



# CHAPTER THREE: MANNER



## **INTRODUCTION**

We have now discussed both preparation and rebuttal. The techniques that we have examined are vital for developing simple and forceful *concepts*, whether they are your case approach, your individual arguments, or your response to the opposing team. However, debating is about more than merely concepts – it is about the effective presentation of those concepts. In this part, we will examine the most important techniques and principles for effectively presenting your ideas to the audience.

The ‘presentation’ aspect of debating has different names in different places. In Australia, for example, ‘presentation’ is referred to as ‘manner’; at the World Schools Debating Championships, it is called ‘style’. However, the essential techniques and principles remain the same.

## **BEING YOURSELF**

There is a fundamental distinction between manner (on the one hand) and matter and method (on the other). Without understanding this distinction, your approach to manner will probably suffer significantly.

When we examined matter and method (which we did when we looked at the respective principles of preparation and rebuttal), we focussed largely on *process*. There are some things that you *should* do, and other things that you *should not* do. Manner, however, is somewhat different. The most important point about manner is not what you should *do* – it’s who you should *be*. Quite simply, *you should be yourself and enjoy yourself!*

All of us have a natural speaking style, whether we realise it or not. Each of us has our individual style, which has been evolving since our very first words. This is our natural style of speaking, our most comfortable way of communicating, *and our most effective way of persuading*. Unfortunately, a few debaters do not trust their natural style. Instead, they adopt a ‘debating persona’ – a completely different speaking style that emerges only for debates. Usually, this involves forced gestures, an uncomfortably rigid stance and a painfully careful pronunciation of almost every word. Ultimately, however, this approach is weak – rather than being persuasive, it simply appears insincere.

Instead, you must be yourself. Of course, you can always try to make your style more convincing and engaging. The ideas and pointers in this chapter are designed to help you do that. However, the aim of coaching manner is never to change a speaker’s entire style – rather, it is to mould that style to be more effective. Naturally, this does not mean that a speaker can legitimately say, “Of course I mumble quickly and make no eye contact – that’s my natural style!”. However, it *does* mean that you should use these techniques in a way that feels natural and sincere *to you*.

## **VISUAL PRESENTATION**

At first, it may seem strange that we should even be concerned with visual presentation. After all, debating is about the clash of arguments, and visual presentation does not directly relate to the arguments at all (at least, not in the same way that oral or verbal presentation does).

However, visual presentation is a vital part of a speaker's overall presentation, and hence a vital part of debating. This is because a speaker's visual presentation is an important aspect of a speaker's *credibility*, and a speaker who seems more credible will be a speaker who is more convincing. You need only pay occasional attention to any speeches given by the President of the United States to recognise the important persuasive value of visual presentation!

### ***Start from the very beginning***

The first issue relating to visual presentation is one that very few debaters think to ask: "When does it begin?"

The simple answer is that your manner begins from the moment that you reach the middle of 'the floor', and start to speak. However, adjudicators are entitled to penalise a speaker who delays in taking the floor, after having been introduced. More importantly, once you are introduced, your audience's eyes will immediately focus on you. If you spend the next 30 seconds writing a few notes and arranging your palm cards, you are hardly likely to exude credibility! Therefore, strictly speaking, your manner begins from the moment that you are called by the chairperson.<sup>6</sup>

However, given the importance of visual presentation, the *best* answer is that your manner begins from the moment that you and your team enter the room. For example, it is common for many debaters to gesture wildly, shake their heads viciously, and speak audibly with their team at the table – while their opponents are speaking. This is not merely unsporting behaviour; it is likely to detract from the overall credibility of your presentation.

### ***Eye contact***

Eye contact (or the lack of it, to be more precise!) is a significant problem among many debaters, particularly young debaters. As humans, we are generally accustomed to looking into each other's eyes as we converse. It is nearly impossible to be an effective debater without maintaining effective eye contact.

