

What is Outside Assistance?

First let's review the basics: Coaches need to organize the team, maintain order and discipline, and sometimes motivate the kids. They may serve as a "recording secretary" to a team (no matter what division) as long as they write only what the team members say. Only Division I coaches may fill out official forms for the team. Division II and III team members must fill out the forms themselves.

Coaches are allowed to ask the team members questions to prod them to think about their solutions and how to improve them. However, these questions must not lead the students. For example, a coach could not ask, "Don't you think it would be better to narrate your play, rather than act it out?" The correct way to state the question would be, "How many different ways are plays presented?" This will encourage the team to think creatively and not indicate that the coach thinks the way the play is presented should be changed. By asking broad questions, the coach stimulates the team members to think. This is the heart of the OotM program.

Because coaches want to do their job, do it well, and never place a team in jeopardy due to their own misinterpretation of what Outside Assistance is or isn't, it is important that they know just what does and does not qualify as Outside Assistance. Excerpted below are sample questions posed by coaches and OotM's response.

Scenario A: For a Division I team a parent plugs in a power tool for one of the students because it is a rule in their house that no children are allowed to plug in any appliance.

Question: Is it Outside Assistance (OA) for any non-team member to plug in a power tool that the team uses to complete its solution to the problem?

Answer: No, it is not OA for a parent to plug a cord in an outlet for practice. (The parent may not use the power tool to work on the problem solution.) However, it is OA if someone other than the team plugs a cord in during the team's performance time.

Scenario B: Kids try to assemble two boards (fourth graders) using screws and nails, but they keep falling apart.

Question: Is it OA for the team to ask an adult who is familiar with carpentry how to fix the problem?

Answer: An adult can tell and show the team members various ways to connect boards. He/She must not show the team one specific way to connect the boards in the team's solution. An adult should give the team many possible ways to assemble the boards and must allow the team to determine what it will do in its solution. There is a principle that if information can be found through research, an adult can tell the team.

Scenario C: A team decides it will center its skit on a CELL theme. The coach gives the team members a homework assignment to come up with as many words as possible that contain the word CELL, such as cellophane, cellular phone, etc.

Question: Is it OA for a coach to give a homework assignment that gets the kids to think more creatively about an initial idea that they came up with?

Answer: Although the coach should not give the team any examples, the assignment is one of the types of things the coach should do to help the team develop its creativity.

Scenario D: Team members decide to narrate a good deal of the solution.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to ask them if they can think of other ways to tell a story, rather than reading a piece of paper?

Answer: Inspiring the kids to generate ideas is part of coaching. As long as the coach is not instructing the team to change its solution it is allowed. For example, a coach may not say, "You need to think of a different way to tell the story." A coach may say, "What are the different ways a story can be presented?" This way, the coach is trying to stimulate their thinking as opposed to guiding the solution.

Scenario E: As the team deliberates on what its solution will be, the coach asks questions to make sure that the solution is well thought out.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to ask questions as the team is developing its solution?

Answer: No – that's exactly what a coach is for! (Just don't ask leading questions.)

Scenario F: Four of seven team members on a team in one OotM year build some backdrops for use in their presentation. These same four are on a team the following year with three new members.

Question: Is it OA for the new team to use the backdrops built in the prior year? May a team use props from prior year in any situation without incurring an OA penalty?

*Answer: Any material that was part of an Odyssey of the Mind solution from a previous year can be used by the team. If the materials were created by the **exact** same team, that is, there are no members from the original roster missing from the current roster, they will be considered team-created. Otherwise, they will be judged commercially produced. These items, such as props and backdrops, will be considered the same as items found in a thrift shop, school theater department, etc. In no case may a team use anything created by anyone who is not on the team's roster to specifically aid in solving the current problem. In other words, if the team uses anything that is produced or provided by a non-team member during the process of solving the problem, it will be considered Outside Assistance.*

Scenario G: An OotM team wants to paint some props. There is some paint that was left over from last year, but the colors were mixed by last year's team.

