

A Categorical Content Analysis of Rhetorical Criticism Ballots

KEVIN W. DEAN and WILLIAM L. BENOIT*

When new students wander into the college forensics program, probably one of the last things on their mind is "rhetorical criticism."¹ Although rhetorical criticism has steadily increased in popularity since its introduction as a competitive individual event, it is still an endeavor shrouded in mystery—and much misunderstanding. It is qualitatively different from all other events, being a "meta-speech," a speech about a speech (or about rhetorical and communicative events). Unfortunately, there is a dearth of information available to assist the student and coach of competitive rhetorical criticism. Speech educators, forensics coaches, and competitors have a veritable smorgasbord of texts and self-help books available for other events, ranging from extemporaneous speaking to persuasion and oral interpretation. This situation is quite different for competitive rhetorical criticism.²

One answer to this problem is to turn to scholarly rhetorical criticism. Many resources exist in this area for the student and

**The National Forensic Journal*, II (Fall 1984), pp. 99-108.

KEVIN W. DEAN is Instructor of Speech Communication and Assistant Director of Individual Events at Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306.

WILLIAM L. BENOIT is Assistant Professor of Speech Communication in the Department of Speech and Dramatic Art at the University of Missouri-Columbia 65211.

The authors would like to express their appreciation to Mark S. Hickman, Michael P. Kelley, and Jack Rhodes, for their help in obtaining the ballots for this study; and to Kenda Creasy Dean for comments on the manuscript.

¹We employ the phrase "rhetorical criticism" in a way which encompasses competitive events called "rhetorical criticism," "communication criticism," "rhetorical analysis," and "communication analysis."

²Little information exists to guide the speaker or coach of competitive rhetorical criticism. For example, Don F. Faules, Richard D. Rieke, and Jack Rhodes, *Directing Forensics* (Denver: Morton Publishing Co., 1976), 2/e discusses extemporaneous speaking, impromptu speaking, persuasive speaking, expository speaking, oral interpretation events, and after-dinner speaking, but never mentions rhetorical criticism. The National Textbook Series of booklets includes several individual events but not rhetorical criticism. While a few articles have been published in scholarly journals, of the 270 forensics (non-debate) articles indexed in Ronald Matlon's *Index to Journals in Speech Communication Studies Through 1979*, only one (Paul A. Barefield, "Competitive Individual Speaking in Rhetorical Criticism," *Speech Teacher* 16[March 1967], pp. 109-14) deals with this individual event.

coach of competitive rhetorical criticism. While these materials are extremely valuable resources, they cannot be relied upon uncritically due to important differences between the two species of rhetorical criticism, scholarly and competitive.³ They are, quite simply put, different games with different rules and different players. Given the lack of published material on competitive rhetorical criticism, and the fact that it differs in certain important aspects from scholarly rhetorical criticism, this essay is designed to begin to fill this gap in the literature by investigating the expectations and standards judges employ to evaluate competitive rhetorical criticism, as evidenced by comments from ballots written in this event.

There are, of course, limitations to this source of information. Judges may not be able to record all of the thoughts—positive or negative—of an evaluative nature that cross their minds while judging a speech. It is possible that some judges may be unable or unwilling to articulate some of their reactions. Ballots rarely indicate which comments were, to them, the most important considerations. Some ballots are difficult to interpret. Finally, judge comments are limited by the speeches they judge—that is, the judge has no motivation to write down all of the standards they employ in judging this event, but only the ones occasioned by the speech at hand.

Despite these limitations, judges' comments do provide some insight in an area where little is currently available. First, these data do reveal which concepts the judges felt were important enough to pass along to the competitor. Comments which tend to recur—or, possibly more tellingly, are absent—point at least to some of the expectations and standards of a judge. An adequate sample of ballots—particularly if they are not limited to one region of the country—should enhance the likelihood that the majority of judges' expectations are included in the sample. Furthermore, in an activity like individual events, which stresses responsiveness to the audience, knowledge of those things that the audience (the judges) consider important enough to include in their comments should be of inestimable value to student and coach alike. Finally, the results of this sort of inquiry could be employed to inform subsequent research, more specifically, a survey questionnaire of coaches and judges, to supplement and confirm the findings from this effort.

³William L. Benoit, "Response to Hahn and Gustainis," *The Forensic* 68(Spring 1983): 3-5.

