

Rhetorical Criticism: Judges' Expectations and Contest Standards

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In 1974, the National Forensic Association National Assembly convened in Plattsburgh, New York, approved a new event for national competition¹ that was proposed by Professor Gracie Walsh and Dr. Seth Hawkins. Opposition to rhetorical criticism at the Plattsburgh meeting centered on the assertion that coaches would become too involved in preparing speeches, and so a quick compromise was added to the event rules allowing judges to question students to insure authorship.² Since then, rhetorical criticism has survived nine national tournaments, at least ten attempts to change its rules, or name, or both, and three separate efforts to end its existence altogether.³

These efforts have, for the most part, been sincere efforts to correct a major problem with the event — its lack of definition in the minds of forensic judges, coaches, and students. Rhetorical criticism means different things to different parts of the forensic community and the result is confusion about how the event should be judged and prepared and what expectations we have regarding the final product.

Methodology

This study examines a content analysis of over 300 student comment sheets from rhetorical criticism competitions held between 1975 and 1984. These ballots were received by some 20 students competing for Suffolk University and the Pennsylvania State University. They are from nine different National Forensic Association National Championships and include five quarter-finalists, one semifinalist, and one finalist in the event. Comments were reviewed by three independent reviewers who made a preliminary classification into as many categories as necessary. The categories were then refined to eliminate duplication. Ten major

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¹The Newsletter of the National Forensic Association, Minutes of the National Assembly, 1974. Raymond C. Beaty, editor.

²The Newsletter of the National Forensic Association, Minutes of the National Assembly, 1974. Raymond C. Beaty, editor.

³Attempts to change the event rules occurred in 1977, 1978, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984 and 1985. Motions to abolish the event occurred in 1979, 1982 and 1983. The Newsletter of the National Forensic Association, editors Peters, Harris, Leiboff.

categories emerged and the reviewers reexamined each comment for inclusion in a category. Where discrepancies between reviewers occurred, the majority opinion was followed. This analysis does not make any pretense that this data base is a statistical cross section of comments received by students at the National Forensic Association Tournament, rather it is designed to serve as a selective data base to determine the general areas of concern judges express on ballots and the general expectations judges have for students competing in the event. This is not a detailed content analysis — rather it is simply an attempt to develop categories of commentary about student performance. There is no attempt, for example, to calculate the impact of certain comments on competitive outcome. Given these restrictions, the content analysis does yield ten major categories of substantive comments regarding student performance. These categories can be regarded as expectations that judges have of students entering rhetorical criticism competitively.

The categories are:

1. Organization — appearing on 87% of the ballots (number comments or N = 281). Typical comments involve structure, transitions, phrasing, etc.
2. Delivery — appearing on 83% of the ballots (N = 249). Comments focus on projection, rate of delivery, memorization, etc.
3. Appropriateness of Rhetorical Conclusions — that is, the conclusions reached by the student regarding the effectiveness of the artifact considered, appearing on 81% of the ballots (N = 243). Comments include references to existence or lack of conclusion, depth of conclusions, etc.
4. Application of the Rhetorical Method Employed — appeared on 80% of the ballots (N = 240). Typical comments discuss the method in specifics to the speech considered and mainly deal with the issue of "correct" application of the method.
5. Appropriateness of the Rhetorical Method — as applied to the artifact under consideration, 78% of the ballots (N= 234). Comments refer to typical use of the method by rhetorical scholars, or question whether the method employed is "rhetorical" or question the qualifications of the author of the method, etc.
6. Knowledge of the Historical, Political or Cultural Situation Surrounding the Artifact Considered — 73% of the ballots (N = 219). Comments include questions about the context of the artifact, for example, what was the reaction of a group

- to a message or what was the political climate prior to a speech, etc.
- 7-8. Selection of a Particular Rhetorical Method from the Range of Potential Methodologies Available — 72% of the ballots (N = 216). Typical comments include why did you select this method, why not use Burke instead, why is this better than Bitzer, this method is overdone, this method is boring, etc.
 - 7-8. Knowledge of the Rhetorical Method Employed (i.e., ability to define terms employed in the methodology, origins of the method, etc.) — 72% of the ballots (N = 216).
 9. Knowledge of the Speaker or Author of the Artifact Under Consideration — 68% of the ballots (N = 204).
 10. Ability to Answer the Question(s) of the Judge — 65% of the ballots (N = 195).

