Spontaneous Tips: overview

Spontaneous problems are an important part of the Odyssey of the Mind experience. Approximately, one-third of the final tournament score is determined during a 10 to 15-minute period in the Spontaneous problem room. Here are some suggestions to help make your team's trip through Spontaneous fun and rewarding.

1. Practice as many Spontaneous problems as possible. The more practice the easier the time will be for the team on competition day.
2. Work on good listening skills – both to listen to other team members and to the directions. (Many teams do poorly in the competition room because they did not listen to the instructions.)
3. Don't argue during a Spontaneous problem. It just wastes time.
4. Practice giving answers loudly and clearly. Make sure the judges understand the response. Judges are human and can misunderstand a response which means they might score it as common when it was creative.
5. Have team members take turns scoring and timing practice sessions. This helps them see and hear the difference between creative and common answers.
6. Practice brainstorming techniques:
    a. No criticism – withhold judgment of ideas. Ideas are not evaluated during the brainstorming process. A critical remark or laughter from another person stops the free flow of ideas.
    b. Quality is desired. The larger the number of ideas, the greater the chances of reaching the best solution.
    c. The wilder the better. Asking for far-reaching ideas encourages group members to expand and be imaginative.
    d. Hitchhiking/Piggybacking is encouraged. Team members should be encouraged to combine or modify ideas of others. This leads to the improvement of ideas.
7. Don't assume your team will be given a verbal or non-verbal Spontaneous problem relating to the type of long-term problem the team has chosen to solve. Any long-term problem may be given any type of Spontaneous problem at the tournament.
8. Don't waste time trying to think of a creative response if it's taking too much time. Give a common response and perhaps it will stimulate other team members to give creative responses.
9. Practice teamwork skills. Many of the problems have bonus points given on how well the team works together. That means everyone should be a part of the discussion and the work to solve the problem – not just a few with the initial idea.
10. Listen to the problem carefully. If the 'NO' word is not used, in other words if the team is told you cannot do something, take a chance. Judges watch for risk takers when scoring creativity. You can always ask the judges if something is allowed. You do not have to surprise the judges in order to do something creatively. Ask for permission if you are trying something risky. "Can I stand on the table? It doesn't say I can't."
11. Practice on other types of communication besides verbal: These can be used when the problem says verbal communication is not allowed and the team is told signals may be used. In these problems, teams are often asked to manipulate objects without words. Sounds or other signals will need to be created to communicate up, down, left, right. But don't forget: start over, stop, lower, higher, etc.
12. Try tension-relieving exercises. Many teams are very nervous before they enter the Spontaneous area. Back-rubs, shaking of arms and legs, rolling of heads, telling of simple jokes to arouse laughter, are all ways to reduce tension. Also be careful with the pep talk as the team is ready to enter the competition room. Sometimes this puts more stress on an already stressed-out team. A relaxed team does much better in the competition room.
13. Make sure the team is aware that a copy of the problem is placed before them as it is read. They may consult it anytime while they are working on a solution to the problem.
14. Deciding which team members compete in which type of spontaneous problem can be difficult. It is best to help the each team member decide their own strengths and weaknesses. Some teams vote who represents them in each type, other times a coach decides or there is a team vote. Whichever method you use, do it before the competition. There should be no arguing or hurt feelings on competition day.
15. Help the team understand the timing of spontaneous problems. If they have 3 minutes to give a total of 35 verbal responses, that breaks down to an average of a little over 5 seconds an answer. Try an exercise which gives them that amount of time. Are they answering too quickly? Are they taking too long?