PROCEDURE

Over three hundred rhetorical criticism ballots from four tournaments held in different regions of the country were obtained for analysis.⁴ Each ballot was subjected to categorical content analysis,⁵ with the categories emerging from analysis of the data. A total of 1445 evaluative comments were identified, and then grouped into two overall areas: 776 comments on speech skills and 669 comments on rhetorical criticism. Each of these broad topic areas was further subdivided (the former into four categories and the latter into eight). Some of these sub-divisions were broken down into more specific categories as well. Finally, the evaluative comments in each specific category were divided into almost 400 positive and over 1000 negative comments. These data are displayed in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

The discussion of results will parallel the order of the twelve categories of Table 1. This table is grouped into those categories pertaining to "speech skills" and then "rhetorical criticism." The categories are ordered not according to any notion of importance, but simply according to frequency of occurrence. Each section is also divided into positive and negative comments. Inspection of the table reveals that some categories contain only positive or only negative comments, although most had some of each. The 776 comments which dealt with speech skills were grouped into four categories: delivery, organization, documentation, and time.

The single largest category of comments, comprising thirty percent (30%) of the total comments, is delivery. Contestants are praised for direct eye contact, purposeful gestures and movement, utilization of humor, enthusiasm, and a personable/conversational tone. Criticisms of delivery are considerably more varied. Physical

⁴The four tournaments represented in this study were: Rose Bowl Invitational, Miami University (Ohio), October 21-22, 1983; Aquarius XIV, Ball State University, November 4-5, 1983; Golden Eagle Invitational, California State University, Los Angeles, January 13-14, 1984; and Great Salt Lake Invitational, University of Utah, January 28-30, 1984.

⁵For discussion of the technique of content analysis which guided our analysis, see Richard Budd, Robert Thorp, and Lewis Donohew, *Content Analysis of Communication* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), Ole Holsti, *Content Analysis* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1969), and Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980).

TABLE 1
"Comments Concerning the Speech and Performance"

CATEGORY	Positive	Comments	Negative	Comments
Delivery	overall	47	overall	8
	conversational	10	conversational	36
	eye contact/	9	eye contact	14
	enthusiasm	8	enthusiasm	22
	humor	7	humor	4
	language	4		
	gestures	3	gestures	34
	articulation/		articulation/	
	pronunciation	3	pronunciation	3
	manuscript (none)	2	manuscript	55
			choppy/memory	
			problems	36
			rapid rate	61
		over-dramatic	13	
		volume soft	11	
		pacing/movement	10	
		lack confidence	5	
		grammar	5	
	Subtotal: 427			
Organization	overall	44	overall	17
	introduction	31	introduction	26
	conclusion	20	conclusion	12
	preview	7	preview	18
	transitions	4	transitions	12
	thesis	1	thesis	2
		ideas too late	10	
	Subtotal: 204			
Documentation		25		62
	Subtotal: 87			
Time		0	too long	18
			too short	15
			narrow topic	25
	Subtotal: 58			
TOTAL for Speech/Performance:		776		

delivery comments center on stiff, mechanical, or choppy gestures; excessive movement; and shifting eye contact. Vocal delivery criticisms include memory lapses, improper grammar, insufficient volume, forced humor, sloppy articulation and pronunciation, choppy fluency, an overdramatic "interpy" quality (especially in introductions, conclusions, and on quoted material), lack of energy, monotone, and—most frequently mentioned—overly rapid rate of delivery.

One additional comment must be made concerning delivery: use of a manuscript. Over fifteen percent (15%) of all of the negative delivery comments concerned use of manuscript. Given the fact that all four tournaments included in the sample permitted use of a manuscript, this figure seems rather high.

The second largest cluster of comments on speech skills concerns organization, or lack thereof. Although a majority of the comments are general, such as "speech flowed well" and "nice clear structure," numerous organizational comments refer to the presence or absence of a clear preview and appropriate transitions. Judges also pay particularly close attention to introductions and conclusions. Students are praised for creative, catchy, attention-getting devices which are also substantive and memorable and for conclusions which possess "impact"—usually meaning insightful discussions of the implications of the criticism. Interestingly enough, organization is the only category in the entire table containing more positive remarks than negative ones. Since there are over two and one-half times as many negative as positive comments in the overall sample, this is a striking finding. Closer examination reveals that the primary objects of positive ballot notations were introductions and conclusions, while most of the negative remarks related to previews and transitions.

It appears that contestants in several instances fail to provide sufficient documentation of the claims and assertions they submit to their judges. Most of the "who says that?" and "where did you get that information about. . . ?" comments relate to the effects of the speech, the original source for the critical method, and the historical/background information about the artifact(s) studied.

All four tournaments set a maximum time often minutes for their criticism events, and none included a minimum. Of the 1445 comments coded, 25 comments state that the topics are too broad, and 33 comments criticize students for exceeding the time limit or for having a speech that was too short. Of the 25 ballots claiming that the topic was "too broad for a 10 minute presentation," at least 12 were judging a criticism of a rhetorical movement. We find it interesting that the folk-wisdom that "the shortest poetry program wins" is not necessarily true in rhetorical criticism. For instance, at one tournament, 12 of the 15 judges who commented about time expressed the belief that the speeches they judged—ranging from 6:48 to 8:50—were too short and needed to be expanded.

