

11/2005 *The Toastmaster* – Don't Let 'Murphy' Ruin Your Speech Contest!

Don't Let 'Murphy' Ruin Your Speech Contest!

How to ensure that your club, area, division or district contest is a success.

By Shelia Spencer, DTM



As Toastmasters, we conduct speech contests each year “to recognize the best as encouragement to all.” Speakers prepare, and everyone anticipates an exciting, educational and entertaining event. The spotlight is not only on the speakers, but on everyone responsible for coordinating the activities.

One guest who is never invited, yet manages to make an appearance at almost every contest, is Murphy. When he appears, things start to go wrong, and sometimes Murphy can turn a contest upside down. This article will help you in anticipating and overcoming Murphy's Law so that your contest comes off without a hitch.

What are some of the ways that Murphy can spoil your contest?

- The contest date arrives, but unfortunately what doesn't arrive are: the trophies, the timing equipment, the *Speech Contest Rulebook*, enough judges – or the contestants themselves.

Speech Contest Materials



Each speech contest has specific information and items available to help ensure the success of your event. All items can be found by going to TI's Online Store (www.toastmasters.org/store).

Table Topics Speech Contest

Contest Kit (#1169TBL)
Contest Judge's Ballot (#1180)
Tiebreaking Judge's Guide and Ballet (#1180A)
Certificates for club, area, division and district contests

Humorous Speech Contest

Contest Kit (#1169H)
Judge's Guide and Ballot (#1191)
Tiebreaking Judge's Guide and Ballet (#1191A)
Certificates for club, area, division and district contests

International Speech Contest

Contest Manual (#1173)
Speech Contest Kit (#1169)
Judge's Guide and Ballot (#1172)

Tall Tales Speech Contest

Contest Kit (#1169TT)
Judge's Guide and Ballot (#1181)
Tiebreaking Judge's Guide and Ballet (#1181A)
Certificates for club, area, division and district contests

- Your contest site is unexpectedly inaccessible, or beset with distractions such as loss of electrical power or intolerable temperatures.
- Everyone is an expert and nobody agrees on how to handle things. Emotions rise, the event grinds to a halt, and even your speakers are leaving before the contest concludes.
- After everyone goes home, you realize major mistakes were made that could invalidate your results.

Here are a few strategies to help you ensure your contest runs smoothly and everyone has a good time:

Things to Do at Least One Month Before the Contest:

- **Decide who is in charge.** Normally, the vice president education (VPE) serves as contest chair at the club level. However, this is a suggestion, not a requirement. In fact, if your club's VPE would like to compete, another member should organize and facilitate the contest. Area and division governors may chair their own contests as well, but this is not a requirement. Sometimes, because of the time required to organize a contest and fulfill other obligations, area and division governors may select someone else to chair the contest.

- Also **select a chief judge as soon as possible.** If you are serving as a contest chair for the first time, it is helpful to select a chief judge with prior experience in running a contest. If you are an experienced contest chair, you may offer someone the opportunity to serve as a "first-time" chief judge. Whoever you choose, verify that your combined experience will be sufficient to address any unexpected situations that may occur, yet maintain order and a positive atmosphere.

All event organizers should maintain close communication with each other before and during the event, to ensure that all essential tasks and issues are being addressed. Don't leave yourself open for nasty surprises on contest day!

- **Obtain a copy of the (current) contest rules.** The most important document to have in your possession is the *Speech Contest Rulebook* (catalog #1171). It is revised each calendar year, and is mailed to club presidents during the month of October. Your first priority as contest chair is to ensure that at least one copy of the *current* rulebook is available for reference throughout your contest planning and execution. (The International Speech Contest Rules also are printed on pages 30-31 in this issue.)

Evaluation Contest

Contest Kit (1169E)

Judge's Guide and Ballot (#1179)

Tiebreaking Judge's Guide and Ballot (#1179A)

Certificates for club, area, division and district contests

Judge's Training

Training Program (#1190)

Presenters Guide (#1190A)

Program Completion Certificate (#1184)

Many more items are available, including rules, eligibility and originality certificates, biographical information sheets, time record sheets.

• **Order all forms and trophies.** Did you know that any awards bearing the Toastmasters name and/or logo must be obtained from TI's World Headquarters? The certificates, trophies and other contest materials should be ordered from WHQ in California well in advance of your contest.

What to order: Item #1169 is the [International Speech Contest Kit](#), containing judging forms, tally sheets and all the official documents you need to conduct this contest. It costs \$8. Similar kits are available for humorous speech, tall tales, Table Topics and evaluation contests. Trophies and certificates of participation, as well as certificates of appreciation for your judges and other officials, should all be ordered a month before the contest, so that you will have time to personalize these items.

If you are placing your order less than a month before the contest, be aware that other contest officials may be doing the same thing. Engraving takes time, so expedite your shipment by ordering blank trophies and arranging for a local engraver. It may cost more, but you'll get it done in time. If you end up not using everything you order, save the unused (non-personalized) items for a future event.