16. Alternate the team's sitting order. You may find some team members do better/worse depending on who comes before or after them.
17. When practicing hands on problems, make this the mantra: ask questions first, plan second, and build third. Most team members like to start manipulating their materials before they really know what they are doing. Have your team practice not touching everything on the table and talking first.
18. Quiet people have good ideas too. Don't let your team fall into the trap of thinking the loudest person has the best idea.
19. Assign jobs – Each team member has strengths. Identify these strengths and assign that team member to exploit that strength. Examples of jobs – Time keepers, problem copy reviewer, builders, scoring analyzer, inventory master and a leader that queries team members that are usually quiet.
20. When the problem has instruction that the team can't talk, but can ask the judge questions, let the team know their question to the judge can be an indirect way to communicate between team members.
21. During verbal response have the team look around the room for items, words or triggers that may help them respond.
22. Team members should determine their "area of expertise." It can be baseball, dinosaurs, board games, etc. When they are stuck for an answer, they can go to their expert area to create a creative idea.
23. Teams should also have a storyline or characters that they worked on and developed. They can use this storyline in many parts of spontaneous as a way to connect their verbal answers. Some teams use their long term story, others use funny ideas that came out of team practices.
24. Newer teams may have trouble being productive during "think time." Teach them to look around the room for inspiration or go to their "area of expertise" to come up with an idea. Teach them to visibly hold on their fingers 5 good ideas they can use.
25. Acting out your verbal or verbal-hands on responses will energize the judges, make it more fun for the team. If not told to sit during response, coach them to stand and work their response into an action.
26. Coach teams to be positive at all times. It can cost them team work points (if assigned) and even deflate the judges during scoring.
27. At the beginning of the hands-on problem, teams should inventory all items and understand what is available before jumping in to solve.
28. Coach teams to avoid references that judges may not understand. Don't use inside jokes, or school references, or references to cultural things their parents wouldn't understand.
29. Research studies tell us when people are happier, they are more creative. On competition day, be sure to carve out time for your team to get in "the zone" before heading into spontaneous. Find a quiet space for just coach and team to do some verbal, to relax, and to review only a few basics. Let the team laugh and enjoy each other. This will make for a better spontaneous session.

Spontaneous Tips: practice being flexible

In an effort to have teams be more creative, the spontaneous problem writers have created several methods to control the speed in the way verbal responses are given. Here are some types of answering systems that have been used in the past. It is important that teams practice spontaneous problems under different types of rules. Being flexible and confident when you are asked to answer in different ways will help a team focused on being creative.

PLAYING CARDS
Assign each of the five team members a number from 1 to 5. Use only the Ace through 5 from one or more decks of playing cards. Shuffle the cards and place them face down in front of the team members. The coach will turn over the first card. The card number (Ace = 1) designates which team member will then answer. After responding, that team member will then turn over the next card and so on. When all the cards are used, the deck is then turned over and the team continues until time runs out.

3 x 5 CARDS
Each of the five team members is given 7 cards. When a team member gives an answer, a card is put into a container placed before the team. When all cards are used the team is finished responding, even if time remains on the clock. If a team member is unable to answer, a card is placed in the container also. If there are fewer than five team members, distribute the cards for the missing team members to the others. A variation is to place a stack of 35 cards (or any amount divisible by five) on the table. A card is placed in the container after each response. If the team member is stuck, the whole team is stuck. Another variation is that if the team member is stuck, a card is placed in the container and the team continues responding to the problem. A third variation, instead of using 3 x 5 cards, use beans, macaroni, checkers, or small blocks of wood.

PASS CARDS
Five PASS cards are placed before the team. If a team member is unable to answer, a PASS card is given to the judge (coach). If all PASS cards are used before time runs out, when a team member is stuck, the whole team is stuck. At the end of the time period, two points are added to the final score for each unused PASS card.

PADDLE
Place a Ping-Pong paddle on the table. Before giving a response, the team member must pick up the Paddle and hold it over his/her head. After giving the response, the team member places the Paddle on the table before the next team member who is to respond. A variation is to place the Paddle on the table and any team member may pick it up to respond. The same team member may not respond twice in a row. The Paddle must be placed on the table before the next team member may pick it up and respond.

RULER
Have your team member line up single file. Hand the student in the front of the line a ruler. Once the problem is presented and time begins, the first student will give an answer, hand the ruler to the team member behind him/her and move to the back of the line. This process continues until time runs out.

REMOVAL
Put 35 cards (or beans, macaroni, or wood blocks) in a container and place it on a table in front of the team. Each team member is to remove one item from the container before giving a response. When all items are removed from the container or time runs out (whichever is first), the team must stop. If a team member is stuck, the whole team is stuck.

