

Turning Speeches into Scholarship: Trajectory through Composition

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In many cases, college writing seems to be confined to the classroom, seen only by the teacher or fellow peers. However, English composition is capable of trajectory beyond the classroom and into the community of the writer. Through the story of a now-ISU Graduate Student, this article presents one possible way in which supposed “non-school” writing, in this case public speaking, can actually benefit the writer in both academic and public atmospheres.

Before the words can even escape the professor’s lips, you know exactly what is going to be asked. It’s Monday in English 101, and you know the instructor’s routine. Open class with a ten-minute period of writing, sometimes prompted, sometimes a “free write” period. As you type about your weekend, a familiar thought pops into your head: *Why am I writing this? Who cares what I write about? Will anyone else ever read what I write?*

As a student, there hasn’t been a single class that hasn’t sparked one of these questions. Whether journal prompts or a seminar research paper, I wonder whether these pieces will have any *trajectory* beyond the hands of the instructor grading them. If you just nodded your head involuntarily as you read this, then I’m apparently not alone.

Trajectory comes from Latin, meaning “to cross.” Ideally, composition should allow any conversation we want to “cross” over from page to person, or to multiple audiences. I must admit though, some classes have caused me to associate this term in the same category as unicorns, tooth fairies, and dragons. Trajectory in the classroom can appear, at times, a myth. We write journals, compose countless research papers, and craft thought-provoking analyses of

the texts we read in class; but, to what result? The paper is submitted for a letter grade, possibly glimpsed by a few peers during the revising process, and then shoved into either our folders, thrown into the trashcan at the end of the semester, or tossed into the hallway recycling bin immediately after we're dismissed. We dedicate numerous hours and consume enough cans of energy drinks during the writing process to pack seven landfills, but by semester's end, our papers don't give a paper cut to anyone except the instructor. It is true that sometimes journal writing has personal purposes in class, but sometimes we want to have our voices heard, or read, by more than just the individuals in the classroom.

Or, at least that's how my friend Angie felt. She competed, as did I, on Illinois State University's Forensic team from 2008 to 2010. I'm not talking about the kind of forensics that reminds you of a television program with a catchy theme song by The Who. Rather, the Forensics I am referring to here is about competition and delivering the best public speech to a vastly varied audience. Basically, whoever has the most compelling ten-minute oral presentation about whatever topic they choose wins. The categories you can compete in through Forensics vary based on your particular communication skills. Some events are theatre-based, such as Prose or Poetry, while others are based on the speaker's talent with communicating researched topics, such as Informative or Persuasion.

The first detail we should know about Angie is that her writing wasn't technically "for a grade." She was writing a speech that could be used for competition. She would memorize what she wrote and present the speech in front of a diverse audience. Since her writing was for competition in an extra-curricular activity instead of a grade, we could consider her work a piece of "non-school" writing. However, just because this was "non-school" composition, it didn't mean that it couldn't have an academic impact.

Angie decided to write what's called an "After Dinner Speech", or ADS, which is a sub-genre of Forensics designed to persuade your audience on a topic and to make them laugh. Think "*Comedian Stand-up meets Presidential Address*." The speech challenges the speaker not only to have a topic relevant to the audience, but it must be able to entertain the audience while they are persuaded. I asked Angie about the process of writing her After Dinner Speech. I was both surprised and humbled by her journey, which shows how "non-school" writing can result in "school-oriented" impact.

Angie's trajectory quest began as she pondered what her ADS theme would be for her senior—the last and most important—year of competition. Though Angie had competed in Forensics during the three previous years of undergrad, she had only competed in ADS during her sophomore year.

The topic was on “victimage,” a term she coined to describe how we crave to be pitied as victims in society. The thesis of an ADS essentially is the bread which holds the “speech sandwich” together. With this in mind, I started questioning Angie on how she began brainstorming ideas for her speech:

RACHEL: “What were you thinking about when you were choosing your ADS topic?”