Question: Would it be OA for a team to use something that was made by someone else even though essentially the same thing could easily be bought by any team.

Answer: No. The decision to paint a prop a specific color is a team decision. It does not matter if the paint used came from a store, the school, a garage, etc., as long as it is selected by the team and included on the materials value form.

Scenario H: A Division I team is spray-painting a prop.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to hold a team member's hand for about 2 seconds (out of a 30-minute job) to help show the proper way to spray paint?

Answer: Yes. The coach may not help spray paint anything used in the solution. However, the coach may teach the team member how to spray paint by using something that is not part of the solution such as a scrap piece of wood.

Scenario I: A Division I structure team has a sheet of paper describing the order to put weights on (smaller diameter first, then larger, to allow hand grip space). Team members composed the form (came up with the idea) but the coach actually wrote it.

Question: Is it OA for a non-team member to write down the instructions used by team members during their presentation? Is this any different than the coach completing the Style Form for Division I?

Answer: As long as the team members provided the information, it is okay for the coach to write it out. It is not different from the rules for the Style Form regarding Division I teams.

Scenario J: A Division I team is brainstorming its solution.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to write down the team members' ideas for later review?

Answer: This is a good idea. The only rule surrounding this is that the coach may only write down what the team members say.

Scenario K: A coach interprets an "engineering practice" to make it applicable to the current problem. For example, the engineering practice of material quality assurance could be translated into inspecting and sorting balsa prior to its use in a structure.

Question: Does the interpretation of how to apply a general engineering practice to a problem represent OA?

Answer: Not enough information is provided. The ruling would depend on how the information is presented to the team. If the coach (or any non team member) guides the team by providing a single idea or practice that the team otherwise would not have sought, it would be OA. For example, if the team never even considered that there might be a difference in the quality of strips of balsa wood, it would be OA to tell the team there is a difference, which wood to use, and to show the team members how to pick wood. It would not be OA if the team asked about the properties of wood and how to inspect strips. That information can be found using research and may be communicated by the coach. The coach should direct the team to test different pieces of wood.

Scenario L: With proper training, it is possible to examine a structure and determine which element failed first and why.

Question: Is it OA for someone other than a team member to examine a failed structure and provide this information for the team?

Answer: Not if the team asks the person and all he/she does is tell the team members what part failed. He/She cannot tell the team why it failed or what to do to keep it from failing in the future.

Scenario M: A coach presents the team with a simple, generic demonstration of an engineering concept that the team immediately applies to its solution (e.g. a simple demonstration of how a truss withstands lateral loads better than a frame).

Question: Does the presentation of an engineering concept represent OA in this circumstance?

Answer: As stated, yes. The coach would have to present several options of construction and demonstrate how each fails, but the team members must draw their own conclusions.

Scenario N: A division I team needs to move a 4' x 6' sheet of plywood from the garage to a workshop area.

Question: Is it OA for non-team member to move the plywood for them?

Answer: No, this is okay. Non-team members may move items except during the team's performance time.

Scenario O: A goal for a team is to learn how to take a complex problem apart, test each component in a controlled manner, then reintegrate the resulting solution and validate if it performed as expected.

Question 1: Is it OA for the coach to encourage the kids to approach the problem this way?

Answer 1: No. The coach may encourage the kids to approach the problem this way.

Question 2: Is it OA for the coach to build jigs or testers to facilitate testing the alternatives the team came up with in its sub-components?

Answer 2: No for testers and yes for jigs. Anyone may make a tester but only the team may make jigs because they are construction aids.

Scenario P: A younger sibling has been following with interest the experiments, designs, and “tricks of the trade” on an older sibling’s team.

Question: Can the younger sibling adopt the many “lessons learned” from following an older sibling’s team around for several years without incurring OA?

Answer: This is okay to do as long as the younger sibling does not produce exact thematic copies.