As you can see, we clearly have a wide variety of expectations for the students entering rhetorical criticism. Judges expect expertise in speaking and organizing and detailed knowledge of not only the method employed, but of other methodologies as well. As judges, we expect not only the ability to apply the method and reach conclusions, but also to defend the method chosen as being appropriate and intellectually legitimate. We expect not only an analysis of the artifact under investigation, but an in-depth knowledge of the author or presenter of that artifact. We expect not only an analysis of the factors impinging upon the rhetorical occasion, but detailed knowledge of the historical, cultural and social factors of the broad context of the occasion. Having done all this, the student is then expected to answer a question (and often a series of follow ups) where other expectations may be involved that are not even considered on the final ballot.

Such a wide variety of expectations results in only one thing — confusion. Confusion for the judge trying to evaluate the event, confusion for the coach trying to aid students in preparing for the event, but most tragically of all, confusion for the students interested in the event.

In order for rhetorical criticism to remain a viable forensic event, a number of changes seems necessary. First, the question period for each speaker should be seriously restricted. As indicated earlier, the original purpose of the question was to guard against authorship violations. Although this is a laudable goal, the question is an inappropriate mechanism for dealing with authorship issues. Some judges don't ask questions, others ask questions totally

unrelated to authorship. A panel of judges, as in the case of elimination rounds, often appears to try and outdo each other by asking more and more imposing questions. Not only are tournament schedules totally devastated by such practices, but the renown of rhetorical criticism finds as a model for the Inquisition quickly turns novices away from an important educational experience.

If the questioning period for this event is to be useful, then the event rules must be changed to limit both the scope of permissible questions and the duration of the questioning. Perhaps three or four broad areas of permissible questions could be identified that would guide judges in asking questions. For example, the event rules could be amended to read:

One question only is permitted for each judge. Follow up or multiple part questions are not acceptable. Questions are not mandatory but if asked must come from the following areas: explication of the student's conclusions regarding the artifact, clarification of the immediate context of the artifact, delineation of terms used in the criticism, or explanation of the application of the method employed in the criticism.

Although the specific areas of permissible questions are subject to debate, a limitation such as this one would provide a framework for student preparation to answer questions and at the same time serve as a guide for judges to develop meaningful questions.

A second substantive change involves the necessity for the forensic community to develop a clear statement of rhetorical criticism as a competitive event. Such a statement should articulate the key areas of expectation for the event and be appended to event rules. If we return to the ten categories outlined in the content analysis, at least three should be excluded as valid considerations for judging rhetorical criticism. The appropriateness of the method selected seems irrelevant as a contest standard. The legitimacy of a given rhetorical method should be debated by rhetorical scholars, not by contest speakers and judges. The selection of a method seems equally inappropriate for contest evaluation. We do not expect those entered in persuasion to defend their persuasive strategies in terms of the body of persuasion theory, so why do we expect those entered in rhetorical criticism to be expert in the nuances of various rhetorical methodologies. From a coaching perspective, there is usually enough difficulty in teaching students to appreciate a few of the more basic methods. Perhaps a criticism would be more mature if the student understood all the methodological choices available. But, then too, if the student did understand all of the complexities of rhetorical criticism, his or her efforts would be appearing in *Communication Monographs* rather than

quarterfinals at N.F.A. There seems only one methodological standard appropriate for contest rhetorical criticism: does the student apply the method as explained to a given artifact to produce reasonable insights into the artifact. If a judge can answer "yes" to that question, then he or she need not trouble over other aspects of methodology.

Similarly, knowledge of the speaker or author of an artifact, or the broad context of the occasion, are in general inappropriate standards for judging rhetorical criticism. Certainly, one might expect a student to know that Franklin Roosevelt was President when he delivered his fireside chats. One might even expect an appreciation that the nation suffered from the Great Depression when Roosevelt entered office, but Roosevelt's policies as Governor of New York, the number of states he carried in an election, or his cabinet appointees seem less than crucial to a competent analysis of the fireside addresses.

If the forensic community could agree on the criterion we would all attempt to employ for judging rhetorical criticism, we would probably have less people complaining about judging the event and more students interested in entering it. If we could distinguish between rhetorical criticism as a forensic event, as opposed to a classroom exercise or an examination for a graduate degree, we might find the event more enjoyable — perhaps even painless.