

TO: Teachers participating in the **We the People** national finals
FROM: Robert S. Leming
SUBJECT: Tips for preparing your students

The Center for Civic Education has developed the following tips for preparing students for the national finals. These tips are based on observations and comments from competition judges.

We provide the judges with relevant and fair criteria and instructions for evaluating your class's performance. The instructions strongly emphasize that judges should evaluate the content of students' prepared statements as well as their responses to judges' follow-up questions.

These tips are meant as suggestions only. There is no formula that will guarantee a winning team.

What do judges look for in the opening statement?

Judges emphasize the criteria on the score sheet. They also check that students answer the question and the sub-questions specifically and that they make good use of their time.

Should I have one student read the opening statement or should I have my students share the presentation?

Sharing the opening statement may be the most effective way of ensuring the participation of most students. However, we advise judges not to mark classes down when only one or two students make the opening statement.

Should my students memorize the opening statement?

Center guidelines expressly allow the use of notes during prepared statements. While it is permissible to use notes, it is best not to read them verbatim but to use them as an aid in making presentations.

In the instructions given to judges, it is stressed that neither the use of notes nor memorization should affect the group's scores. Some judges have even observed that memorizing can lead to more stress especially when students forget their lines and do not know how to proceed.

Should my students stand or sit when presenting?

We recommend that students remain seated when they make their presentations. This seems to put the students more at ease and helps their

presentation appear less staged. This is the usual procedure at congressional and other hearings.

How should I prepare my students for the follow-up questions?

Involve as many community experts and **We the People** alumni as possible in brainstorming sessions with your students. These sessions can help students anticipate the types of questions they might be asked, increase their understanding of complex constitutional issues, and provide experience in the exchange of ideas. If you need help identifying community experts and/or **We the People** alumni, contact your state or district coordinator.

What do judges look for in the follow-up questioning?

In addition to the criteria on the scoresheet, judges also look for

- comprehensive knowledge of the entire unit, not just the section that answers the specific question.
- understanding of underlying constitutional principles involved in the question.
- application of abstract principles to real-life situations.
- ability to support and refute different positions on issues.
- willingness to explore issues with the judges.

Effective participation goes beyond ensuring that every student speaks. The comments of each individual student should demonstrate relevance to the ongoing discussion.

What if my students don't agree with each other on the answers to the questions asked?

A team should not feel that all members must agree on an issue and present a consensus position. Genuine disagreement expressed with civility has been impressive to judges. Judges have commented unfavorably, however, when the differences of opinion appeared staged or artificial.

What if the judges don't agree with the point of view of my students?

We stress that judges are not to evaluate on the basis of their own opinions or positions, but on the ability of students to provide well-reasoned support for their positions and answers.

How much influence does the presentation style of my students have on judges' scoring?

Judges are advised to rate students on the content rather than the style of their presentation. Judges have mentioned, however, that students speaking too rapidly can make it difficult to understand the points that they are trying to make.

Also, judges comment that staged presentations and follow-up are often not convincing. Judges want to see students sincerely present their own thinking rather than prepackaged, theatrical demonstrations.

What should my students wear?

We emphasize to judges that clothing and grooming are not relevant factors in judging student performance. It is our experience that judges follow our guidelines and do not discriminate on the basis of clothing or grooming. Therefore, there is no need for students to purchase special clothing for the competition.