

Persuasive Speaking: A Review to Enhance the Educational Experience

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While persuasive speaking is the oldest event in intercollegiate individual events competition, it has certainly not maintained a status as the most popular. Coaches find it difficult to get students excited enough to bring in some form of a speech for coaching. Many judges find it difficult to get excited enough to fulfill their judging commitment for a round of oratory. Christina Reynolds (1983) expressed this feeling when she wrote, "All too often, coaches/judges grimace when they are handed a ballot envelope for an oratory round. The typical response to this situation may very well be 'Why are *they* assigning *me* to judge this round?'"¹

What has brought on this attitude, this apprehension for a coach/judge to look at the final round postings in dread of seeing his/her name as a judge for persuasive speaking finals? To help uncover an answer, think about what a judge is likely to hear in a final round. Speakers one through six will probably say the same thing. They will be using the same skeleton for a preview, "We must first examine the problem, then we will pinpoint what has caused the problem. Finally, I will offer some viable solutions to help alleviate the problem." These speakers will follow this structure because the handful of competitors that did not are not in this final round. Throughout the years, coaches and judges have condemned certain topics as "done to death" but the same organizational pattern has been tolerated over and over, year after year.

An effort to provide some suggestions for improving the quality of persuasive speaking requires an examination of the event itself (current practice and tournament descriptions) and the attitudes held by coaches, judges, and competitors toward the event. With this understanding of how persuasion is currently being practiced, it will be possible to provide some recommendations to help

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¹Christina L. Reynolds, "Winning' Orations? A Study of Select Interstate Oratorical Speeches," *National Forensic Journal* 1 (1983), p. 119.

enhance the competitive and educational quality of persuasive speaking.

Research is limited with respect to how prevalent the problem-solution format is although most indications show that it is the most common organizational pattern being used. In 1971, William Schrier estimated that "probably 90 percent of college orations are of the problem-solution variety."² Larson and O'Rourke (1981), in their evaluation of contest ballots, concluded that the "problem-solution format would seem to be the most recognized persuasive approach."³ Reynolds, in her look at Interstate Oratorical Association speeches on the dread disease topics, also found problem-solution to be the primary pattern of use.⁴ Many judges and coaches would echo the thought that most persuasive speeches today are of the problem-solution variety.

Persuasive speaking, as an event, is not clearly defined. Tournament-descriptions vary from school to school and from region to region. National tournaments also employ different descriptions. Some descriptions are broad, including several genres of speeches. Others are limited in their focus, allowing only a specific pattern.

A look at the event descriptions for the NFA and AFA national tournaments shows how descriptions differ. The National Forensic Association Individual Events Nationals Tournament description reads:

An original speech to convince, to move to action, or to inspire on a significant issue delivered from memory. Qualifies from sales, persuasion, oratory, peace oratory, original oratory, public address, epideictic, etc.; event must have required an original speech the purpose of which was the speaker's persuasion of his/her audience.⁵

The American Forensic Association National Individual Events Tournament describes persuasive speaking as:

An original speech by the student designed to inspire, reinforce, or change the beliefs, attitudes, values or actions of the audience. Audio-visual aids may or may not be used to supplement and reinforce the message. Multiple sources

²William Schrier, *Contest Oratory: A Handbook for High School and College Contestants and Coaches* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1971), p. 39.

³Suzanne Larson and Sean Patrick O'Rourke, "Predominant Forms of Argument in Individual Events," *Dimensions of Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation* (Annandale, Va: Speech Communication Association, 1981), p. 330.

⁴Reynolds, p. 124.

⁵Taken from the American Forensic Association 1986 National Individual Events Tournament invitation.

should be used and cited in the development of the speech.

Minimal notes are permitted. Maximum time limit is 10 minutes.⁶

Neither of these tournaments require the use of the problem-solution format. There is a written expression that allows students to deliver speeches to inspire, convince, or stimulate. Despite this broad definition, many speeches that are not following the problem-solution pattern receive comments after the tournament to the effect that "this isn't really persuasion."

There are some tournaments that do limit and focus their descriptions of persuasion to specific organizational patterns other than problem-solution. The Great Eastern Forensic Tournaments and the Southern Connecticut Forensic Tournaments do provide categories for non problem-solution speeches. The inclusion of events such as Convince (which includes straight proofs of any important or interesting theory or issue from any area of knowledge or problem-solution speeches for which the solving agent is NOT the audience) and Epideictic (in which each speaker gives an original ceremonial speech; praise, blame, or mixed of a living, dead, or mixed real or mythical individual, group, or entity) seeks to encourage the student to enter the realm of persuasion that is not as rigid as the problem-solution domain. The Ohio Forensic Association also took this into consideration by adding Epideictic as their experimental event for the 1984-85 season. It was described as "An eight (8) minute maximum original speech to praise or to blame some person, organization, institution, practice, etc. The purpose of this speech is inspirational." Guidelines for preparation and judging were also included, for example, "the subject should concern ideas, feelings, and beliefs rather than problems and solutions."⁷

While these tournaments are good steps toward encouraging patterns other than problem-solution, their potential for success is never realized due to lack of support on the national level. Although such alternative persuasion events have been recognized to qualify a student for nationals, these speeches are rarely heard at national tournaments. Coaches and students often take the attitude that if a speech to convince or an epideictic speech qualifies, the speaker should write a new speech along the lines of problem-solution for national competition. To an extent, the existence of alternative persuasion events has resulted in the national events being, by

⁶Taken from the 1986 National Forensic Association National Championship Tournament in Individual Speaking Events invitation.

⁷For more information on the epideictic speech consult the Spring 1983 issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, pp. 274-78.

default, considered the domain of the problem-solution format.

