



## Evidence Philosophy and Standards

*This document outlines a set of recommendations for the use of evidence in debate rounds. These standards are not rules, but they are “best practices” that our organization wants to strongly encourage. Stoa has a commitment to high standards of ethics and accountability and believes that these standards advance these goals. This document begins with the biblical principles undergirding the specifics of the standards that follow.*

### A Philosophy of Evidence Ethics

Perhaps the greatest potential for ethical failure in the debate activity arises in the use of the quoted word or what we traditionally call “evidence”.

We can subdivide (or classify) all of a debater’s speech into two broad categories: 1) the student’s own words and; 2) the words of others. A competitor, using his own words, is granted considerable leeway in the use of these words because the thoughts and words are his and the responsibility and consequences of these words is his as well. A speaker’s words are the property of the speaker—as is the responsibility for those words. If a speaker speaks in error, the speaker alone bears the responsibility for the error, but when a speaker speaks on behalf of someone else, they place another person’s reputation at stake.

An ecclesiastic model...

Some of our students may become pastors, elders, teachers or even Bible translators. To quote, teach or translate the word of God is a tremendous responsibility and one that all Christians should take very seriously. We are training many of our students for these monumental tasks. If speech and debate allows (or even trains) them to play fast and loose with their quoted evidence, what can we expect when they move on to bigger things? How reliably will they translate scripture? How tempted will they be to misquote scripture to make a point in an article or a sermon?

A courtroom model...

Evidence, when read into a debate round, is akin to calling a witness to the dock in a courtroom. The author of the quoted evidence becomes a witness who is testifying in our debate round. The witness may be attesting to a matter of fact or he may be providing his expert opinion on a subject. To misrepresent the words or intent of the witness in a court of law is “tampering” with a witness and this carries considerable legal consequences. Some of our students will pursue legal careers. If our students develop unethical practices in high school debate, how can we expect them to overcome these bad habits learned in this preparatory activity?

For these and a host of other reasons, our students must learn and practice honest and ethical use of the quoted word.

## I. Why is evidence handling an important issue?

### 1) It reveals the heart

A student who intentionally misuses evidence is placing competitive success ahead of integrity and justice. This is a spiritual problem that should be identified and corrected. A student who intentionally misuses evidence either has, or will have, other ethical and heart issues. It is always best to identify personality and spiritual weaknesses early in life so they can be overcome before they expand.

There can be a heart issue even if a student is not misusing evidence, but is avoiding full accountability. This failure to submit to standards of accountability and/or to the accountability of others demonstrates pride and a dangerous overconfidence.

### 2) It establishes a pattern for life

It is easy to say or think, “I will take a ‘shortcut’ now, but later in life, when it really matters, I will be completely upright”. The truth of the matter is that the practice of sin dulls us to other sins. The Lord may deal with our hardness of heart in “small things” and judge us with greater hardness of heart in the “bigger” things. This is one of the many reasons why, there are no “small things” and this is a prime reason why we must teach uprightness at the outset of every activity.

### 3) It can be a positive or a negative witness to the world

The world is watching—even when we are unaware. If our students are a bad witness for Christ, then all of our labors are in vain. Of course our primary audience is our Lord for whom we should always try to be beyond reproach.

### 4) It is a matter of biblical principle

#### Do not bear false witness

If a student alters or misrepresents evidence, the student is giving a false testimony of what that author actually said or intended. The ninth commandment is explicitly clear in its prohibition of this practice. (Exodus 20:16 & Deuteronomy 5:20)

#### Do not steal

If we use unethical means to achieve a benefit, we are essentially stealing that benefit. This is especially true in the forensic world because the ill-gained success comes at the expense of another competitor or competitors. (Exodus 20:15 & Deuteronomy 5:19)

#### Treat others as we wish to be treated

Would any student want their opponent to alter or misrepresent evidence in an attempt to defeat them in competition? Probably not. Therefore our students should follow the Lord’s golden rule. “Do to others as you would have them do to you.” (Luke 6:31, NIV)

We should act justly

What does the Lord require of us? To do justice.

“He has shown you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8, NIV)

- If I misrepresent evidence, am I acting justly?
- If, through my deceit, I defeat an honest opponent, am I loving mercy?
- If I attempt to elevate myself in the tournament results through dishonesty, am I walking humbly?

