

Certamen Tips Addendum

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Having played and practiced much Certamen throughout our high school career, we have come up with several useful guidelines that have helped in making our Certamen playing successful. So, in the manner of our predecessor, Mark Spreitzer, whose own tips taught us much, we too have decided to compile and share our insights and observations so that others might benefit from them as well.

PRACTICE A LOT

As obvious as this may seem, continual practice is integral to becoming a better Certamen player. Too often, good players will stop practicing believing that they will continue to win matches at their current level. This is not true. As with the translating Latin tip in Michael Pomeranz’s “Tips about Studying Latin”, your Certamen skills begin to decline once you stop training. Experienced players will probably tell you that even a brief respite from practice causes their anticipatory abilities to become dull. So, it is vital that you attend practice whenever possible. You will be able to both sharpen the recall of knowledge gained through outside readings as well as improve your buzzing skills. Furthermore, we recommend that you try writing your own Certamen questions when you are doing your own readings. For some, this is a very effective method to retain what they read. Thus, you should definitely give it a try at least once to see if it works for you.

BETTER RESPONSE TECHNIQUES

As you continue to progress in your Certamen/buzzing abilities, you may begin to wonder if there are ways in which you could fine-tune some of the skills you have gained. Usually, you will only need to tap into these methods when the competition is very intense, as they are risks involved. One such technique is quickly calculating the probability of a possible answer choice and answering the question before enough information is given. This may seem vague, so let’s look at an example scenario:

Question – Which of the following words do not belong with the rest? Amicus, Vulgus, Vulnus, mare, oppidum

Answer – Amicus (its gender is masculine while the rest of the words are neuter)

In the above question, a player, should he recognize the pattern, has a 50/50 chance of answering properly once the moderator mentions “vulgus”. Depending on the competition, it may be a very good idea to guess at that point. You may be afraid of the chance of being wrong, but you have to understand that you have the same chance of getting it right and more importantly that risk is a primary element of Certamen.

Another technique that may be less risky but harder to master is reading the moderator’s lips. Thus, this skill takes practice. Eventually, you will be able to anticipate the next word of a question based on a moderator’s lip movement in certain situations.

STRICT ADHERENCE TO NJCL CERTAMEN RULES EVEN DURING PRACTICE

This recommendation is pretty straightforward. The NJCL Certamen Championship is the most prestigious Certamen event in the nation, and thus its rules are the strictest that you will probably find. Since some of you will be competing at the national level, it is important that you become accustomed to the format, part of which are the rules, of those matches. So, you should impose strict discipline on yourself and follow rules such as time limit for questions and submitting your first response as your official answer.

REQUIRED GRAMMAR SKILLS

You have been told from the first day of practice that Latin grammar skills are critical for success in Certamen. However, after the initial competitions you may have come to the conclusion that your team can win rounds without being masters at grammar. And then, a few competitions later, you find yourself

terrified as you face one grammar question after another. Not only are there more, but they are harder as well. The lesson to be learned: know your grammar. We strongly recommend that you read Aisha Ahmad's "How to Master Ars Grammaticae" as a starting point for conquering grammar.

Once you have learned most of grammar, you will probably find that that is simply not enough, especially as you move up the levels. You will be required to decline and conjugate words in split seconds and sometimes form sentences from them within a span of a few seconds. So, how do you become proficient at this? Practice. The more you expose yourself to grammar questions and answer them in front of the buzzer, the faster you will become. As you can see, there are no secrets to this whole issue. Only a lot of commitment and dedication will bring the desired results.

As you compete late in your Latin II year and in Upper Level, you will find that you have to know all sorts of uncommon to rare constructions. Thus, if you are responsible for heading the grammar division in your team, you will have to be very familiar with translating and the usages of quo, quominus (as well as other relative clauses), cum, dum, and donec clauses. In addition, you will have to know arcane constructions such as the "Ethical Dative." The best way to learn these is probably through Allen and Greenough's New Latin Grammar or an equivalent book.

