

## ON QUESTIONS IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Rhetorical Criticism (Communication Analysis) has been the subject of controversy from its inception and subsequent acceptance as a national tournament event. The concept of the question has remained a polarizing element in this controversy for students, coaches, and judges. Arguments in support and against the question abound, yet no decisive trend concerning the nature, function, and scope of the question has emerged from this ongoing dialogue.

I confess to once aligning myself with the group of forensic educators who advocate abolishing the question. I viewed the question as counterproductive to a student's forensic education for various reasons (e.g., time constraints in rounds; questions that rivaled student speeches in complexity and length; the absence of questions in other national events). My work last year as chair of the NFA Rules Committee compelled me to re-evaluate my position on the efficacy of the question.

The 1984 Rules Committee was asked to consider a motion to abolish the question in rhetorical criticism. The committee surveyed coaches before the National Assembly convened in April at the N.F.A. Nationals. Before reporting to the National Assembly, we presented our findings to the Student Assembly along with noting our intent to recommend that the motion be carried. We fully expected to hear resounding support for our position from the students. Instead, the students emphatically discouraged abolishing the question. It was immediately obvious in the student responses that they viewed the question as a potentially positive experience. They took no issue with the intent or purpose of the question; they were disturbed with the way in which critic/judges wielded the privilege of asking a question in competition rounds. The students' position eventually led to a committee recommendation that the motion to abolish the question be rejected.

Much thought and further dialogue with competitors who participate in rhetorical criticism has goaded me to advocate the question as a valuable tool. But I offer my support with a qualification: that

we cease abusing the right to ask a question of competitors in this event. The question-answer session is more often than not a grueling, defensive experience for competitors when it should be both positive and constructive. The notion of a question-answer session per se is not the problem. It is our lack of focus on effective utilization of that time. If critic/judges think carefully about what is reasonable in terms of the parameters of questions, the students to whom they are addressing questions, and how they are phrasing questions, the result will be more fair and insightful questions from the critic/judges and more insightful answers from the students. Our guiding through as critic/judges should resemble an adage with which I was once comforted: "there are no bad answers, only bad questions."

First and foremost, the event rules stipulate that "judges may ask one question each at the conclusion of a speech." That does not imply that it is necessary for a judge to pose a question if he or she does not wish to ask one. Nor does that imply that a judge may ask his or her question in a way that requires a competitor to give five answers. The rule simply gives critic/judges the privilege of asking a question should they see fit.

As we should not feel obligated to question each and every student, we should not assume a necessary guilt in reference to their knowledge or skill about the event. Judges should not approach the question-answer process as an opportunity to "trip those competitors up," to expose their weaknesses and attack their efforts. Rhetorical Criticism competitors are not—nor should they be—required in their answers to attack or defend the entire field of rhetoric, a theory or method that they do not utilize, or a judge's position on the validity or efficacy of a critical method. We critic/judges do not presume to "know it all" concerning the rhetorical tradition; why should we then expect undergraduate students to demonstrate a comprehensive knowledge in their answers to our questions?

Our questions will be most valuable to the student and revealing to us if they are *content specific* to the student's speech. Our questions should be positive in tone: they should allow students to bolster their credibility, to illuminate and expand ideas presented in the speech. Questions should give students the chance to be on the offensive, not the defensive, in their answers. I suggest that as critic/judges we should be examining a student's ability to argue analytical statements effectively. The phrasing and substance of our questions should promote that goal. Our students should demonstrate reasonable understanding of their subject matter and

rhetorical perspective in their speeches via insightful and sound argument. Thus our questions should encourage students to further demonstrate knowledge of their subject and method, and reasonable understanding of the rhetorical tradition in light of their undergraduate education.

The controversy surrounding the issue of questions in Rhetorical Criticism will not dissipate overnight. But we forensic educators can be a force in resolving the controversy by taking two steps. First, we can encourage more tournament directors during the regular competitive season to allow questions at their tournaments (whether the event be labelled "rhetorical criticism" or "communication analysis"). We critic/judges can surely benefit from the practice. Second, we can take care in exercising the right at the national tournament by keeping our queries reasonable and succinct.

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