Scenario Q: A Division I coach asks each team member to read one of the elements of the problem and explain what it means.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to write each element on a piece of paper and ask the team to group the elements so that it now has a bubble diagram that organizes the elements? Once the team organized the elements, can the coach copy them down, make copies, and distribute them to each team member?

Answer: (Any Division) No. It is okay for the coach to write down the elements, ask the team to group them and then copy the grouping and distribute copies to the team members. The coach may not add or change anything, however.

Scenario R: A team is brainstorming about all the things that make you think of tropical islands.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to put those ideas on a flip board for everyone to see?

Answer: This is okay provided the coach writes only the team members’ words.

Scenario S: Team members are creating the script (Div. 1).

Question: Is it OA for the coach to write down what they say so that they can look at what they already have?

Answer: This is okay in any division provided the coach writes only the team members’ words.

Scenario T: A Div. 1 team is reading the OotM Program Guide and cannot figure out what will happen if they have printed materials for judges to read.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to help them figure out what the rulebook is trying to tell them? Is it OA if the kids ask what the coach thinks it means? Is it OA if the team asks the coach what he/she would do if he/she were them?

Answer: The coach should help them interpret the rulebook. The coach may tell the team what he/she thinks it means. The coach cannot tell the team members what he/she would do unless the answer is “write for a problem clarification.” However, he/she should encourage the team to think about what it means first.

Scenario U: A Div. I team has decided to use what it thinks is tasteful bathroom humor in its skit. The coach has made sure everyone is aware of the rule about vulgarity.

Question: The team doesn't think it's vulgar but does not have a clue what adults think is vulgar (TV examples abound in the arguments as examples of what adults think is acceptable). Is it OA for them to tell other adults what their jokes are and to ask if they think it's vulgar?

Answer: No, this is okay to do. Even a clarification will not be able to state what any particular judging team will deem acceptable versus vulgar.

Scenario V: The performance has been taped. Four kids think they need to schedule an extra practice; three think they do not and the performance cannot be done with just four.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to make the decision? Is it OA for the coach to say “Majority rules?” Is it OA for the coach to say they must come to a consensus (meaning every person but one must agree)?

Answer: It is up to the coach to make the decision or to decide on how the decision is to be made. Practice schedules are entirely within the coach's purview. The coach should create this structure when the team is first assembled.

Scenario W: A judge stops a team's performance in long-term because its vehicle is marking the floor. At end of the performance parents standing outside the taped area lift the car to protect the floor.

Question: Is it OA for any non-team member to help with the props after the performance has ended.

Answer: No. The team may have help with prop movement at any time except during the timed competition period.

Scenario X: During check-in the coach hands the paperwork to the judge.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to hand the paperwork to the judge?

Answer: No. Although it is always good to have the team members hand in the paperwork, there is no rule against the coach handing it to the judge.

Scenario Y: A team member tells the adult who is helping to stack weights that he is going to go help resolve a problem with a prop. The adult verbally acknowledges that statement with the affirmation, “Sure, go ahead.”

Question: Does this represent OA?

Answer: No. The team member has made the decision to do this. It would be OA if the adult said something like, “Weight placement is more important, just stay here and continue with this” or if the adult initiated the conversation by telling the team member to go help with the prop.

Scenario Z: A team is preparing for its spontaneous competition. The coach picks problems for them to practice with that he/she thinks represent the type they will get in competition. The

coach tells them whether they made a creative response or a common one. The team is given constant, direct feedback on the quality of their spontaneous solutions.

Question: Is it OA for the coach to prepare their team for spontaneous competition in that manner.

Answer: No, preparing teams is one of the primary roles of the coach.

Scenario AA: Kids get to World Finals and are uncrating their scenery and props (unscrewing crates).

Question: Is it OA for the coach to tell the team in what order to do everything? (We know they can help do it but does a team member have to tell the adult to do it?) Can the coach point out things that broke and ask if the team is going to repair them?