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<sup>6</sup> That is, when the chairperson says (for example), "I now call the second speaker of the affirmative team, to continue her team's case."

This means making eye contact with specific individuals in the audience, and holding that contact for a time (as a general guide, from 5 seconds to 30 seconds). There are a number of ways that a speaker can *fail* to make effective eye contact:

- A speaker can simply read his or her notes. The effective use of notes will be examined later. For now, it should be noted that, particularly among young debaters, this is usually the biggest cause of a failure to make adequate eye contact.
- A speaker can ‘flicker’ his or her eyes between notes and audience. Many debaters *think* that they are making adequate eye contact when, in fact, they are constantly ‘flickering’ their eyes between notes and audience. Audience members may be left with the impression that the speaker looked *at* them, but will not feel that the speaker spoke *to* them.
- A speaker can speak to his or her opposition and, in the extreme case, can address his or her speech to the opposition in the second person (‘you said...’). You may convince your audience, but you will rarely ever convince your opponents.
- A speaker can look elsewhere in the room. Some speakers are sufficiently confident that they do not constantly read their notes; however, they are not confident enough to look the audience in the eye. Therefore, they address inanimate parts of the room – such as the door, a window, or a chair. A more sophisticated variant on this theme is for speakers to deliberately stare just over the heads of their audience, trying to give the impression of eye contact without *actually* making eye contact. Your audience will not be fooled!

## ***Gesture***

Gesture is a natural part of most people’s everyday conversation. Watch people talking, particularly when they are standing, and you will often see them gesturing constantly – even if they are speaking on the phone! So what? As debaters, we should strive to appear credible and sincere – in other words, *to look natural*. Gesturing in conversation is natural, so it should be natural to gesture while speaking in a debate.

This is the most important point about good gesture – *allow your natural gestures to occur*. It can often be very tempting to grip your palm cards with both hands, particularly if you are nervous. However, this serves only to limit your natural tendency to gesture. *Free your hands if you can, and let the gestures happen!*

Some debaters, coaches and adjudicators worry about fine details of how you should gesture – for example, a downward gesture is sometimes said to provide a sense of authority. However, paying excessive attention to your gestures – whatever those

gestures may be – usually serves only to make those gestures seem artificial. In everyday conversation, we do not deliberately choreograph gestures to match our words (for example, by sweeping your hands outwards above your head when discussing ‘the whole world’!). It therefore seems unnatural and insincere to pay significant attention to specific gestures during your speech. You are much better thinking about your arguments, and merely keeping the issue of gesture in the back of your mind.

### **Stance**

As with gesture, the most important aspect of an effective stance is that you are natural. Many speakers worry about fine details of their stance, such as the position of their feet, the distribution of their weight, or the straightness of their back. However, the most effective way to have a natural stance is not to worry about your stance at all!

The only exception is the issue of movement. There is no rule that requires you to stand rooted to the one spot as you speak – you are welcome to move around the floor. Indeed, as long as it does not seem contrived, it can be quite effective to take a few deliberate paces between arguments. *However, you must avoid movement that is repetitive or distracting.* For example, many speakers ‘rock’ on the spot, by taking small steps forwards and then backwards, or left and then right. Similarly, many speakers wander around the floor without purpose, often in repetitive patterns. Pacing back and forth will not endear you to an audience who has to watch you for eight minutes! The principle of movement is simple: *by all means move, but be aware of what you’re doing and move with a purpose.*

### **Mannerisms**

In debating, a mannerism is understood as a distinctive or idiosyncratic trait of visual presentation. For example, a speaker may have a particular unique gesture or way of moving.

Of themselves, mannerisms pose no problem – every debater will understandably have his or her own way of speaking. However, they become a problem when they are repetitive. In some cases, audience members who notice a speaker’s mannerism will pay attention to little else! For example, you might have a tendency to look at a particular part of the room on a regular basis, to continually fiddle with your hair or (as we discussed earlier) to make the same gesture repetitively.