## **II. Why do we need evidence standards?**

- 1) The existence of an evidence standards document communicates the importance of evidence handling to the members of our organization.
- 2) Evidence standards provide a path to some degree of evidence uniformity in our organization.
- 3) A standards document helps honest competitors avoid ethical breaches and even the appearance of ethical breaches.
- 4) Evidence standards can be a deterrent to those who might be tempted to cheat.
- 5) Evidence standards aid our community in achieving accountability.

## **III. Steps for maintaining ethical practice in this area:**

As a Christian organization, we need regular and ongoing efforts to direct all of our participants (coaches, parents, students, and judges) toward a distinctively Christian vision of our activities. We all need to study, consider, and discuss both the principles and the application of how we engage in forensic activities. To these goals, we must be devoted and purposeful. We must have both formal and informal education of students, parents, coaches, and as much as possible, judges.

Each of these groups has different educational needs. It is not possible to fully educate a community judge in all of the issues of evidence handling during a 30-minute orientation. For this group a few basic pointers are all that can be taught in a single orientation. Coaches and parents, on the other hand, need training in evidence ethics (and other issues) that is comprehensive and broad.

## **IV. Levels of accountability and oversight**

As a Christian organization, we have all tools and structures that we need to properly address these matters. With the guidance and oversight of coaches, parents, judges and peers we can adequately deal with these issues. The following is a list of the tools that are already available to us.

- 1) Education of our students (appeal to the head)
- 2) Motivation of our students to embrace high standards (appeal to the heart)
- 3) Oversight of parents
- 4) Oversight of partner
- 5) Oversight of coach
- 6) Oversight of opponents
- 7) Oversight of judge
- 8) Oversight of the broad community  
(Those observing a debate round, including tournament personnel, other clubs, etc.)

These tools will only promote high ethical standards if we choose to use them for this purpose.

## **V. The two extremes to be avoided**

In our desire to develop good evidence handling and strong ethics, it is possible to error in several different directions. We can be naïve, apathetic, or inactive on these issues with the result that ethical failings will gradually become more prevalent. This is a great disservice to our students. Or we can become so obsessed with the matter that we look for a fault behind every bush with the result that we make the activity miserable for everyone and drive our student's hearts in the wrong direction.

We must remember that ethical failures in the handling of evidence can be inadvertent or intentional. As parents and coaches, we need to guard against the dangerous emotions of frustration and anger relating to these issues. We would do well to remember that our students are sinners (not much different from us) and that life for the believer is a process of sanctification. If we observe ethical failures, we should verify, assess motive, consult with wise counselors, stay calm, and then address the issue with appropriate grace.

We should also remember that the greatest majority of evidence handling failures are not an intentional effort to cheat but are the result of inadequate instruction, carelessness, or haste.

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# Evidence Standards

The following document outlines four different sets of standards:

- I. Qualification Standards** help us determine when to give certain words the additional weight of “evidence”. How do we know when we have gone beyond the words and opinions of the debater to the words and opinions of an expert?
- II. Source Standards** help us avoid the pitfalls of misrepresenting a source or of misrepresenting the credibility of a source.
- III. Extraction and Editing Standards** help us in our efforts to be faithful to the original words and intent of the author.
- IV. Oral Presentation - Best Practices** help us to properly represent our evidence in our oral communication.

## I. Qualification Standards

### Introduction to qualification standards

These standards are not intended to measure the credibility or weightiness of a piece of evidence. Instead, these standards are intended to identify a set of minimal criteria to determine whether the “evidence” is really evidence. (Should the words attributed to a particular source be given greater value than the debater’s opinion?)

Just because quoted material meets the standards presented in this document does not mean that the claim in the evidence is true nor does it make the evidence beyond challenge by an opponent. All evidence does not carry equal weight in the debate round. A multitude of factors including source credibility, recency, and even grammar will give some pieces of evidence more weight or consideration in a debate round than others. The qualification standards in this section are intended to suggest minimum requirements for when material is given more consideration than the opinion of the debater.

These standards have several goals/purposes:

- 1) To create tests to determine if something spoken in a debate round is really evidence or rather just the opinion of the speaker.
- 2) To accurately and fairly represent the ideas of others
- 3) To minimize ethical infractions
- 4) To maximize accountability

## **What qualifies something as evidence?**

### **1) The source should be in the public domain**

The evidence should come from a source that is published and available to the general public. Public domain sources may come with a cost or they may be free. The existence of a subscription cost or other fees for access does not take a source out of the public domain.