DICE
Assign each team member a number from one to five. The coach will roll the dice the first time. The team member with the number showing on the dice will give a response. After giving the response, the team member will roll the dice. The team member whose number appears will then respond, and so on. If the number six appears, the team member who rolled the dice must respond again. If it is on the first roll, the coach will select the team member to respond.

Spontaneous Tips: give the team jobs

The reader: is responsible for taking additional time to understanding the problem. Reads the problem on the table along with the judge when giving directions. Makes sure the team is dealing with all the elements. Look for important words that may be overlooked or small loop holes. Does it say we ALL have to stand behind the line? It doesn't say we can't LEAN over the line. It says we can't talk. Does that mean we can use sign language to communicate? When needed, the reader asks the judges points of clarification.

The math guy/gal: is responsible for understanding the score elements and advising team decisions concerning the scoring factors. Can be the same person as the reader. But the math guy/gal is specifically someone who like breaking apart how the problem is scored and doing some analyzing before decisions are made. Should we only make our structure 5" high and hold 80 pennies, or should we make it 10" high and only hold 50 pennies? What's the math? This person reminds the team if they get points for teamwork – so someone better ask the quiet teammate in the background what he thinks! Or reminds the team to use all the material if you get points for using all the materials.

The timekeeper: makes sure the team is aware of factors related to the time. At any point in any type of spontaneous problem, (unless otherwise stated) the team can ask the judges how much time is left. Asking this question or stating how much time is left to the team, will let the team know to hurry up – or to take your time. The team can discuss ahead of time, factors related to the time, such as they should stop discussing and start building after 1 minute of discussion. Or that when there's a minute left, they should stop building and start adding weight – for example.

The leader: is not necessarily the person whose ideas will be used or the person with the best ideas. The leader is needed to make sure everyone is heard. That the team is moving along as planned. That disagreements are worked out with team spirit in mind. That good time management is being used. The leader knows how to keep the team on track and respects the input of all.

The person who goes first: is not necessarily the person who has the best ideas. It is someone who doesn't get nervous. Who will set a good pace and have a great attitude. A lot of times, especially in a verbal problem, the first person will set the tone of how creative we will be. Did this person act out their answer or just give it with a straight face.

Reporters: team members who do not participate in the competition will still be allowed in the room. They can be charged with analyzing what happened and giving feedback. No feedback should be negative/personal towards their teammates. They can offer 3 positives and 3 improvements.

Spontaneous Tips:
Verbal - make the most of think time and beyond

Team members new to spontaneous may find themselves drawing a blank when it comes to think time. Here are some ways to break down think time to make it more productive.

1. Reread or think closely about the question. Understand what it is asking you to do? What are the important words in the question?
2. Look around the room for inspiration for an answer: the desks, walls, lights, doors, windows, characters, colors, patterns, students clothes, floor, words
3. Determine ahead of time your favorite thing or something you are an expert at. Your "area of expertise" can be animals, art, dinosaurs, camping, scouting, music, etc. Use your knowledge in that topic to help come up with an answer.
4. Think about common ways to answer the question. Now decide how you can change that answer – only a little – to make it more creative. Practice going around and turning a common answer into a creative one. Add a descriptor, an action, something unusual. Use SCAMPER techniques.
5. Practice coming up with 5 possible answers during think time. Have the team actually think quietly and hold an answer on a finger each time they think of one. Stop the team mid-think time and see if they can remember the answers related to the counted fingers.
6. When giving answers, speak loudly and clearly. Have energy. Spruce up your answer: act it out, be a character, use motions, get up and deliver it, but always make your answer make sense.

The following process can be used teach the above points:

Give the team a verbal spontaneous. Go around twice. Assess how they did. Did they make the most of think time? Did they have at least 2 answers? Did they have energy, etc? This is the base result. Now, using the same or different problem, work on the above 6 points, in order, to help the team improve. Ask them what the problem was asking. Analyze the words, etc. Then move on to build on their learning. Each step can last 10 minutes or more as different examples are used. Eventually, you can give them another verbal problem but not stop to analyze. After a full problem is given, you can go through the steps and assess if they incorporated new techniques.

