

## Odyssey of the Mind: Spontaneous 101

**Overview:** This document provides an overview of the “spontaneous” element of the Odyssey of the Mind program and includes six example practice problems as well as other spontaneous resources. For more information about the Odyssey of the Mind program, please visit <https://www.odysseyofthemind.com/>

**Definition:** In an Odyssey of the Mind tournament, every team competes in an element called “spontaneous”. This part of the competition is called “spontaneous” because teams don’t know what they’ll have to do until they enter the competition room; spontaneous problems are kept “top secret.” Solving spontaneous problems teaches students to think on their feet, practice teamwork, and solve problems with creativity as they arise.

The nature of the spontaneous problems varies, with each having its own set of specific rules that are read to the team in the competition room. Teams will have to solve one spontaneous problem at a typical competition, and all seven team members are allowed to participate in the spontaneous portion of the competition.

There are three types of spontaneous problems:

- **Verbal** spontaneous problems require verbal responses. They may incorporate improvisation or dramatization. Teams are scored for common and creative responses.
- **Hands--on** spontaneous problems require teams to physically create a tangible solution. Each hands--on problem has its own specific scoring categories.
- **Verbal/hands--on combination** spontaneous problems require teams to create a tangible solution and include some type of verbal component, for example, creating a story about the solution. Teams are scored for both the tangible solution and the verbal presentation.

### Tips:

While each type of problem has its own unique aspects (see verbal, hands on, and hands on verbal), general strategies exist that teams should apply to all types of spontaneous problems.

- “If the problem doesn't say you can't do it, assume you can”. Assume flexibility in interpretations in the rules, and ask judges questions if you are unsure of a rule (teams can not be penalized for asking too many questions, though questions consume time).
- Practice time management, especially with hands-on problems.
- You don’t always need to use all the materials included in a problem. Some materials might distract you from a creative or effective solution.
- Pay special attention to the scoring elements in a problem - these are often read last but are the most important.

**Running a spontaneous problem as a coach:** As a coach, here are some basic guidelines for running spontaneous problems:

- Prepare the problems beforehand. Setup hands-on problems and run through the problem with a coach or parent if needed
- Prepare learning objectives (some spontaneous problems even have objectives listed).
- Take advantage of any spontaneous trainings your state or region offers. If possible, observe an experienced coach run and debrief a problem.
- Record score and explain why you scored a team a certain way. Give honest feedback, especially in response problems (a silly answer isn't necessarily creative, especially if it doesn't fit the response structure of the problem)
- Video record the team and let them watch themselves afterwards. This strategy is especially good to show teams needing to improve teamwork and delegation for hands-on problems

**Debriefing teams:** Coaches should debrief teams after every problem. Debriefs build teamwork and give a platform for students to encourage each other. Also, the most successful spontaneous teams perform well because they have a framework for attacking spontaneous. Rarely will a team encounter a problem in competition exactly the same as something they've solved before; they need to learn how to solve problems generally and recognize patterns in the types of problems presented. The least important (and most overdone) aspect of spontaneous debrief focuses on the nitty-gritty of the problem such as specific materials used or better responses available.

While it's easy to focus on what the team could have done differently in a particular problem, try and lead the discussion to focus on broader trends. For example, rather than saying "You should have used the rubber bands in this way", ask "How do you know which materials you have? What can you do in the future to notice what materials you are given?"

Here is a sample outline of questions to use as a basic guide:

- Intro: how do you all feel like you did? (warm up, but don't dwell too long)
- What did you do well on?
- What could you improve?
- Where do you think you could have scored more points? Why?
- Do you think you understood the problem well? Why or why not?
- Specific to problem (examples):
  - Why did you run out of time?
  - How were you doing project management? Was that effective?
  - What was easy or hard about coming up with creative wordplay?
  - Did you have good teamwork? Why or why not?
  - How could you have used your materials more effectively?
  - Why did you choose to do...XYZ?
- End: what is one thing you would now do differently in a similar problem?

**Additional Resources:** Below are links to several additional spontaneous resources. Note: in 2021, there were two changes to spontaneous problems which might not be reflected in older resources or practice problems you find online:

- All team members can participate (before, there was a cap before of up to 5 members)
- In response-type problems (such as verbal and hands-on verbal), team members do not have to go in order. Almost any response problem will also have a limited number of total team responses (usually 35)

**Website Resources:**

- [North Carolina](#)
- [Pennsylvania](#)
- [Southern California](#)
- [Virginia](#)

**Videos:** these YouTube videos are recordings of spontaneous problem sessions, along with problem introductions and debriefs.

- [Heads and Tails \(hands on\)](#)
- [Buckets \(hands on\)](#)
- [Perpetual Motion \(hands on\)](#)
- [Up, Up and Away \(hands on\)](#)
- [Sky is the Limit \(verbal\)](#)
- [Dogs in Space \(verbal\)](#)
- [More than Meets the Eye \(hands-on verbal\)](#)

**Practice Problems:** Additionally, below are linked seven practice problems that include notes for judges and coaches. These are perfect practice problems!

- Verbal
  - [Jetpacks, Planes, and Flying Colors](#)
  - [Cat Helmet](#)
  - [Home Sweet Home](#)
- Hands-on Verbal
  - [Selling Trash](#)
  - [Sound Off!](#)
- Hands-on
  - [Seeing Double](#)
  - [Radio Activityy](#)