Public domain sources include: books, newspapers, magazines, professional journals, government documents and all published material. Articles and content from Internet web pages are also considered “public domain”.

Unpublished quoted material from personal correspondence is not considered public domain and is not classified as evidence in the debate round.

#### **Justification for the standard:**

This standard enhances accountability. If the source document is not publically available, it is difficult or impossible to verify the evidence or the source of the evidence.

### **2) The source and the evidence should be in textual (printed or written) form.**

This standard applies to the original source and to the presence of the evidence in the round.

**The original source** should be in text form (either printed or electronic). Video and audio presentations do not meet this standard. However if a textual transcription of the audio is published, this published text qualifies as evidence. Some television and radio programs post transcripts of their programs on their web sites and this meets the standard.

A news service’s transcript of the President’s State of the Union Address meets this standard, but the debater’s own transcription from the television broadcast does not.

**The evidence in the round** should also be in written or printed form.

All evidence used in the round should be physically present on paper. Audio or video recordings should not be played in the round, but even if they were, they would fail this standard.

Memorized evidence that is not available on paper in the round does not meet this standard because it cannot be handed to an opposing team or judge for analysis and review.

#### **Justification for the standard:**

This standard gives the greatest assurance of an accurate relay of the precise words of the author.

### **3) Evidence should have a complete source citation**

The most important factor underlying this standard is that there should be sufficient information to enable someone else to easily retrieve the evidence. Any source citation that fails this test should disqualify the evidence. Beyond this, the following components should be included in every source citation.

A complete source citation should include:

- Author
- Name of publication
- Date of publication
- Page number (if from a book or large document)

If the evidence is from an electronic source (Internet), the citation should also include:

- The complete URL (or other source locator)
- Access date

Evidence has very little value unless the author or the source of the quotation has qualifications. Debaters should be diligent to include these qualifications in their source.

In some instances, a published article may not provide the name of the author. In this event, the citation should note that no author name is available. This may include a statement like: “no author provided”. It is also possible that some published material may not include a publication date. In this situation, the citation should include a statement like: “no publication date available”.

When quoting evidence in a debate round, it is not necessary to read the complete source citation, but the complete citation must be on the evidence card or the brief.

#### **Justification for the standard:**

A complete source citation aids in the accountability and verification of the evidence  
A complete source citation aids in the in-round evaluation of evidence. This may help to answer questions like: Who wrote this? Who published this? Is this a peer-reviewed publication? Does this author or publication have any biases?

### **4) Evidence should be read verbatim in the round.**

A paraphrase (or summary) is not the same as a quotation. The opponent, the judge, and the audience in a debate round all need to hear the precise words of the author of the quotation. The debater is free to analyze, paraphrase, explain, or summarize their evidence before or after it is read. But unless the quotation is read verbatim, it does not carry the weight of evidence.

#### **Justification for the standard:**

There are several reasons for this standard. First, even a well-meaning debater cannot help but to infuse his or her own perspective and biases into their paraphrase of the evidence. This alters the message of the evidence and may give it greater strength than it deserves. Second, this practice modifies the author’s words without his consent. Third, if paraphrasing were to replace the

verbatim reading of evidence, teams would have to ask for, and inspect, every piece of their opponent's evidence because paraphrasing may hide weaknesses in the evidence. Fourth, paraphrasing introduces two versions of the evidence into the round: the spoken version and the paper version.

## II. Source Standards

The following should be avoided:

Quoting from a blog unless it is sponsored by an organization that regulates who can post and assures the identity and credentials of the author

Quoting from web pages where the author is a student with less than a bachelor's degree.

Quoting anything that the student or the student's friends wrote

### **Justification for the standard:**

The Internet allows anyone to become a published author. If we are not careful, our high school debaters may find themselves citing information that is clearly not credible or reliable. These standards also aid in accountability by preventing a student from creating their own quotable content.

## III. Extraction and Editing Standards

Debate evidence must be extracted from the original source document with extreme care.

Once extracted, evidence needs to quote from the first word of a sentence to an ending punctuation without omission or addition. Ellipsis, gray-out, strike-through or other indicators of omission should not be used. The portion of the original text that is extracted as evidence must not alter the meaning or intent of the author.

The debater is responsible for any textual omission or textual addition. In the event that the judge feels that a debater's editing of evidence alters the intent, magnitude, or credibility of the evidence, the judge is free to discipline this improper editing by issuing a loss to the offending team.

