

# Tips for a Successful ENVIROTHON Program

by  
Wake County Envirothon Team Advisors

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## Recruiting Members

- EARLY, at the beginning of the school year, we post flyers throughout the school.
- We have other teachers in the department promote the Envirothon to their classes.
- We also post advertisements with pictures from the previous year on our closed circuit daily school news program.
- Often a large majority of our kids are hand-picked by us in the first few weeks as we discover kids in our science classes with personal interest.
- Others also join after a year of having class with us.
- Reality is...it takes a few years of building the program's reputation before numbers grow.
- We started with roughly 5-8 kids and in later years fielded 30+ students at the start of school.

## Introductory Meeting

- At the introductory meeting we discuss what Envirothon is and what our intent is.
- We establish our expectations and the time commitment required to be successful.
- Students fill out information sheets describing their prior-knowledge and subject interests.

## Assigning Specialty Subjects

- Our program's philosophy is to give each member 2 subjects to specialize in out of the 5.
- A week after the intro meeting we review the info sheets and try to balance how many students study each subject taking into consideration students' interest level, possible team divisions, and the students' prior knowledge.
- We burn each student a CD with all the study materials as provided by our local soil and water conservation district (which originally comes from NC Division of Soil & Water Conservation – same as on the NC Envirothon web site.) We also include other materials we've created such as i.d. guides for trees, aquatic insects, and related issues.
- They are instructed to study those materials but particularly their two subjects. Often students study more than just their particular subjects to better their overall placement test score.

## Expectations

- Part of our success has come from building the program to a level that we have multiple kids trying out for the team every year that creates some inner school competition.
- No different than tryouts for a school sports team--if you have 30 kids try out, some will rise up to make the varsity squad if that's their goal.
- From the start the students are told team placement will be based on:
  - Their attendance
  - Their presentation scores
  - Their test scores
  - Completion of study times

(We've never made any cuts, but we field four teams plus alternates most years).

## **Student Presentations**

- Each student is required to give two 5-minute presentations on their specialty areas.
- After the first few meetings we supply a schedule of sign-up dates for presentations.
- Usually through most of the fall once a week we run presentations. Each subject is run for two separate days once a week over two weeks.
- Each student is required to attend at least one of the presentation sessions on each subject area.
- Students are supplied with a rubric.
- The presentations motivate the students to study their material and it gives us an idea of their presentation skills in case we go to Nationals.

## **Attendance**

- We are an afterschool program so we don't expect the kids at every meeting. Envirothon must compete with a lot of other activities. Be flexible.
- It does require a lot of record-keeping and communication with the students.

## **Communication with Students**

- The program we've developed does require a lot of email communication with the students.
- We use email to remind (continuously) the students about upcoming meetings and events.
- We also attach records of attendance to the students. It creates a sense of responsibility amongst some of them when they do not attend meetings on a regular basis.

## **Study Times and Communication**

- We also require a biweekly study time of 30 minutes from each student.
- Upon completion of their study time they email us a short synopsis of what they learned. We send them a quick response + a digital picture of them in action from our recent field trip.
- After a study time due date is past, we once again send out a record of completed study times to encourage accountability.

## **Hook the Kids with Field Trips**

- Throughout the year we take field trips after school, typically one every other Friday, some Saturdays, and occasionally shorter ones on a weekday here and there.
- We make the most of our local resources for study sessions: our Soil and Water Conservation District, NC Forestry Service, NC Museum of Natural Science, NC State and Duke Universities. We ensure each study session has a minimum of 10 students attend to make it worth the Resource Professionals' time (especially when they work weekends just for us!).
- The concept is to make Envirothon fun, hook the kids into wanting to come back, and spread the program's value by word of mouth.
- We focus on hands-on study sessions, and topic-related community service projects.
- We take lots of digital pictures & send them to students who complete study times.
- We often get some of the pictures posted on our closed circuit news program to help promote and advertise the program. At the end of the year, each student receives a CD of all the fun photos to visually document their Envirothon experience. Name of the game is PR!

## **The Test**

- The students are also required to take a comprehensive test at the end of January.
- We create a 100 question test from old national exams, identification questions, *Wildlife in NC* magazines, and current environmental issues.
- 20 questions per 5 subjects.
- The students are informed that this test is a large portion of their team placement and they study accordingly.

## Team Placement

- About a week after the test we compile all our information and begin to design teams.
- In February we'll have a practice test designed so teams can work together as a unit for the first time.
- Each team is also assigned a Team Captain. The Captains are instructed to listen to their specialists, but then they can make the final call on each question.
- We also encourage Team Captains to arrange their own study sessions outside of school and monitor their team members' attendance and study habits. It's been effective giving Team Captains leadership responsibilities.
- If you have the numbers...it may be helpful to have an inner school elimination round where the lowest scoring team becomes alternates for the remaining teams. Once again encourage the students to study on their own. We now use the Area competition for this event.

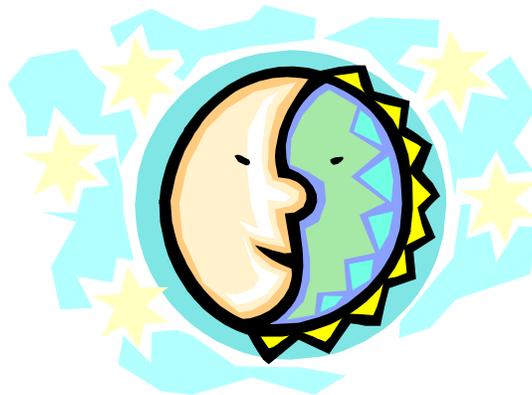
## Oral Presentations

- Practice, practice, practice! We make up practice problem scenarios and have teams practice developing their solutions with a script for each team member. Our local Soil & Water Conservation District hosts a Mock OP where the students orally present before a real panel of volunteer judges. The judges give the teams constructive feedback – what they did well, and how they can improve both their technical science content and their public speaking skills.
- Practice, practice, practice! This is an important skill they'll need and use all their life!

## Wrap up, Area and State Competitions

- We like to camp for the State competition. It's something the kids look forward to all year and one of our biggest hooks!!
- We cook out over the campfire which helps to build team unity and buy-in to the program.
- We usually have a party at the end of the year where we promote the Resource Conservation Workshop, encouraging students to apply for this summer conservation camp.
- Bottom Line: We lay out expectations EARLY—"We're here to learn and take the competition seriously!" If you can also make it fun for the kids, then they'll do the work for you.

**Good Luck!**



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