The 669 comments on "rhetorical criticism" were grouped into eight categories: analysis, justification of methodology and artifacts), explanation of methodology, history/background, criticism

or judgment, and effects. It is interesting to note that these comments comprised over forty-five percent (45%) of all comments coded (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
“Comments Concerning Rhetorical Criticism”

Analysis	clear/interesting	34	unclear	7
	examples (good)	8	examples (poor)	37
	integrates description and criticism	4	doesn't integrate description and criticism	14
			Expand analysis	62
			Too general/too shallow	42
			Faulty assumptions	10
			Biased	7
	Subtotal: 225			
Justify Methodology		33		67
	Subtotal: 100			
Justify Artifact(s)		31		54
	Subtotal: 85			
Explain Methodology		15		58
	Subtotal: 73			
History/Background		26	Too much	3
			Too little	38
	Subtotal: 67			
Criticism/Judgment		7		42
	Subtotal: 49			
Critical Implications		9		32
	Subtotal: 41			
Effects		7		22
	Subtotal: 29			
TOTAL for Rhetorical Criticism: 669				

The application of the methodology to the artifact is the stage at which analysis, the bulk of most competitive rhetorical criticisms, occurs. The second largest category of all comments on the ballots (second only to delivery) concerns the speaker's analysis. Contestants receive praise for employing illustrative excerpts from the artifact under investigation, for making interesting, clear, and insightful conclusions, and for appropriate integration of description and criticism. Predictably, negative comments are more varied and tend to fall into seven groupings. The most common complaint simply calls for speakers to expand their discussions. Judges want students to provide more analysis, cite specific examples from the artifact(s), and to make the analysis more specific and in-depth.

Contestants are also criticized for an unbalanced use of description and criticism, making faulty assumptions, including biased statements, and vague assertions.

The data gathered suggest that judges request justification of the students' selected artifact(s) and rhetorical methodology as being, respectively, worthy of study and appropriate for that understanding. The methodology⁶ is a framework or guideline to be used as a tool for opening up the artifact(s) under investigation by the student critic. It allows critics an opportunity to focus their study on identifiable elements of the communication act. Many methodologies are available for application to the students' selected artifact(s). Judges indicate that they consider it the critic's task to choose one approach and then justify the utility of that selection. More than thirty-five percent (35%) of all critical comments regarding rhetorical criticism suggest that students need to articulate more clearly the rationale for the methodology utilized.

All four tournaments in the sample provided flexibility for students to undertake "communication" as well as "rhetorical" events or artifacts for analysis or criticism. Incidentally, the tournaments held in the midwest seem to attract more "traditional" topics than do tournaments from the west. However, judges in both regions tell students that they need to justify the artifact(s) they endeavor to study. Statements of justification generally seem to be expected more of students who undertake non-traditional than traditional (speeches) artifact(s).⁷ For example, two students are criticized for not providing specific information regarding the rhetorical significance of the television show (in one case) and the song (in the other case) that they chose to evaluate. Justification of artifact and methodology seem analogous to the "need to know" section many judges expect in informative or expository speeches.

Once a methodology has been selected by the student for application to the artifact(s), judges expect that student to explicate that methodology in the speech. This is not surprising, given the wide range of critical approaches adopted by students in competitive rhetorical criticism. Inclusion of such a section not only helps judges who are unfamiliar with the method, but also helps display the student's understanding of it. A total of seventy-three (73) comments from judges indicate that they possess this expectation. Nearly eighty percent (80%) of these remarks indicate that students

⁶Unlike some, we do not feel compelled to distinguish between "method" and "methodology," which we employ interchangeable.

⁷This was not always easy to discern as many ballots failed to record the rhetorical artifact under investigation.

need to be clearer in explanation of the critical method they selected to employ in their criticism.

Historical background of the artifact(s) studied was also a major area for comment. The vast majority (93%) of comments in this category requested additional information from the contestants. In most cases, "non-traditional" topics (songs, movies, literature, etc.) more often tend to evoke this type of response from judges than traditional topics.