SPECIALIZATION AND GOAL-SETTING

People should generally be doing well and improving on tests in areas they are specializing. One way you can make sure this happens is by setting individual goals for yourself. For example, you may be the mythology specialist on your team and you might have placed 8th among Latin I students at the NJCL Convention following your freshman year. Your goal then for the NJCL Convention following your sophomore year should be to place among the top 5. Whatever your goals may be, it is important that you continue to improve instead of stagnating or declining.

USE YOUR DOMINANT HAND

This is quite obvious. Unless your dominant hand is injured, you should always use it in both tournaments and practice. Unfortunately, sometimes players become lethargic during the latter scenario and switch hands so that they can keep their dominant hand busy (e.g. with cell phones, GameBoys, and etc.). The usual result of this is a drop in the response rate of the player, which of course defeats the whole purpose of practice. So if it is working, always use your dominant hand.

DIVIDE LISTENING DUTIES ON ORAL LATIN

Although everyone is responsible for knowing their Latin grammar, you will usually have a player or two (the latter is preferred, but you can still use this tip with just one expert player) specialize in the subject (i.e. know uncommon/rare constructions as well as be fast at language usage). So, in order to fully exploit their (we will be assuming there are two grammar experts henceforth) potential during sentence construction bonus questions, they should decide who should handle what part of the sentence prior to the match. That means for example, one person will handle the protasis and dependent clauses, while the other will take care of the apodosis and independent clauses. Whatever the division, just make sure each player knows what sections they are responsible for before the game begins.

AVOID LAST ROUND BURN-OUT

This tip is based on our own experience during earlier years. After performing splendidly in earlier rounds, you might face a Cannae-an defeat or gain a Pyrrhic victory in the last round of the meet (e.g. round 3 in the regular Illinois Certamen League preliminary matches), regardless of your opponents. This can happen for several reasons: overconfidence, fatigue and drowsiness, degradation of coordination and cohesion among team members, and etc. Whatever it may be, should your team encounter this undesirable phenomenon, you ought to figure out the cause as soon as possible after the match, so that it can be avoided in the future. For example, if you are experiencing a kind of sluggishness going into the last round, it could be due to hunger; so, in order to rectify the issue, you can bring a quick snack/drink to the meet with you or make sure that you eat well before the competition starts. Hopefully, this effect

won't occur for the first time for you during a highly critical match like a championship, but always be mindful of it and take steps to avoid it.

TAKE NOTES DURING PRACTICE (ESPECIALLY WHEN YOU'RE NEW)

During Certamen practices, a sea of information begins to flow through the air of Room 204, not only in the form of questions, but also in the form of the brief lectures from the wiser, more attractive, veteran Certamen players. Inevitably, you will not be able to remember every single important piece of information flowing through this sea, so you ought to keep a pencil and piece of paper handy during your first year of Certamen. This will allow you to assimilate major facts more quickly, which is very useful at the Latin I level as there is a smaller pool of knowledge to master.

GET READY FOR THE UPPER LEVEL

The leap from Latin II to Upper Certamen is a much greater leap than that from Latin I to Latin II. Your momma ain't here to help you no more, so to speak. It can be especially difficult for Latin III students to compete with Latin IV students, and can become more difficult still at NJCL where one is likely to encounter a number of Latin VII (yes, VII) students. A team should start to divvy up subjects towards the end of Latin I; by the time they get to the Upper Level, it will be impossible for one person to master sufficiently every aspect of classical learning.

Other than the larger knowledge base, the primary work of Upper Certamen is the subject of literature; at the Latin II level, you are not even required to know who wrote the Aeneid, whereas at the Upper level you should be familiar with nearly every author who has an extant classical Latin work. However, you (or at least one member of your team) should not fear literature, but rather embrace it, as it is ultimately the source of every other discipline within Certamen: mythology, history, mottoes, grammar, and the like. Appoint one or two literature specialists, perhaps splitting it up by prose and poetry, or by BC and AD.

The Upper level is also where you will begin to run into obscure facts, primarily in history and mythology. It is important that you remain diligent and continue to read a diversity of texts on your specialty and review those texts which you have already read. Multiple source-reading is especially important as you will often be asked to give a version of a myth "according to Gaius So-and-So" instead of just any version.

