

The American Mock Trial Association

Quick Tips for Online Mock Trial Competitions¹

Our hope is that this will help provide some guidance on how to approach online mock trial competitions. Two important points: not every question has only one right answer, and invitational tournaments (and future AMTA competitions) may have different rules that change this guidance or make some tips moot.

The Overarching Recommendation

Preparation and practice are essential to success in the courtroom – no less so when the courtroom is virtual. Obtain your equipment well before the tournament, and practice using it. Practice new techniques, such as an online impeachment. Practice your delivery. Practice screen sharing your exhibits.

Technology & Setup

- **A wired connection beats a wi-fi connection.** Ensuring you have a reliable internet connection is the single most important thing you can do to prepare your setup for online trials. Ideally, connect to a hardwired network or plug directly into your router. If your computer doesn't have an Ethernet port, you can get an Ethernet-to-USB converter (for less than \$30). If you have to use wi-fi, be as close to your router as possible, with nothing in between your computer and your router.
- **Be aware of network bandwidth usage and potential tradeoffs.** If you are competing at home, know who in your household or on your local network is going to be online. If you can, try to have exclusive use of the internet during your rounds to ensure the best connection possible. Close out of any unnecessary programs or tabs to reduce bandwidth use.
- **Prepare for a worst-case scenario.** If your internet goes out, plan ahead and download the Zoom app on your phone so that you could use cellular data to connect as a backup plan.
- **Ensure you are clearly visible on screen.** Whether a lamp or a window is your primary light source, position yourself so that the light is in front of you and behind your camera. Experiment with light placement to illuminate your face without it being too harsh or too dim. Avoid bright lights directly behind that will make it harder to see you.
- **Proximity matters more than quality.** The proximity of your microphone to you is almost always more important than its quality. You can use any mic you want: a computer mic, an earpiece, an external mic, or a headset, but you should also consider the optics of the equipment you use.
- **Position matters more than quality.** Whether using your laptop's camera or an external camera, try to position the camera at eye level. It may help mounting your camera or laptop on a stand, box, or secure stack of books to elevate it to the appropriate height for you. If you are planning on sitting and standing during trial, try to position the camera so that it will capture you in both locations without having to reposition it.
- **Make your setting as professional as possible.** You want your surroundings to convey professionalism, even if you are competing from home or in your dorm room. Make sure the room behind you is tidy and remove items that may be potentially distracting (as well as any school-affiliated items). Try to find a quiet space without much background noise that is also free from potential interruption by roommates, family members, and pets.
- **Make sure you plug in your laptop.** That's it. That's the tip.

¹ AMTA thanks Zachariah Mundy, the primary author of this guide, as well as Baylor Law School, Drexel University School of Law, and UCLA School of Law, whose publications were a source for many of the suggestions contained here.

Online Public Speaking

BE CONFIDENT

- **You are not alone. This is new for everyone.**
Don't let your nerves get the best of you just because you haven't competed online before. We are all in this together, and your competitors are facing the same challenges. Judges are also delving into this new experience with us and may look to you for guidance on best practices.

DRESS THE PART

- **Wear the same clothing that you would if you were competing in the courtroom.** Attorneys should wear business attire and witnesses should wear what their character would wear when making a court appearance.

POSITIONING

- **Sitting or standing? Do what works for you.**
One of the first questions of online mock trial was whether attorneys should stand when speaking to simulate the courtroom experience or to sit to reflect Zoom call norms. In tournaments so far, competitors have had success doing both. Determine what works best for you and your team. Things to consider are: if your room is large enough for standing, if there is adequate lighting throughout the room, and how quiet your room is (if there is too much background noise you may not be heard if you step back from your mic).

DELIVERY

- **Speak slowly and deliberately.**
It is essential to ensure that everyone can hear you and your witness. Use a slow, deliberate delivery to make sure judges (and the witness you are crossing) understand you. You don't want to rely on the sound quality of their speakers.

KEEP THEIR ATTENTION

- **Zoom fatigue is real.**
Just like you, judges are facing new challenges in online trials and being at home or in the office instead of in a courtroom presents additional potential distractions. To keep their attention, make conscious efforts to remain energetic and employ varied tone, pace, pitch, and modulation in your delivery.