It is impossible to set out any kind of complete list of mannerisms, precisely because they are so idiosyncratic. However, you must nonetheless be aware of the dangers of mannerisms, and be alert to any elements of your visual presentation that could become repetitive and distracting.

## **VOCAL PRESENTATION**

Vocal presentation concerns the way that you enunciate and deliver your words to the audience.

### ***Speed***

Unquestionably, the biggest issue concerning vocal presentation is speed – and the biggest problem is going too fast. Inexplicably, speaking before an audience can create a time dilation that relativity theory is only now beginning to recognise! That is, what may seem a perfectly normal speed to you, the speaker, can in fact be unbearably fast to your audience and adjudicators. Initially, it can be difficult to recognise this as a speaker, so it is important to pay attention to what adjudicators or audience members say about your speed of delivery. If you *do* need to slow down, there are at least two good ways of doing it. First, remember to start slowly, to reinforce the feeling of speaking at a measured pace to your audience. Second, many speakers like to write ‘SLOW DOWN’ on their palm cards. This can be a useful technique, as long as you don’t read those words out!

It is possible to have a speed problem by going too slowly, but this is unlikely. Usually, this is simply the result of not having enough to say, or not properly understanding those things that you do have to say. From a debater’s perspective (though not an adjudicator’s), this is really a matter issue – you need to ensure that you have enough to discuss, and that you understand it in sufficient detail.

### ***Volume***

Volume is a significant component of vocal presentation. Perhaps the most important element of volume is that *your volume should be appropriate for the context of your speech.*

For example, if you are speaking to a large crowd in a big hall, it is important to project your voice loudly; if you are addressing a small group in a classroom, it is far more effective to adopt a conversational tone.

Some speakers feel that they always need to speak loudly and aggressively in order to appear confident and forceful. There is no question that this can be worthwhile, but if used continuously, it can have the opposite effect – the speaker can appear flustered and out of control. It is often more effective *not* to give the impression of taking your argument and “shoving it down your audience’s throat” – it is more effective to speak softly, almost as though letting your audience in on an important secret. This style has the advantage of forcing your audience to concentrate harder on what you are saying, and can itself give the impression of force and confidence, because you are comfortable enough to deliver your message in a more relaxed and subdued tone.

The ultimate goal with volume should be to present a confident speech that is appropriate to the context, and to be confident enough to vary your volume where appropriate.

### ***Variation***

Whether or not variety is indeed the spice of life, it can certainly help your manner mark! Of course, you can always have variety in your visual presentation – by using different kinds of gestures, for example. However, variety in manner is essentially an issue of vocal presentation. This is because, as a speaker, the monotone poses the greatest risk of monotony.

Perhaps the most important way to avoid a monotone is to use your palm cards effectively – simply reading your palm cards is the easiest way to fall into a comfortable (and boring!) monotone.

It is important, therefore, to vary your style of presentation throughout. For example, you can vary the pitch of your voice by speaking in an expressive and animated style, rather than in a monotone. You can vary your natural speaking rhythm by pausing. Ironically, the best way to regain your audience's attention on what you are saying is often to say nothing – to pause quite deliberately between sentences, arguments or ideas. Finally, always remember variation in volume. There is no rule about how or when to do this, except that you should generally aim for sharp and noticeable changes, rather than subtle or gradual variation. For example, it can be very effective to finish one argument in a loud and aggressive style, take a significant pause, and then commence your next argument in a soft and analytical manner.

This last example is a case of a 'manner change'. A manner change is a specific form of variation in manner, involving a sharp and noticeable change at a key point in your speech. Further, it often involves your *entire* manner – for example, you may change from speaking aggressively, quickly and with large gestures to speaking softly, slowly and with more constrained gestures. Manner changes are most popular when moving from substantive arguments to summary, or from one argument to another. Some coaches and adjudicators swear by manner changes; others are less concerned. Ultimately, manner changes are one form of effective variation, and it is variety that is the key.

