standards – not the league’s – since you are our referees here in our stadium.” We as coaches are entrusted with the task of training the judges because we trust each other to form our judges in line with the association’s rules and standards. So the great news is that this training program gives coaches new tools to achieve this common goal of attaining consistent judging at our MLFA speech meets. And the even better news is that the winners will be the students, who will be judged more fairly and consistently as a result of this new standardized training program.

What if I have real problems with this whole approach and don’t want to participate?

In such a situation, we invite you to talk with either Patrick Russell (President-Elect; prussell@shst.edu) or Mary Beth Vinogradsky (Judges Standards and Training Committee chair; vinogradskyM@cudahy.k12.wi.us) to express your concerns and issues to see if such a conversation might lead to better understanding of this new training program’s goals and purposes. If you won’t use the new training materials, then you will need to send your new judges to a training session at another school, many of which are posted on the website.

Do my experienced judges need to go through this new training program too?

The association is not requiring the re-training of experienced judges. The rationale is that such judges have – through their experiences as a judge – come to a proper understanding of the association’s scoring standards. Further, it is assumed that you, as a coach, monitor to some extent their judging performance and recalibrate their scoring if it seems inconsistent with the association’s expectations. However, it might indeed be helpful to encourage experienced judges to attend a training session as a refresher course. Or, possibly more workable, encourage them to go to the MLFA website (www.middlelevelforensics.org) and go through the training module on their own, as the PowerPoint, the student performances, Judges Handbook, and the other materials will be posted on the site in the near future.

What if I have, after using it, suggestions on ways to improve the new training program?

Fantastic! Please contact either Patrick Russell (President-Elect; prussell@shst.edu) or Mary Beth Vinogradsky (Judges Standards and Training Committee chair; vinogradskyM@cudahy.k12.wi.us) with this feedback so that the program can be improved for next year. In addition, plan on attending the Spring 2012 Coaches meeting, as a review of the training program will be a major agenda item at that gathering.