Quotations from different sources should never be merged into one piece of evidence.



Non-contiguous quotations from the same document should not be merged into one piece of evidence.

If evidence is placed on a page with content that is not evidence (as one would do in a 1AC or in a brief), the formatting of the page must clearly differentiate the evidence from the non-evidence. This can be accomplished by the use of quotation marks or the more common practice of double indentation of the quoted material.

In addition to the standards presented above, it is the responsibility of the debater to assure that their evidence accurately reflects the intent of the original document. The student should:

...handle evidence as if the author of the source document will be your judge every time you read the card.

...handle evidence in such a manner that your opponent would consent to the way you pulled it

...handle evidence according to established debate norms

## **IV. Oral Presentation of Evidence**

### ***Best practices of delivery***

#### ***Maintaining ethics and accountability in the delivery of evidence***

Properly placing evidence on paper is only half of the battle. It is possible for evidence to be properly extracted from a source document and properly recorded on the debater's card or brief, but to deliver it in a deceptive way in the round.

Here are some examples of possible abuses:

\*A student reads only selected portions of a piece of evidence, leaving out troublesome or clarifying words or phrases.

\*A student orally embellishes the evidence by adding words during the reading of evidence

\*After reading a quotation, a student goes right into their own analysis in an attempt to make their analysis appear as part of the evidence.

In each of the cases described above, a review of the physical evidence may find that it meets all evidence standards, but the oral presentation did not accurately reflect the printed evidence. In other words, the printed quotation was accurate, but the spoken quotation was erroneous.

One of our prime objectives should be to communicate quoted material (evidence) accurately and clearly to the audience. Since quoted material is likely to be given more weight than the speaker's opinion, we want to adopt practices that effectively communicate to the audience precisely what is on the card or brief. The task of accurately distinguishing the quoted word from the non-quoted word is easier to achieve when we use the written word. Quotation marks and double indentations, when properly used, make this distinction abundantly clear in the

printed word. This task is far more difficult when we set our pens and paper aside and choose to employ the spoken word.

It is, of course, possible to say, “quote” and “end quote” at the beginning and end of each piece of evidence, but this practice becomes annoying to an audience—especially if there is much cited evidence. (Although we may not want to rely on saying “quote” and “end quote” as a matter of standard practice, it can be a useful tool, if used sparingly, to clarify a particularly difficult quotation or an awkward verbal transition.)

Because of the difficulty of this task of accurate oral use of evidence, coaches and parents should exert extra energy into coaching this area of the activity.

Orally communicating the quoted word is a difficult task requiring a variety of more nuanced approaches. Here are some useful techniques for achieving our goal.

1) The source should precede the quotation.

This has been the norm in academic debate for decades—and with good reason. The citation of a source before reading the quotation accomplishes several objectives. First, it tells the audience that quoted material is to follow. This substitutes for saying, “quote” at the beginning of each piece of evidence. Second, by knowing the identity and qualifications of the source prior to the reading of the evidence, the audience can evaluate the author’s words in light of the credibility or reputation of the author.

There is one noteworthy exception to this standard and it relates to quotations used to open a speech. In some instances, the speaker may want to achieve a dramatic effect by opening a speech with the words of someone else (quoted words) and not reveal the source until after the conclusion of the quotation.

2) Go right from the source to the quotation.

Generally, the speaker should not place their own words between the reading of the source and the reading of the quotation. Any non-quoted material that might be spoken before the quotation can too easily be mistaken for the words of the quoted source.

3) Use verbal techniques to indicate the end of the quoted material

These might include a slight pause, a change of voice tone or inflection, or an alteration of delivery speed.

4) Use nonverbal indicators to indicate the end of the quoted material

This is easily achieved through the debater’s physical handling of their evidence. If the student is reading from a card or a brief, there will usually be less eye contact with the judge while reading the quotation. When the debater is finished reading the evidence, they will usually resume normal eye contact with the audience and the physical card or brief will be repositioned in some manner.

## **Conclusion**

With regard to the use of evidence in a debate round, our goal should be to go beyond the letter of the law and to seek to embrace its spirit. We want to accurately convey the ideas of others; we want to hold ourselves accountable; we want to follow established norms for evidence; and we want to orally communicate to our audience what we have carefully placed on paper. Looking at the big picture, we want to avoid the temptation to place winning ahead of our ethical treatment, and delivery, of evidence.

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