CHALLENGE EVERYTHING

You have spent countless hours practicing Certamen and have diligently delved into a number of works of classical knowledge. You are smart. When an answer of which you were 100% certain is called incorrect, something may be fishy. Certamen question writers are not perfect, and errors arise. If anyone on the team thinks that an answer one of the teammates gave was correct, discreetly discuss it, and if the group is in agreement, have your captain ask to challenge it after the tossup is dead but before the next tossup or boni are begun (if another team gets it). For a challenge to a bonus, challenge right after the bonus in question. Fight for all the points you deserve.

Challenging another team's allegedly correct answer which you believe to be incorrect is a touchier subject. It would be bad sportsmanship to challenge such an answer in a round in which you have a massive lead. You probably should not do it unless the match is going to be close.

CAPTAINS, SERVE YOUR TEAMMATES

I, Smokey Rivers, was the captain of Northside's Upper Certamen team for the 2006-07 season. Clearly, it does not take anything special to be the captain of a Certamen team. Therefore, captains, do not get a big head about being captain. I have seen teams that do not have any sense of unity because they have a hotshot captain, and these teams do not do well. Captains, you have a vital role as the head of the team, and it is your duty to make every player feel useful, to praise good performances, and to encourage your teammates when they are down.

During boni, make eye contact with each of your teammates before answering and make sure all are in agreement. NEVER give an answer to a bonus without first consulting. Sometimes, when the moderator has asked for an answer to a bonus and the team is not in agreement, you may have to make an executive decision about which to use. Make a confident choice and stand by it. If it's incorrect, accept it and move on.

A TEAM'S RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE CAPTAIN (BY KAVINDA)

The first and the foremost thing that all players must understand about captaincy is that it is a hard job. So, for a team to function effectively as possible, the rest of the team needs to reduce the stress placed upon the captain. That means, provided that the captain himself is responsible, the team needs to stand by his decisions during bonus questions. Sometimes, a captain will receive several conflicting answers from his teammates in a bonus and at those times, he needs to make a decision within several seconds. He will often try to have each player back his own answer (e.g. through a synopsis of a story surrounding an answer), but eventually will have to pick one of the choices. Now regardless of the outcome that the response causes, it is the duty of the rest of team to support the decision that was made. If you start to contend with the captain during the game, it will create unnecessary tension and probably will result in poor performance by the team as a whole. However, players should always feel comfortable approaching their captain afterwards to discuss something that did not go well during the match and the captain in turn should be receptive to his teammates.

USE ALL THE TIME YOU CAN GET (AND A LITTLE BIT MORE) ON BONI

If and when the team is 100% certain, answer immediately, but otherwise use all the time you are allotted to come up with an answer. The responsibility of making sure this is done falls on the captain. That extra second you wait before just guessing "Julius Caesar" may give your history person the chance to figure out that they're looking for Fabius Maximus. Taking your time is also immensely useful when you have to answer in Latin, so that you can go over the sentence again and avoid getting tongue-tied. Moderators are inconsistent in the amount of time they give you for boni, but most err on the side of too much, so use it all. Usually, you can stall for two seconds after the moderator says "I need an answer" before your time is truly up, so use that when you can as well.

SPORTSMANSHIP

Win or lose, you must respect your opponents and tell them they did a good job after each round. Certamen matches can get very competitive, and it is important that when the final scores are read you come back down to earth for a moment to remember that you are all just a bunch of kids trying to have some fun with the classics. Surely, you would want your opponents to be gracious to you in either victory or defeat, so do the same for them.

SET A GROOVE; ESTABLISH A SEATING ORDER

Our recommendation is that you have your captain sit in the two or three position, and that you have your two strongest grammarians next to each other. Besides those rules, the most important thing about seating order is that you keep it the same. Sitting in a different order can mess up your mojo; maintaining a consistent seating order helps a team get into a groove. Also, always try to be the middle team, especially if it will be a non-buzzer round.