• **Reserve your contest site...and a backup site.** You'll need to mention exact time and location of your contest on all of the promotional information, so the sooner you reserve the contest room, the better. Pay a personal visit to the site to ensure that it will accommodate your gathering. Confirm any special resources and restrictions. (Are a lectern, microphone and other equipment available on site for your use? Are there restrictions on movement within the building, access to restrooms, ability to rearrange room furniture, or use of the walls to post fliers or contestant props?)

While reserving this spot, inquire about whether there may be any last-minute problems in using the space. Seek out an alternative site in the same building or somewhere else nearby, to use in case of emergency. Here in New York City, I've attended several contests where there were last-minute difficulties in using the original room. (Another group was still occupying the space, a broken fire alarm was blaring, or the room temperature was intolerable.) In most of these cases, the contest chair was able to move us to another nearby space. Preparation can save you a lot of stress if Murphy tries to interfere with your contest site!



Things to Do Before the Day of the Contest:

• **Double your equipment...and personnel.** Two sets of timing devices (stopwatches) and signals (lights or color cards) can come in handy if the first one malfunctions. Test all electronic or mechanical devices prior to arriving at the contest site, then test again when you get there. Give your timers an opportunity to practice, especially if the devices are different from those used in their own club. It doesn't hurt to bring extra batteries too!

Club and area contests should have at least five judges, in addition to the chief judge, tiebreaking judge, three ballot counters and two timers.

Division and district contests are expected to have at least seven judges (who equitably represent each of the participating areas or divisions). It sounds like a lot of work to amass over a dozen contest officials, but to be safe you should go even further – schedule at least two extra judges

and a backup timer and ballot counter. This way, you won't find yourself caught short at contest time.

- **Promote awareness of impartiality.** The chief judge ensures that judges, timers, ballot counters and other facilitators are in place, and are trained in their roles. It is equally important that these officials not have a conflict of interest.

The *Speech Contest Rulebook* specifies that “an individual may not be a judge at any level for a contest in which they are still competing.” Common sense would also suggest that you not appoint a judge who is a relative, “significant other” or mentor for one of the contestants. Since the judges may not know the names of all contestants until they arrive at the event, include in your briefing the request that any judge who may have difficulty remaining impartial please step down.

As one of my leadership mentors told me, “How things look” can be as important as “how things are.” Emotions can run high at contests, and it is important that all of the proceedings occur with an emphasis on fairness and impartiality. Make sure that no one has reason to question why a particular person was chosen to serve as chief judge, judge or sample speaker (for the evaluation contest) by filling these roles with people who are not closely related to specific contestants.

- **Know your contestants and alternates.** You should know the contestants' names in advance. At the club level, all contestants should be identified prior to the meeting day and listed in the contest program. For area, division and district contests, the previous winners' names should be submitted well in advance of the contest, along with the names of *all* alternates (in place order). If the winner and first alternate are both missing, you can determine whether another eligible contestant is present.

Confirm (more than once) that all contestants have your name and contact information, the contest date, time and address. Provide everyone with clear directions to the location within the building or complex where the contest will be held.

Things to Do At the Contest:

- **Briefing of contestants and contest officials.** The contest chair briefs the contestants and the chief judge briefs the judges and other officials. If specific briefing areas within the room or building are designated and posted in advance, everyone can gather and complete their discussion quickly and efficiently.

- **When briefing contestants:** Ask whether a speaker needs setup time (and breakdown time) for props. Confirm that all contestants understand that disqualification can occur not only for going undertime or over-time, but also if it is found that the speaker has not paid club dues or has failed to attribute any quoted or “borrowed” material. Again, make sure that all contestants understand these requirements.

- **When briefing judges:** Emphasize that all ballots must be signed, and must list first, second and third-place speakers in order, or the ballot will be invalidated. Remind all officials that their paperwork and its contents are to remain confidential, and no one is to discuss their rationale or scoring with anyone after the contest is over.

- **Briefing the audience.** In addition to the essential items included in the *Speech Contest Rulebook*, be sure to request that everyone turn off all beepers, cell phones or other audible devices. Request that they refrain from moving within, into or out of the room or taking photographs during the speeches. Children, if too young to remain quietly in their seats, should not be in the room during the competition.

Protests can only be lodged by judges or contestants, and are limited to the areas of speaker eligibility and, for international, humorous or tall tale presentations, originality of material. Other issues (such as an administrative oversight, personal emergency, noise within the room or other distraction) should be addressed to the contest chair, chief judge or sergeant-at-arms, but these are not "protests."

Notification of Winners to the Next Contest Chair

The chief judge should compile a ranked list of all contest finalists, and submit it to the contest chair, who in turn should submit it to the contest chair for the next level of competition. Contestants disqualified for timing, eligibility or originality must be removed from this list, since they are prohibited from advancing under any circumstances.

When the applause has ended, the trophies and certificates are distributed and the happy guests have filtered out of the room, the contest chair can breathe a big sigh of relief that the contest was a success, and Murphy did not win!

Shelia Spencer, DTM, is a freelance writer and member of Midtown Club 4722 in New York City. She can be reached at bocki@attglobal.net.