

Forensic Forum

What changes, if any, should be adopted in the use of questions in rhetorical criticism?

CRITICIZING THE CRITIC: THE VALUE OF QUESTIONS IN RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Since the introduction of rhetorical criticism as a contest event we have labored over one critical concern: did the *student* write the speech? Praised as the most academically valid of the contest events, it is clear that rhetorical criticism requires something more of the forensic competitor. As a result, the coaches and judges of the National Forensic Association proposed a question to validate the student's individual work in this event. Initially, I believe, this was rooted in the fear that students could not critically examine a rhetorical artifact without a dependence upon their coach. However, I believe the time has come to recognize the advancements of a second generation of student critics and withdraw the question. For if we yet harbor doubts about the ethical nature of contest criticism, the time has come to quit questioning the student and begin questioning the coach.

As mentioned earlier, the requirements for a good rhetorical criticism are unique to forensics. Bright, motivated undergraduates can survey literature to find a prose selection or poem that speaks to them. An industrious, conscientious undergraduate can read voraciously and file diligently to prepare for limited preparation events. A thorough, creative undergraduate can research a topic or

satirize a foible of society to prepare a public address event. However, the process of invention is different for a student writing a rhetorical criticism. Methods of critical analysis tend to be buried in the jargon of speech journals; as a result, they are unattainable or unintelligible to but a very few of our brightest students of communication. In addition, as classes in undergraduate rhetorical criticism have been rare at the universities I have known, a reliance upon the forensic coach for the instruction in rhetorical theory and criticism is required. Thus a unique, interdependent relationship is fostered between the coach and student predicated upon the academic roots of contest criticism. This relationship is the basis of our concern over the authorship of the rhetorical criticism and, I believe, the reason we initiated the questioning of competitors.

Some will say that my primary assertion is unfounded. They have argued that the question in rhetorical criticism is not a negative but rather a positive tool which allows students the opportunity to expand on their research. A second concern is the students' desire to keep the question. Since students voted overwhelmingly at a recent national business meeting to retain the question, why should we change something they seem to want? Others have claimed that in a closely contested round the handling of questions is the basis of their decisions, only that the question is a valuable asset to judging and should be retained.

Forgive me the indulgence of trouncing my own strawmen. Anyone who teaches or coaches rhetorical criticism recognizes the limitations of a ten minute time limit. Many students I have coached began with a ten, fifteen, or in one case a thirty page critical essay. While encouraging them to submit this written work to a conference or convention, we would begin the arduous task of cutting the paper to contest time limits. Thus I empathize with those students or coaches who favor the questions because it allows contestants time to elaborate on their research. However, I must ask, if questions are valid means of demonstrating additional knowledge or effectively judging contestants, why do we not use them in other events as well? Persuasion, extemp, or even the interp events could benefit from the interaction of contestant and judge. Of course such a plan would extend rounds from the conventional one-and-a-half hours to two or two-and-a-half hours in length. Subsequently weekend tournaments would become just that as extra days were built in to accommodate the longer rounds. And of course, for nationals, well, instructors and graduate students could take unpaid leaves of absence in the Spring as the tournament became even longer than its current schedule. Clearly we cannot go

further in the use of questions in contest forensics because of the administrative and bureaucratic problems entailed in their time consumption at tournaments. Therefore let us be consistent in our administration of contest rules. If we do trust contestants in rhetorical criticism, let us treat them no differently than other students. We should discontinue the question in rhetorical criticism.

The other two concerns—students' desire to save the question and my assertion that the primary purpose of the question is to verify authorship—may be dealt with together. Having examined one of the basic reasons students wish to keep the question, time, the core of these remaining questions are the same: credibility. Students who struggle with a rhetorical method and a suitable artifact to produce a worthwhile piece of criticism have a right to take pride in their work. The lingering criticisms or gossip that suggest undergraduates do not *really* understand what they are doing or that, at best, only juniors and seniors should be competent enough to do criticism is absurd. Yet these pervasive myths remain and taint some of the fine work that is being done in contest criticism. It is little wonder that students wish to vindicate themselves from this spectre of doubt by answering any questions the judges might have. Ask any student who has "beaten" a pompous judge by responding to the seemingly unanswerable question, the feeling is one of personal satisfaction.

Credibility from the other side of the desk and ballot is another matter entirely. In recent years several convention papers and critics have asked, "who has the right to judge rhetorical criticism?" However, limited judging pools and an increasing number of hired judges have consistently brought the answer: anyone. Among the "most qualified" persons are regular coaches who are untrained in rhetorical theory, graduate students who may have less training in rhetoric than the contestants, or former competitors who "know the ropes" of forensics but have never studied communication. These individuals invariably ask questions because the rules say they should; however, they have no basis for the evaluation of the rhetorical method or the criticism. Doubts which may exist about a speech will not be clarified by these judges, for they cannot question the authenticity of that which they are incapable of evaluating.

Virtually everyone who has ever been to a tournament has a "forensic horror story" about the interrogation of a student by a pompous graduate student or an unfriendly judge. The time has come to put an end to this behavior. Let us police our activity internally rather than offering public executions of questionable speeches. Students who wish to fabricate or plagiarize a rhetorical

criticism will have difficulty doing so without the knowing or unknowing consent of their coach. For as I contended earlier, few students have the capacity to write a rhetorical criticism without the assistance of a speech professional in finding a method of analysis. The coach who does not verify the authenticity of a student's work is as guilty as the coach who writes a student's speech. Therefore I believe we should extend contestants in rhetorical criticism the same courtesy we extend all other forensic competitors: accept their work as original without the aid of a question. And if we still feel the urge to question the interdependent relationship between coach and student, then we must recognize that the trouble is not within the students but within ourselves.

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