ANGIE: “Since it was my senior year, I wanted a topic that would be important to me. I’ve always liked After Dinner Speeches, but a lot of ADS topics are “fluff.” They don’t carry real relevance and can be offensive. I wanted to write a speech that I was really interested in and would get my message across, but still be funny.”

What she describes as “fluff” reminds me of composing exercises done at the beginning of class seemingly never seen again. Fluff seems a more user-friendly word for one synonym: filler. Just as students may see these prompts as a clever way to take up class time, a competitor in Forensics sees a “fluffy” speech as a clever way to fill the allotted ten minutes you have to present something meaningful to your audience. In both cases, “fluff” usually is equivalent to wasted time. The difference between the two genres is that in a composition class writing isn’t always intended to have trajectory beyond the teacher’s hands. In an After Dinner Speech, trajectory is considered important. Most ADS contain relatively the same amount of humor, making judges look towards the content or topic for aid in ranking a round of competitors. When looking at the content, typically the speeches with the most trajectory or potential impact stand out and place higher than those with “fluffier” topics.



Without proper ADA standards in place, college campuses are basically giant tree trunks blocking the path. You may be able to get around, but it’s an unnecessary pain to do so.

Angie decided for her senior speech that she would write about a topic that was relevant to her but also needed to be heard: college campuses only meeting minimum requirements of the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act).

RACHEL: “Why did you think it was important to write a speech about college campuses adhering to ADA guidelines?”

ANGIE: “I think it’s something overlooked in college activism. Beyond student support services or concerns, there’s not really any activism geared towards it. By doing [my ADS] on the speech circuit, it would get to a large amount of audiences.”

Angie, having a good grasp of the Forensic genres, knew she could use the scholarly research she had studied in her undergraduate Social Work courses to support her argument. But she also knew her audience. Most of the Forensic community is comprised of college students, professors, and adults that would be available to assist disabled students on college campuses. Having competed



Our faces may be funny, but the idea of “riding” this college campus’ Evacuation Chair, closer to a rubber hammock than an actual chair, down several flights of stairs is considerably less humorous.

in Forensics at both Illinois State University and Southeastern Illinois College, she had seen how lax the enforcement of ADA standards can be across college campuses. The image at the left was taken at a Forensic Retreat attended a year prior. While the photograph was meant to be humorous, the caption certainly holds true to how serious the lack of accommodation can be for disabled students. Numerous times during the last three years of competition, Angie discovered multiple campuses failed to update their facilities to allow access for students with disabilities. For example, one college campus had elevators to access multiple floors of their

buildings, but how would a disabled student living on the upper floors quickly evacuate the building if there was a fire? The answers, or lack thereof, to this question spurred Angie to compose her speech for the improving of college campuses and disabled students’ academic experience as a whole.

And so, with a topic in mind and a pen in hand, Angie started composing the written speech she would later have to memorize and present at a Forensics tournament.

RACHEL: “What was the hardest part about writing your [ADS] speech?”

ANGIE: “How to get the humor across in a way that wasn’t offensive to the audience or to the population it was about; to do it in a way that was relevant to the topic and not just mindless humor.”

Her knowledge of the genre in which she was composing helped to focus her argument and create jokes reinforcing her content. One of her jokes, for example, takes the real life scenario of someone failing to hold the door open for a disabled student and turns it on its head:

ANGIE: “I say, ‘Don’t just walk by us with your iPods on and pretend like you didn’t notice, because beyond shaming your grandmother you’ll probably trip over something...and I will laugh at you.’”

While Angie’s speech was written with a jovial spirit, she was constantly aware her writing could be used for more than just competition. Just as we wonder if and how our work will effectively carry relevancy beyond the classroom, Angie wanted to use the time and effort she’d poured into her paper to create a piece that could benefit her grades as well. As she wrote, Angie kept in mind that the knowledge she incorporated into this “non-school” composition could in fact move into the academic community:

RACHEL: “Your major is in Social Work. When you write for class, do you think it will have impact beyond just the classroom?”

ANGIE: “I think it will have an impact on *me* beyond the classroom. I can apply what I learn, the theories and lessons, and get feedback from teachers and so on...which is important.”