Understanding how persuasive speaking is being practiced and described, however, does not explain why the problem-solution format is dominant. Since there is no explicit requirement for the use of problem-solution, other factors must be influencing the organizational pattern choices being made by coaches, judges, and contestants. Some recent investigations into how coaches/judges view the event might help explain the popularity of the problem-solution format.

In a study on the evaluation criteria used for judging the persuasion event, Benson and Friedley (1982) asked coaches to indicate the criteria they use while coaching and judging persuasion. The top eight criteria were:

1. establishment of a significant problem,
2. indication of how the problem was related to the audience,
3. clarity of organization,
4. use of a problem-solution format,
5. quality and sufficient amount of supporting evidence,
6. balance in types of evidence (emotional and logical),
7. well-developed, workable solution, and
8. sincere, conversational delivery.⁸

These criteria are ideal for the persuasive speech following the problem-solution organizational pattern. Criteria 2, 3, 5, 6, and 8 are also applicable to any type of persuasive speech (with the substitution of topic or issue for problem). With these being the primary considerations in the mind of the critic, the student is discouraged from attempting the persuasive speech that is attitudinal, inspirational, or convincing. Both the competitors and coaches know that to use a pattern other than problem-solution will invite criticism.

Competitors and coaches are using one of the most basic speech preparation techniques that is taught in public speaking classes, audience analysis. When preparing a competitive persuasive speech, the coach and competitor are taking into account what they know about their audience, the forensic judge. Manchester and Friedley (1981) point out that judges "are not particularly concerned with encouraging a variety of structural patterns; rather, judges are more concerned that the speaker utilize a familiar organizational pattern and one that is clearly presented."⁹ This pattern,

⁸James A. Benson and Sheryl A. Friedley, "An Empirical Analysis of Evaluation Criteria For Persuasive Speaking," *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 19 (1982), p. 2.

⁹Bruce B. Manchester and Sheryl A. Friedley, "Do Judging Standards in Individual Events Reflect an Argumentation Perspective?" *Dimensions of*

they conclude, is "the use of some form of a problem-solving format."¹⁰ Speakers are simply reacting to the type of standards that forensic judges are employing. We are determining which pattern and type of speech our students deliver as a result of our coaching and judging habits. Despite the wording of event descriptions and our awareness of other available approaches to persuasion, a set of unwritten criteria biased toward the problem-solution pattern is directing how persuasive speaking is practiced in forensics. This overemphasis by critics on the problem-solution format, and the attitude of judges toward persuasion expressed at the beginning of the paper (dreading the judging assignment) results in a paradox when these same judges take the role of coach and encourage the problem-solution approach. Rather than treating other formats as refreshing and innovative, they are treated as violating, off-base, non-competitive, and inadequate.

An effort to revitalize persuasion and to encourage other organizational styles would not have to entail any radical changes in the way we approach this event. Change would be required in three areas: event descriptions, judging standards, and coaching habits.

As far as event descriptions go, we should be thankful that existing national descriptions do not specify problem-solution patterns. There is, however, room for improvement. Descriptions should focus on stating clearly the types of patterns that may be used. Speech types that should be included might be inspirational, ceremonial, epideictic, convince, or value. This larger description would serve to remind judges of the varied types of persuasive speaking. This alone would help encourage other types of persuasive speeches. Larson and O'Rourke (1981) suggest that "in the case of both persuasion and expository speaking the statement of the speech's purpose helped the contestant to formulate arguments."¹¹ By identifying explicitly the types of approaches available, the contestant has a better basis from which to begin deciding on a topic and organizational pattern.

A second area where improvement can occur would be to employ a clear set of judging criteria. The Second National Conference on Forensics (1984) discussed the need for judging guidelines. Judges need to know more about other organizational patterns available for persuasion. A set of criteria could be developed to help the judge evaluate not only the familiar problem-solution speech, but also the

Argument: Proceedings of the Second Summer Conference on Argumentation (Annandale, Va: Speech Communication Association, 1981), p. 400.

¹⁰Manchester and Friedley, pp. 400-01.

¹¹Larson and O'Rourke, p. 333.

epideictic, inspirational, convincing, and value oration. Our lack of experience with these other approaches is no excuse. As coaches and judges we should be capable of evaluating a persuasive speech regardless of the pattern being used.

Along these same lines, there are two additional things that can be done to encourage more responsible judging of student speeches. Judging workshops could be set up to educate critics on how a persuasive speech can be constructed and evaluated. Tournaments might also wish to encourage the use of non-forensic judges in persuasion rounds. Benson and Friedley's (1982) results seem to indicate that the problem-solution format is less important to a lay judge.¹² A wider diversity of judges would help to encourage diversity in persuasive approaches used by contestants.

Finally, as coaches, we need to teach and foster the growth of persuasive speaking. Familiarity with other styles is necessary so we can coach and judge persuasive speeches fairly. With effort and awareness, there is no reason why concerned coaches cannot encourage greater diversity and growth in the way persuasion is being practiced in collegiate forensic competition.

The National Developmental Conference on Forensics (1974) spoke of individual events tournaments as "laboratories" for improving our understanding of communication. Laboratories are where we experiment, research, and refine our ideas. They should promote growth and expansion. They should not be stifling. Yet, in the laboratory of persuasion, the only development has been the cloning of problem-solution speeches. We must utilize all of the instruments available to us and learn to develop and refine the event of persuasive speaking. Perhaps through some inspiration, stimulation, convincing, and problem-solving, we can experience a renewed excitement toward persuasive speaking and turn the grimaces and apprehension evoked by monotony into smiles and eagerness toward persuasion.

¹²Benson and Friedley, p. 11.