### ***VERBAL PRESENTATION***

Matter and method (content and strategy) are often described as comprising “what you say”. This, however, is not strictly true – in reality, matter and method comprise the *ideas* behind what you say. The *way* that you actually use words to express those ideas and concepts is best understood as being a component of manner – verbal presentation.

It is impossible to teach people how to express their ideas in words – that is a natural skill learned from a young age! However, this expression can be refined and improved for debating purposes.

### ***The importance of clarity***

Clarity is by far the most important element of verbal presentation. For many public speakers, ‘clarity’ refers to the *way* that they enunciate their words. That, however, is not the point here – we should be far more concerned with the actual words used to enunciate ideas. Too many debaters use long words and convoluted sentences to sound impressive – even if that means making their speeches difficult to understand and painful to follow.

The opposite should be true. You should always aim to express your ideas as simply and clearly as possible, using simple language and short sentences wherever possible. We have already seen an example of this earlier, when discussing Adam Spencer’s colloquial and effective explanation of an argument about Microsoft’s market power. The underlying principle should be clear: you should aim to present an impressive case, not to use ‘impressive’ words and phrases! Of course, this is *totally unrelated* to the content of your argument itself – although arguments should be simple, there is no need to reduce your ideas to colloquial or banal concepts. Our concern here is the language used to *express* those concepts, however intricate they may (or may not) be. There are a number of important principles.

- ***Avoid complex vocabulary wherever possible.*** For example, there is no reason to accuse your opposition of ‘naïve inductionism’ – it is far simpler and hence more effective to say, ‘our opposition assumes that because [X] has occurred in the past, it will continue to occur in the future’.
- ***Acronyms can cause great confusion to adjudicators or audience members who don’t understand them.*** Therefore, you should state what any acronym stands for the first time you use it. For example, it is not enough to simply refer to the ‘WHO’ – the first time that you do so, you should say something like, ‘the WHO – the World Health Organisation’.<sup>7</sup>
- ***There can sometimes be value in using technical terms, but these need to be explained.*** For example, it is never enough simply to refer to ‘economies of scale’ – you need to explain the term as well (‘declining average costs as production increases’).
- ***Answer any rhetorical question!*** Rhetorical questions can be a useful way of directing your audience’s attention to the core of your argument. However,

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<sup>7</sup> This principle does not apply to the *very* simplest acronyms, such as the USA or the UN.

there is nothing worse than leaving a rhetorical question unanswered (for example, “How can we possibly justify having killed innocent Iraqi civilians?”). Your opponents will happily answer the question for you – or rather, for them (for example, “Our case shows exactly why it was justified to take innocent Iraqi lives to avoid a much greater conflict in the future.”).

Finally, this is as good a point as any to discuss the use of ‘clever’ verbal techniques. In other forms of public speaking, speakers are often encouraged to use various ‘devices’ when writing their speeches – for example, the frequent use of metaphors, ‘triplets’ or alliteration. There is nothing inherently wrong with these techniques, but they do understandably sound scripted. Therefore, in debating, they should be confined to those areas of your speech where the audience expects to hear well-crafted prose – essentially, to your conclusion and your formal introduction. A debater who presents substantive arguments (or even rebuttal) in cleverly crafted language will almost always suffer as a result, because these arguments will lack the sincerity and effectiveness of a more natural expression.

### ***Humour***

Humour in debating is a double-edged sword. If used effectively, it can significantly improve your connection with an audience; if used poorly, it can distract, confuse and reduce your credibility. Humour is very difficult to teach, but easy to practice. We will therefore simply examine some general pointers as to the use of humour in debating.