Note how Angie said “an impact on *me*.” Her emphasis on what will make her a better person and student is critical because no matter what genre we engage in, no matter what kind of writing we investigate, we have to find a way to make it matter to us. Who says journal prompts can’t address something important? Free writing can be about ideas you’ve been mulling over but just haven’t written down before. And research papers? If Angie’s story has shown us anything, it’s that a paper with research doesn’t have to seem like a research paper. Angie knew there were many options she could have chosen for her ADS, but, rather than settle for a “fluffier” topic, she chose one that could combine her own personal story with scholarly research she was interested in and that could benefit her major.

This brings us back to the idea of giving “non-school” writing academic (and beyond) impact. After writing her speech, memorizing it, and competing at several tournaments with her ADS, it qualified to compete in the American Forensics Association (AFA) National Tournament at the University of Wisconsin Eau Claire and the National Forensic Association (NFA) National Tournament at Ohio State University. At AFA’s national competition, she won the title of Champion in After Dinner Speaking. Angie’s speech was the highest ranking public address in ADS in the country, and she held that title going into NFA, placing overall 2nd in the nation behind a fellow teammate in the same category. Clearly, her hard work, skill, and knowledge of the genre helped her to be successful. But Angie wasn’t willing to let her writing’s impact and trajectory end there. Graduating that spring with a Bachelor’s in Social Work, Angie wanted to continue her academic career



Angie, accepting her award for winning “Champion in After Dinner Speech” at the AFA National Tournament, 2010.

and apply for Graduate School. Her application for a scholarship to help pay for tuition required her to compose an essay describing a part of the Social Work field she wanted to contribute towards and help improve. When applying for a Graduate Scholarship, she was able to refer back to the ten-minute ADS speech she had recently given.

RACHEL: “You had to propose something that would help enrich your community in the Social Work grad application. How did you connect your speech to this?”

Angie explained that in the application essay she talked about how she wanted to continue toward a Master’s in Social Work, where she would write grants and policy proposals that would help disabled students as well as other disabled individuals across the country. While researching her speech, she had learned a great deal about what was lacking not only on campus but in other facilities as well. Her “non-school” writing had inspired her to seek out ways to help those in the academic community and even beyond the school setting. Her essay was accepted by the graduate program, and Angie received an additional scholarship to help manage expenses with her degree.

ANGIE: “I advocated for better ADA guidelines and won a graduate scholarship because of it [the ADS]. Beyond that, [writing my ADS] helped me to speak up more about the issues I’m concerned about, and that’s reflected in my grad school papers. I can express what I feel in a more professional way.”

Angie’s experience with public speaking and Forensics in general has improved her ability to confidently speak in groups about what she’s passionate about and to organize her thoughts and ideas through composition in a more effective way. Here Angie achieves the goal of trajectory with “non-school” composition, which means she is able to simultaneously improve her handling of “real world” concepts and her academic writing. In saying “real world,” I am talking about genres that are not based in schoolwork, although schoolwork can and often does have “real world” implications or is created with these implications in mind.

Speeches for competition, writing in our free time, forum posts on websites, blogs, even Facebook, help improve our skills as writers in the classroom. The work we do for class can help us learn more about our chosen career fields. For Angie, the process of writing an After Dinner Speaking public address for competition enriched the work she did in school and provided the material for her successful graduate school entry essay. Angie crossed the bridge from student to Forensic competitor, back to student again. While her communication genres changed multiple times, she was still writing in all these situations, just with a different purpose.



Rachel Parish is currently working towards her Master's degree in Professional Writing and Rhetorics at Illinois State but holds an unofficial degree in Photography from NintendoU, with a Specialization in Pokemon Snap. While holding a close passion to Visual Rhetoric and Authorship, Rachel also likes to read numerous volumes of Manga (Japanese graphic novels), play old school video games on her N64, Original Nintendo, and Sega Genesis, draw cartoons involving both fictionalized and real people, and can quote the entire script of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" as well as "Labyrinth" word for word.