Some judges indicate their expectations concerning the need for the critic to criticize or render a judgment of the artifact(s). Ballots from 42 judges make it clear that students are expected to provide more evaluative, critical comments of the rhetorical artifact(s) under investigation. In most instances, judges write that students are spending too much time describing, rather than evaluating, the discourse in question. To a lesser degree, students fall short on the pronouncement of a judgment. Judges frequently want contestants to issue an overall judgment of the rhetorical success or failure of the communicative artifact. Most importantly, judges often expect the end judgment to be a synthesis of the total evaluation process. One student is criticized for apparently concluding that "this speech was a success, for it clearly met all of the steps of Burke's pentad." Apart from the fact that the elements of Kenneth Burke's pentad are not "steps," the mere fact that these elements are *identifiable* in the artifact hardly means that it was an effective one.

Rhetorical implications, or a discussion of the significance of the overall criticism, are desired by several judges. The basic question posed here is, "How can we benefit, learn, or grow from the results of your study; specifically what have we learned from your criticism?" Comments concerning implications focus both on the speaker's subject as a whole, and, more specifically, on the chosen method of analysis. Statements like "I'm really not convinced that you told us why in 1983 we should really be concerned," or "What conclusions can you draw from this method? It is applicable to any situation where [humor] is involved" can be found on thirty-two (32) ballots.

The final area, that of the least frequently occurring comments, deals with effects, those significant outcomes resulting (at least in part) from the rhetorical artifact(s) being criticized. Of the twenty-nine (29) ballots which discuss effects, over seventy-five percent (75%) wanted elaboration in this area. Comments such as "What direct impact did this speech have on the audience?" and "Did the song serve as a motivation for anyone to take specific action?" illustrate this category.

CONCLUSION

Because of the lack of published guidance of the formation and presentation of competitive rhetorical criticism, would-be competitors and coaches alike must seek advice elsewhere. One potential source of judge expectations is the ballots they produce while judging this event. Although this resource has limitations, spelled out earlier, it does have utility given the present state of literature on this event.

We found it interesting that there was very little difference between the comments coded from the midwestern and western tournament ballots—only in one instance (justification of artifact) did it seem worthy of comment. Given the fact that the number of comments coded were quite similar (730 from the west, 715 from the midwest), this comparison seems appropriate. While it would be useful to obtain ballots from the east or the south, this limitation does not seem severe in light of the degree of similarity between the two regions included here. Future studies, should there be any, might want to study ballots from national tournaments and to compare tournaments held early in the season with ones held later (this might be especially interesting as regards delivery, manuscript use, or sophistication of analysis, all of which plausibly could improve during the season).

From the data gathered here, the following judging criteria emerge in competitive rhetorical criticism:

1. adequate delivery skills (conversationality, enthusiasm, appropriate movement and gestures, direct eye contact, etc.)
2. memorized speech (no manuscript)
3. creative and substantive introduction and conclusion
4. clear preview
5. appropriate transitions
6. adequate documentation
7. focus of study appropriate for time limits of speech
8. judicious use of available time
9. inclusion of specific illustrations from the artifact(s) studied
10. analysis balancing description and criticism
11. justification of artifact(s) selected for study
12. justification of critical methodology
13. clear explanation of methodology
14. concise but complete explanation of the historical context in which the artifact occurred
15. clear judgment of the rhetorical effects of the artifact(s)
16. discussion of the implications of the criticism

We must caution that this list is not intended to be a description of "the complete rhetorical criticism judge." We make no claim that any specific judge holds these expectations, nor even that a majority of judges hold most of them. Rather, this represents a distillation of all comments made by all judges in this sample. Only a survey questionnaire of the sort suggested earlier can establish these sorts of claims. However, since the competitive rhetorical critic does not know the judges who will judge the speech during its development, this list is important as representative of the range of expectations that judges could possess.

We believe it important to point out that, while this sort of summary glosses over some differences, we did not find widely incompatible standards articulated by different judges. Judges did not tend to write comments which indicate directly incompatible expectations. Thus, it is possible for the student and coach to find guidance in our summary. The most likely sources of difficulty will be on questions of relative emphasis. For example, it may be that providing enough explanation of the critical method (number 11) to satisfy one judge would make it impossible, given time constraints, to include sufficient historical discussions (number 12) for another judge; or that the amount of time required to present a judgment of the effects (number 13) which one judge would consider adequate might preclude a discussions of the implications of a criticism (number 14) lengthy enough to satisfy yet another judge.

One final point remains to be made. We do not want to be interpreted as passing a value judgment on the appropriateness of the expectations we have elucidated from judges' ballots. That is, we do not make the claim that these are the expectations judges *ought* to have, only that these are the expectations they *do* have. However, only from a starting point such as this one (or from survey research as suggested earlier) which identifies what judges do want to hear from contestants can we begin to deliberate on the question of whether these expectations are appropriate ones. Despite the fact that these practical difficulties remain to be surmounted by students and coaches, at least they now have a more specific idea of the nature of the judges' expectations which they must attempt to meet.