Spontaneous Tips: examine spontaneous in slow motion steps

Teams are often coached in spontaneous by being asked the questions, “What would be a more creative answer?” Often, the answer is, “I don’t know….” The thinking is that creative answers are fully formed and just pop into your head. They can be… But creative answers also can also be the result of a well-crafted thought process which bring you to a creative answer.

Below is a rough sketch of different level of creativity.
Give the team a basis spontaneous problem and assess where they are on the scale. Discuss and analyze their answers and why they may be common. *(Have we heard of this before? Then it’s common.)*
Then ask the team to redo the same, or a varied, spont problem, but this time, challenge them to think of their answers from the next level. And so on. Stepping through the level of creativity, at a moderate pace, will reinforce HOW to go about constructing a creative answers.

Pick up one or 2 things on the table and say what they are and what they are used for.

Round one prompt: ask everyone to give common answers. They must be true and accurate.
Round 2 prompt: now let’s give common/true answers, but give funny or creative reasons.
Round 3 prompt: now let’s try for creative answers, but give common reasons.
Round 4 prompt: now let’s try for all creative answers, but they have to make sense.

The team should begin to identify how to make what is common and what is not common.
Use the SCAMPER chart to add types of prompts: change size, use, add, subtract, etc.

Level 1: each team has an individual answer not related to other answers. The answers keep the items the same size, in the present tense, in our current world, for a very similar use.

Level 2: play on words, extra energy,

Level 3: acted out, team mate became the character, created a story with the other team mates,

Alternate:

See how far they can go to tell a story with the props and have it be creative.

Does the plot make sense, but still revolve around the actual use of the items? Is there a creative twist? Does the team build off each other, not just add on to each other (and then…)

Tip 2 - Spontaneous Problem: All Those Uses for a Paper Clip

Gather your team in a circle, with a bowl of gummies or smarties in the middle of the group.

Hand them each a paper clip. Have them take turns going around the circle stating uses for a paper clip. After each answer have them take one treat out of the bowl.

Once the treats are finished, talk about the ideas that they came up with.

- If you were to categorize the ideas, how many categories would you have? For example, using a paper clip to open a letter and using it to open the wrapping on a new music CD would both be in the same category of 'using a paper clip to open something.'
- How much detail did you go into with your ideas? 'Bend one end into a heart shape and use the other for an earring post' is more elaborate than 'use it as an earring.'
- Did you consider modifying or manipulating the paper clip, to change the shape of it?
- Finally, were your ideas similar to what others might think of, and therefore 'common?' And were some of the answers original or even highly creative, such as using a paper clip to make a tiny triangle for a lemming orchestra?

Was your team able to look at the object with fresh eyes, as though they had never seen one of these little bendy wire things before? This is known as divergent thinking, using many areas of interest and bringing them together to form novel, creative or unusual solutions. With divergent thinking there is no single correct answer -- but rather an infinite number of possible correct answers.

When we permit ourselves to look beyond the 'common' we encourage creative ideas; the more ideas you generate, the more creative you will become! With practice, your team will become comfortable with generating lots of creative responses and they will become faster and faster at responding creatively.

Creativity can be learned!

Tip 16 - Continuing story

Problem of the week

Your Problem is to tell a story, each person continuing the story. Bonus points will be given for demonstrating what is happening in the story with your hands.

For example, “One day I walked into the woods…” and you walk your fingers along the table top.