EYE CONTACT

- **Look at your camera when speaking.**
Eye contact is always important in public speaking, so remember that your computer screen is not your camera. Though you may naturally want to look at the judge's video feed, the judge may not be able to connect with your eyes if you do so. Keep your eyes up and look at the camera. If you plan to use a second monitor, consider its placement to avoid having to look too far away from your camera when referring to affidavits or exhibits.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

- **Just like in the courtroom, purposeful gestures and movement can be effective.**
In online trials, it is important to be cognizant of your distance to the camera (hand gestures may seem magnified when you are close) and the camera frame (so you don't want to walk off screen by accident).

FACIAL EXPRESSIONS

- **Bring your poker face.**
Nervous? Frustrated? Surprised? Judges might not notice your facial expressions from across the courtroom, but they will definitely notice now your face is front and center. Try your best to present a professional demeanor throughout trial.

DON'T JUMP THE GUN

- **Wait to be acknowledged by the judge.**
In a courtroom, you likely began when a judge looked up from their ballot, but in an online trial, the judge may actually be looking at their computer screen filling out their ballot online (or reading an unexpected email). Make sure you ask the judge if they are ready for you to proceed.
- **Be patient.**
It is especially important that only one person speak at a time in online competitions. Pause before asking questions and providing an objection response to avoid talking over the judge, opposing counsel, and witnesses. If it appears someone is talking over you, consider that it may be due to a technical issue or lag.

Presenting Your Case

CLARIFY PREFERENCES

- **Don't be afraid to ask the judge about their preferences.**
Online trials are still in their infancy and different jurisdictions are developing different practices and standards. If you are unsure what your judge expects, ask them about their preferences during pretrial (or when an issue presents itself).

KNOW THE RULES OF YOUR COMPETITION

- **Don't assume every competition will operate exactly the same.**
Most in-person competitions are run similarly, but there may be significant differences from one invitational competition to another this year. A school may use different videoconferencing software or place limitations on how you can present exhibits and demonstratives. Avoid disputes and frustrating your judges by making sure your team understands the rules ahead of time.

IDENTIFY YOURSELF

- **It's easy for a judge to forget who you are when teams aren't sitting on opposite sides of a courtroom.** Use the naming function in Zoom to identify yourself as a "Plaintiff" or "Defense" attorney and have witnesses display their character name. If your camera also captures your table, consider using a traditional placard as well.

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

- **Don't forget to silence all electronic devices.**
It was pretty straightforward to remember to tell your team to turn off their phones before trial, but it's a little more complicated now. Don't forget to silence your phone, block notifications on your computer or tablet, turn off your alarm clock if you are in your bedroom, and mute your smart home devices (unless you want the judge to know when your Amazon packages are delivered).

THINGS WILL GO WRONG

- **Stay calm.** We've all been in a Zoom meeting when someone forgot to unmute their mic, their screen froze, or they lost their connection. Don't worry. Judges will understand. Contact your teammates quickly so that they can let the judges know that you'll be back soon.

EXHIBITS & DEMONSTRATIVES

- **Practice, practice, practice your use of exhibits and demonstratives.**
While most of your mock trial skills will translate well to online competitions, presenting exhibits and using demonstratives will require an adjustment. Who will be your "trial technician" in charge of sharing their screen during examinations and speeches? Will it be the same person throughout trial or will the duties rotate among team members? When will they share the exhibit or demonstrative? When should they stop sharing? These questions should be answered when planning your speech or examination, and you should practice them with your trial tech.
- **Be prepared to adjust.**
Just as in-person judges may or may not accept "reference" or "courtesy" copies of documents before they are admitted or during an impeachment, you will have to adjust to judges' preferences in round. Make sure your team is paying attention and alter your practices appropriately.
- **Practice adapting to surprises with your trial technician.**
The best advocates know how to adapt in trial to an opponent's theory, objections, and witness responses. While you may be prepared for everything, make sure your team is also ready to share exhibits and affidavits when you need to lay more foundation, conduct an impeachment, or explore a new line of questioning. You should also consider ways to effectively communicate with your teammates during the round without breaking up the flow of your speech or examination.

COMMUNICATE WITH TIMEKEEPERS

- **Don't forget about the timekeepers!**
Timekeepers will generally be offscreen, so you need to decide how you will remain aware of how much time you have remaining. Timekeepers should also frequently confirm their times with the opposing team and should notify judges throughout the round to avoid any potential disputes.