- You don’t need humour! It is often easy, particularly in the company of funny and entertaining debaters, to see humour as an essential part of debating. It is not – some of the great argumentative speeches in history were presented without any humour (can you imagine, “I have a dream... in fact, I have lots of dreams...what it is about dreams anyway...?”). Usually, a debater’s sense of humour – and sense of when to use that humour – develops slowly and over many years. There is no need to rush this process.
- If you are using humour, make sure that it is appropriate for your context. Of course, manner should always be appropriate to its context, as we will examine shortly. This is especially important in the case of humour. If, for example, you are debating about sport or television, jokes are probably great. If, on the other hand, you are debating about terrorism or domestic violence, jokes will almost certainly go down poorly – and even if they are well received by the audience, they will hardly improve your credibility on the issue of debate.
- Obviously, there is no point using isolated jokes. If your humour does not directly relate to the issue and the debate, it will hardly be amusing. For example, general witticisms may raise a smile, but will not improve your

credibility on the issue of debate (for example, “Our opposition’s case is like a skyscraper – it has many ‘flaws’”.)

- Don’t get personal or sarcastic. We learned in Step One of Chapter One that it is important to always maintain polite and respectful relations with your opposition – cracking personal jokes about your opponents is probably the easiest way to violate this principle.
- Keep it clean. Humour in debates is supposed to lighten the atmosphere and endear you and your arguments to your audience. Jokes that even *some* members of your audience may find lewd or rude will only harm your persuasive credibility as a speaker.
- Remember, laughter is not rebuttal. It does not matter how many jokes you make about your opposition’s case, nor how much your audience laughs – this does not in itself show why your opponents’ arguments are wrong. Of course, you can use humour to *assist* your rebuttal, but it will never substitute for actual analysis and argument.
- Don’t get distracted. It is very easy to become enthused because your audience is responding warmly to your jokes. At this point, you have a choice – either push on with your arguments (confident that your audience is responding well to your speech, and is listening carefully to what you say) or simply tell a few more jokes. Too many debaters in this situation choose the latter. Musicians sometimes say, “If you play for applause, that’s all you’ll ever get” – the same can be said of debaters who get carried away and manage to trade their argument for a few more laughs.

For a section on humour, this all sounds very depressing! Our list of general pointers was a list of “don’ts”. This is not to suggest that humour should not be used – in fact, if it is used effectively, humour can be one of the most effective contributors to effective manner. The key is to use humour carefully so that the joke doesn’t end up on you.

## GENERAL POINTERS

There are some important concepts that do not apply exclusively to visual, verbal or vocal presentation. Rather, these issues are important because they apply to manner *as a whole*.

### *Using palm cards effectively*

The vast majority of manner problems among inexperienced debaters are caused, either directly or indirectly, by ineffective use of palm cards.<sup>8</sup> Essentially, you will suffer all kinds of manner problems if you read your speech from your palm cards, rather than simply using notes on your palm cards to prompt you in explaining your argument. Most obviously, your eye contact will suffer – short of using an autocue, it is almost impossible to make effective eye contact while reading from a script. However, an equally serious problem is that your entire vocal presentation will suffer. Quite simply, your audience and adjudicator will know from the intonation of your voice that you are reading a script. This is not a problem for newsreaders, or politicians giving ‘set piece’ speeches, because audiences expect and accept those presenters to read. However, audiences and adjudicators respond best to debaters who *actually* argue – not to those who read an argument from a palm card. In simple terms, it is more effective to stumble occasionally by putting your thoughts into words during your speech than to present a perfectly fluent speech read verbatim from your notes.

So much for theory – how can you put this into practice? The answer is simple: don’t write much on your palm cards. Perhaps the most frustrating common remark to hear from debaters is, “Of course, I won’t read my speech word for word, but I will write it on my palm cards word for word, just to be sure.” This makes no sense – if you have your entire speech on palm cards, you will almost inevitably read it word for word. Even if you manage to avoid doing this, your presentation will still suffer, because it is very difficult to extract your key points from a speech that is written out word for word.