Scoring:

- 1-10 points how much the story make sense
- Bonus 1 point = simple hand movement
- 3 points = more movement(s)
- 5 points = more complex

Judges: the score

- 1-4 the story rambles, every team member leaves of with or begins “and then”
- 5-7 bit more coherent but team members are left stranded by the story
- 7-10 good story, team works as a team

Bonus:

- 1 point = uses one hand as in walking across the desk
- 3 points = uses two hands, one hand is the legs the other is the torso
- 5 points = one hand is walking the other is a tree in the woods

Tip 17 - Name things that are cold

Problem of the week

"Name things that are cold"
1 point: ice, wind, drinks
3 points: my feet at a wedding, my dog's nose when she doesn't have a cold

Tip 24 - Spontaneous Problem: Leaning Towers

Rules:

1. You will be given _____ minutes to discuss the problem and create your solution. You may talk at any time.
2. Your problem is to build two structures that will be measured for height and their distance apart
3. You will be given materials to make your structures, including two adhesive dots. You will be given scissors; however, the scissors may not be a part of your structures.
4. You will be given two pieces of 8 ½" x 11" paper. The paper must rest on the table surface.
5. To receive a score:
    1. One structure must stand within one piece of 8 ½" x 11" paper and the second structure must stand within the other paper.
    2. The structures must stand on their own. They may not touch anything except the piece of paper. However, they may extend beyond the area.
    3. Each structure must have one adhesive dot on it. You may attach these to your structures at any time. Your score will be determined by these dots.
6. Your structures will be measured when time ends or when you ask the judges to be scored.
7. Scoring will be as follows:
    1. the shortest distance from the first structure's dot to the table's surface inside or outside the paper will receive 1 point per cm.
    2. the distance from the second structure's dot to the table's surface will receive 1 point per cm.
    3. the distance between the dots will receive 3 points per cm.

Team Score Sheet:

Team Name: _____ School:_____

Structure 1: distance from dot to paper surface _____cm x 1 = _____

Structure 2: distance from dot to paper surface _____cm x 1 = _____

Distance between the two dots _____cm x 3 = _____

Total: _____

Tip 18 - Spontaneous Problem: Candle, Book and Match

Hands-on Spontaneous - Candle, Book and Match

I just finished a book called *Why We Make Mistakes*, by Joseph Hallinan. It is a light-weight psycho-babble book. There was one study sited that pertained to creativity. A large group of people were given a candle, a book of matches and a box of tacks. The challenge was to attach the candle to a wall.

If you want to do this with your team give them a candle stub that is about 1" circumference and 1" high, 1x 6" masking tape and a box of tacks –(the candle circumference cannot be larger than will fit easily in the box. And the tape should not be able to stick to the candle) Provide a shoebox placed upright and weighted and have them attach the candle to the box.

The key is that you empty the box of tacks and use them to attach the box to the 'wall' and place the candle in the box. This is an elegant solution but not terribly creative – the fascinating part of the study was that when the people were 'happy' 75% of them were able to come up with the elegant solution. But if the people were 'unhappy' only 20% were able to solve the problem. The people were 'made' happy by watching a very funny cartoon jut before being given the problem while the unhappy group watched a film about how to find a math curve.

Is a happier team more creative? Let us know your results!

Maybe we should show cartoons in the Spontaneous Problem holding room at the tournaments!

Verbal Spontaneous - Hit Parade

Your problem is to tell who is in the Parade and where are they going?

Tip 14 - Spontaneous Problem: The Longest Rope

Hands-on Spontaneous Problem: The Longest Rope

Tell teams this is a non-verbal problem.

You will have 5 minutes to solve this problem.

Your problem is to build a rope out of the materials provided

Score will be as follows:

- Each 3 inches of the rope will receive 2 points
- Creative construction of the rope 1-15
- How well the team works together 1-20

Give the teams the following materials to work with

- 4 sheets of paper
- 1 paper bag
- 1 envelope
- 2 pieces of
- 12 inch string
- 5 mailing labels
- 4 straws
- 10 toothpicks
- 1 pencil
- 1 pair of scissors

(thanks Virgina OM!)

Add a Verbal component

Using the rope you just built as an example say " my rope will be used for…"

Buster Says

- can the rope be lying on the floor – giving it stability?
- I 'd give them only 1 piece of paper. If they spiral cut it they will be out the door just with that one piece!
- as this is non-verbal their teamwork is critical – how do thy communicate?
- "my rope will be used for…" a leash for a doggie bag or as a rope course for paper dolls