

Troy's Top Ten Mock Trial Do's & Don'ts

For Coaches:

DO

1. use videotape to track progress of students and polish arguments
2. silly team building/motivational stuff like team T-shirts
3. ask for help from colleagues, parents, other educators at practices to lend different perspectives
4. make students do their homework (weekly drafts of questions—and you need to give comments weekly as well)
5. think globally about other concerns (courtroom decorum, what students should wear, etc.—beyond just questions and answers)
6. make practices progress logically (pick roles then choose themes then develop questions and arguments)
7. do mini-mocks for practice in front of an audience and feedback from teammates
8. track progress for end of the season debriefings (I put it all on a spreadsheet—our attorneys vs. other team, our witnesses vs. other team, break all of it down and list nominations for outstanding performances by judges after both regional and state competitions)
9. develop your own style
10. solicit advice from seasoned coaches—Many other coaches gave me some invaluable advice before I began my first season as a coach, but I have developed a way of doing things which is uniquely my own

DON'T

1. let students dictate the practice schedule—you set the time and they can be there or not participate, it's the only way to deal with high school students
2. let students choose their own roles—you pick where they will help the TEAM most, not where they will have the most fun
3. lose control of practices—think controlled chaos and not total anarchy
4. be afraid to chew the students out if necessary, I have had to do this and it has turned out OK
5. take yourself too seriously—you may have some special technical knowledge but the primary focus is teaching the students about the court system not puffing yourself up
6. forget to use your timekeeper, I always put them in charge of exhibits, it makes the otherwise basically boring role seem more important
7. be afraid to ask your more experienced students for opinions/advice if necessary (I did this as a first year coach and it really helped)
8. tell war stories—use examples to get your point across but the students do not want to hear about the time that.....
9. underestimate the value of your educator partner—they are worth their weight in gold and let you focus on teaching mock trial and not all the other noise that accompanies working with kids at times
10. forget to have FUN, if you aren't having fun, why do this? Mock Trial ROCKS!

For Students:

DO

1. work as a team—the other 3 attorneys at the counsel table have to help out the questioning attorney by finding passages for impeachment and help when needed with objections
2. be alert—you are all on camera all the time and the judges will be watching so keep your head in the game and stay in character until the closing argument is finished
3. know where the focus is—directing attorneys should yield the spotlight to the witnesses, crossing attorneys should jealously keep the spotlight and NOT let the witness take it from them
4. use notes sparingly if at all for arguments, it always impresses the judges when you memorize your arguments
5. use the timekeeper in practice, they are fabulous tools to point out when you are going way too long or need more questions to fill unused time
6. continue through mistakes—just say what you meant and go on (making a big deal, a face, noise, or gesture just draws more attention to your mistake)
7. show emotion both as witnesses and attorneys, this is supposed to be someone's life at stake in a first degree murder trial and somebody is supposed to have died, so be angry, sad, scared, whatever, just show some emotion
8. use visual aids where appropriate (flip charts, tape flags, dry erase markers), it can really add to a presentation when done correctly
9. maintain eye contact between questioning attorneys and witnesses
10. try to simulate reality wherever possible, this “acting” will score you points and make things more fun to both perform and watch

DON'T

1. confuse mock trial with TV and do something outlandish then say “withdrawn”—I have a standing rule that if any of my students do anything that could be shown on “The Practice” that I will immediately throw something heavy or sharp or both at them
2. zip through questions and not listen to what your witness gives as an answer
3. forget which side you are on—as the state, the defendant's name is “the defendant” or “Mr. X, the defendant”; as defense, you should never use the word “defendant” because your client has a name, is a person, and we should care about them
4. ever make the judge ask you to speak up so you can be heard
5. get docked for stupid things you have total control over like what you are wearing (this happened to one of my teams at state)
6. forget the judges packets for pretrial and don't wait until the night before competition to prepare them
7. identify where you are from, stay away from wearing school colors, and remind any family members who may be coming to do the same
8. forget to be respectful of the courthouse, play your role as it would be done if this was real
9. think you can wing this stuff, it takes practice and lots of it
10. lose out on opportunities like coaches clinics to get some perspective from other people besides your own coaches

For Judges:

DO

1. use the scoring guide, it is very helpful
2. attend the free CLE, it's a win/win—you learn how to judge and get the free hours
3. watch the off center stage students too, this is an area for team score points to be given or deducted
4. try to write comments for each student's performance, it helps for all of them to benefit from your experience and observations
5. give short general comments or tips at the end or targeted specific comments
6. nominate students for outstanding awards where appropriate, those things are very important to students
7. listen carefully to objections and responses to objections
8. treat parties involved as you would like the court to treat you, or if you are a real judge, as you would treat anyone in your courtroom
9. watch out for the team score, it is a really good tie breaker if needed
10. understand this is a very big deal to students, coaches, parents, etc., so take it seriously

DON'T

1. be a windbag when it is time for comments, tournaments run on schedules (I can't stress this one enough)
2. hold students to standards of practicing attorneys—use age appropriate scoring
3. be afraid to preside, it's fun to sit in the big chair for once, and you get a killer view of the courtroom from up there
4. forget that sometimes it may be useful to rule incorrectly on an objection to see how students react—use this technique sparingly though
5. take overly long recesses, again the schedule thing
6. blow off the judges briefing, it never hurts to hear that stuff again
7. be afraid to recuse yourself if it is even close to a conflict (knowing a student, connection to the school), it is not terribly uncommon to have to shuffle judges between trials
8. begin comments until all scoring is completed and the runners have the ballots
9. be afraid to ask the attorneys questions during objections
10. forget to tell all your friends/colleagues what a great experience judging is