What should you write on your palm cards then? There is no simple answer – every debater’s palm cards look different, because everybody has a different way of taking notes and of abbreviating ideas. However, the general principle is that you should ***write as little as possible, while preserving the important ideas of your speech***. Just what those ideas are will obviously vary from one debate to the next. Most good debaters find it helpful to note the ‘signposts’ and ‘subheadings’ in their speech. For example, in presenting a substantive argument, most good debaters will write the label of the argument, then note some kind of internal structure on their palm card – for example, the ‘label, reasoning, substantiation, tie-back’ structure. This does not mean

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<sup>8</sup> This section refers to palm cards because the use of palm cards is the norm in Australian schools debating. At the World Schools Debating Championships, speakers are entitled to speak from any kind of notes, including A4 note pads. I will refer to palm cards because they are the norm in Australia and seem to remain most popular at the World Championships. However, my comments are generally applicable to other forms of notes as well.

writing those words, but it does mean using subheadings to maintain the internal structure of your argument. The following ‘palm card’ gives a very simple example of this, with subheadings (a label, ‘Why?’, ‘e.g.’, ‘So what?’) to remind the speaker of the internal structure of the argument.

<p><b>[LABEL]</b></p> <p><u>Why?</u> <b>[EXPLANATION]</b></p> <p>e.g. <b>[EXAMPLE(S)]</b></p> <p><u>So what?</u> <b>[TIE-BACK]</b></p>
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Of course, this does *not* mean that you should use this format for a palm card. The format of your palm cards is closely related to the internal structure of your argument, so it is important that you think about this carefully on an argument-by-argument basis.

A similar common remark to hear from debaters is, “Oh sure, I will only write notes on my palm cards – but I like to write my speech out word for word on other paper first, *then* reduce it to note form”. This misses the point – notes on palm cards are designed to summarise *ideas*, not specific sentences. You should worry about the clarity and persuasiveness of your arguments, not about how specific sentences are to be expressed. On a more practical level, this approach is a complete waste of time – why bother writing your speech out word for word only to speak from notes?

Save your time! The best approach is to write your speech *directly* onto palm cards, in note form. The time that you save by not writing it out word for word is best spent practising delivering your speech from those palm cards – that is, practising taking the notes on your palm cards and presenting them as a speech. Many debaters find that the best way to practise like this is to speak to a mirror – this can also help to improve your visual manner. The advantage of preparing this way is twofold: not only will you deliver your immediate speech in a more natural and sincere way, you will improve the technique of delivering a speech from notes on a palm card. These are two advantages that you will never gain by writing your speech out word for word.

### ***The importance of context***

Context is all-important for speeches in everyday life. It would be rare to speak in the same ‘manner’ to a friend or family member as to a teacher or employer – and it would be ridiculous to ask which manner is ‘better’. So it is in debating. Although the basic characteristics of good manner do not change, your overall manner should reflect the context of your debate. That is, it is impossible to have a standard ‘perfect manner’ – the requirements of good manner will be somewhat different before different audiences, against different opponents, in different venues and on different issues.

We have already considered the danger of using humour in a debate about a solemn topic. The point here is that the issue of debate is an important part of context, and your manner should reflect that context if you are to be a credible presenter.

We have also examined the importance of context for volume. If you are debating before a large audience in a large hall, you will probably find it most effective to use a loud voice and expansive gestures. However, if you are debating before a small group in a small classroom, that kind of manner will probably not endear you to your audience, who will likely feel simply that you are shouting at them. Instead, this is the best time to use a conversational tone and more restrained gestures.

Your opposition is undoubtedly part of the context of the debate. For example, you may find yourself debating a flippant and funny opposition that appears to have endeared itself to the audience. Although it can be tempting to try to match this style, this is not always the most effective approach. Instead, it can be more effective to take the opposite tack – to emphasise just how serious your topic is, without making a single humorous remark.

As with so many aspects of debating, it is impossible to be dogmatic about the circumstances in which different forms of manner work best. However, the underlying point is important: when it comes to effective manner, one size does not fit all – not all speakers, and certainly not all contexts.