Answer: It is okay for the coach to tell the team what order to uncrate things. It is also okay for the coach to point out things that broke and ask if the team wishes to try and repair them. However, from that point on it is up to the team members to decide whether and how to make repairs.

Scenario BB: A Div I team is having major problems figuring out how to keep track of information for its Materials Value Form.

Question: Can the coach ask what information the team is trying to track and how they intend to track it, and then prepare some sheets for the team members to use to write down all the information as they go?

Answer: Yes, the coach may do this.

Scenario CC: It is summer time and the synopsis of next year's problems have been published, but the full version has not been published.

Question: Since the problem has not been completely specified, is there anything the coach can do in this scenario that he or she couldn't do (with respect to OA) after the problems have been published?

Answer: No, the rules are the rules all year.

Scenario DD: A team observed another team dressed up in chicken costumes that did very well. The next year the team decided to dress up as chickens.

Question: Is it OA to observe successful performances in one year and copy facets of it in the next?

Answer: No, it is not OA but the coach should try to motivate the team to be original.

Scenario EE: A local group of several different OotM teams are convened for the purpose of practicing spontaneous problems. The coach of each team has prepared a different spontaneous problem to give to each of the teams.

Question: Are the coaches in this instance providing OA? If not, and the coaches score the teams, is this OA? If not, and the scores are provided back to the teams, is this OA?

Answer: None of these circumstances is OA.

Scenario FF: Same as the above, but the purpose is to practice each team's long-term solutions and present them to all of the other teams.

Question: As described, is anyone in this instance providing OA? If not, and the teams are scored, is this OA? If not, and the scores are provided back to the teams, is this OA?

Answer: The teams may present their solutions to each other and may be scored. They may be given verbal comments. (Verbal comments would tend to give the team more specific direction in not only what category should be improved (indicated by the score), but what specific items or changes should be made (e.g. "Costumes were colorful, but all were alike so little creativity was exhibited.")

For general information: The only practical Outside Assistance in spontaneous is if, during the competition, one of the non-participating team members joins in to help the team members who are solving spontaneous. (Or if someone obtained a copy of the problem(s) in advance and gave them to the competing team.)

What are the penalties if Outside Assistance is present? Here is how an Outside Assistance penalty should be considered:

First, you must consider the amount of assistance given. For example, in scenario H, where the coach holds a team member's hand for 2 seconds out of 30 minutes to show how to spray paint, if this is done while painting the prop, then a very small Outside Assistance penalty should be given. The questions the judge should ask are, "If the coach did not help spray this part of the prop, would my score have changed? How much did it help the team?" The assumption is that if the coach did not spray the part, he/she would have taught the team member to spray paint using another item. The answer to the question is obviously that the score would not have changed or not have changed significantly. (The bigger issue would be if the coach helped make the determination to use spray paint and/or which color to use.)

If the coach helped paint the entire prop, a larger penalty would be assessed. If the coach made the entire prop, a larger penalty would be assessed. If the coach made the entire prop, a larger penalty. And, if the coach had the idea for the prop as well as made it, an even larger penalty.

However, there is a second consideration. How much is the prop worth to the team? If the team did not have this prop, what difference would it have made? For example, assume the coach designs and makes an elaborate background set for the team. The team is in the structure problem and the set is one of the "free choice" Style categories. The greatest number of points that the team can earn for this set is 10 plus whatever of the 10 overall effect points it might add. In any case, no more than 20 points total. Therefore, the penalty should not be the maximum. However, suppose that the team is in the *Classics* problem. The set is paramount to the play. Its set is the focal point for the performance. The penalty should be much greater. In the first instance, the structure problem, the judge should say to him/herself, "If I give this amount of penalty for a Style item, what penalty would I give if the coach designed and made the structure?" This obviously would be a maximum penalty since it is the entire long-term problem solution.

Remember: A coach helps the team members to grow. This means providing a good environment, maintaining discipline, and stimulating – not influencing – its thinking.