

## **An Analysis of Topics Used in Persuasive Speaking**

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Persuasive speaking has been a basic part of American forensic competition for many years. As the more old-fashioned "oratory," it goes as far back as 1874 and the Interstate Oratorical Contest. In the late 1960s, before the birth of the national tournament in individual events, persuasive speaking was still a very popular event. Howe (1969, p. 86) found the event ranked third in a list of all competitive events with 134 verifiable instances of the event taking place. Twenty years later, persuasive speaking is now the most frequently offered individual event. Hawkins (1990, p. 21) reported 234 instances of persuasive speaking in the 1989-1990 forensic season.

With its popularity and endurance as a collegiate forensic event, I was curious about what topics were being used in persuasive speaking. My curiosity might yield some tangible guidelines for forensic coaches who must attempt to answer the question, "What should I talk about?" My article will try first to discover what experts suggest should be appropriate topics for the event; second, to discover what topics are being used in competition; and finally, to see if there is a correlation between experts' suggestions and actual practice.

### **Advice from Experts**

How are topics for persuasive speaking competition selected? There are many factors that influence topic selection, and any of these factors might take precedence over the others during the process of creating the speech. These factors could be the contestant's own interests and experiences, what topics have been used in competition by teammates and competitors, the "hot" topics of the day, and the coaches'/students' opinions about the potential success of the topic in actual tournament competition.

Advice on how to choose topics for forensic competition is not only remarkably dated but vague as well. Scott (1964, p. 2-5) suggests, "Any idea might become a subject for an oration, provided it 'bothers' a speaker." Buehler and Johannesen's (1965, p.46) advice is equally broad: "Topics should be timely and of wide public interest. Speakers should find something new, unusual, interesting and original." Golden (1965) does get more specific when he cautions against "overdone topics unless they are highly original and compelling and particular

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problems related to a campus or special school issue." Klopff and Rives (1967, p. 12-13) do come close to suggesting possible topic areas such as "human poverty, racial issues, public apathy, and contemporary societal problems." They also provide a checklist for discovering if a topic will be suitable for contests. Topics should be significant, have available information, be worthwhile, be interesting to the speaker, handled within the time limits, and fit the occasion.

The advice from texts and articles specifically related to persuasive speaking as a forensic event is also dated and contains few specifics concerning topic selection. Many of these sources seemed to be more concerned with justifying the event itself rather than exploring the details of the event. (Reynolds, p. 122) With limited sources available, I also checked with several college speech communication textbooks to determine if more specific advice might be available. Wilson, Arnold, and Wertheimer (1990, p. 49-44) recommended speakers "draw from their own experience limited only by the speaking situation." Like Klopff and Rives, Gregory (1990, p. 80-88) suggests speakers choose a topic they care about, know about already, one that is of current interest, and one that interests an audience. Gronbeck, Ehninger, Monroe, and German (1988, p. 398-399) do offer a potential list of topic areas on the inside of the back cover of their text. They include foreign policy issues, domestic affairs, censorship, education, crime, race, child abuse, drugs, and pollution, to list but a few of their suggestions.

Two articles which have appeared in previous issues of this journal come closer to offering more specific suggestions or at least a more specific topic area for potential topic selection. They are among the very few articles to discuss topic selection in persuasive speaking. Reynolds (1989, p. 124-125) contends that because of "our cultural ignorance about medicine and disease," we are very curious and interested in these types of speech topics. Reynolds states these have become known as the "Dreaded Disease" speech. The reason topics in the area might be effective is that they involve interesting and disturbing subject matter sure to grab the attention of listeners, especially the judge. Sellnow and Ziegelmuller (1988, p. 84-85) expanded the scope of topic selection in their study of 24 different winners of the Interstate Oratorical Contest over a wide span of years. They theorize that because of the increase in individual events tournaments in the 1970s, there has been a growth in the number of competitors in persuasive speaking. The authors then suggest that many speakers look for fresh and unique topics unlikely to be used by the competition. As the most frequently offered event, it would seem important to choose a topic unlikely to be used by others.

With only a few exceptions, the advice of experts on topic selection is broad and general. Almost every topic used in persuasive speaking could conform to some of the expert opinion. Those who coach persuasive speaking do not usually reach for a journal article or textbook to help students select a topic. By examining the topics used in the NFA's National Tournament, we might be able to determine if there are potential guidelines for topic selection in persuasive speaking.

### **Methodology**

A survey questionnaire was included in all sections of one preliminary round of Persuasive Speaking at the NFA National Tournament held on April 28-30, 1990, at Mankato State University. There was a total of thirty sections of persuasive speaking at the national event. The NFA assigns two judges per section in preliminary rounds; therefore, a total of sixty surveys were included for the round. Judges were instructed to record the contestant's 4 digit code number and last name. They were asked to "write what you think is the topic sentence of the speech." They were directed to "be as specific as possible." As an example, judges were advised to write, "Loud music on personal stereos is a serious problem" instead of just writing, "Loud music." Judges were employed to record the topic sentence instead of the actual competitors themselves for two reasons. I did not want to interfere with anything that could distract a speaker during competition. Asking them or having them write the topic sentence before or after they spoke could have potentially distracting consequences. Second, since the NFA used two judges in each preliminary round, a double set of topic sentences would provide a built-in double check for topic accuracy.

The double set of questionnaires was used to insure the right topic went with the right contestant and to verify the actual topic being used in competition. The tournament tabulation sheets were used to double check the accuracy of the contestant names and codes. A double set of topic sentences was received from 23 of the 30 sections, with just a single set for the remaining 7 sections. Of the 171 contestants entered in the event, 39 received only one judge's opinion on the topic being presented. Despite only topic sentence, it was still possible to determine if it were the right contestant in the right section. It was impossible to verify a topic for two competitors. Both were in the same section and had only one judge responding. One was left blank and the other was not readable. A total of 169 topics were determined to be usable for this article.

Topics were placed in categories based on the topic sentence recorded by each judge. It became obvious that definite categories were emerging. It also became apparent, if I alone put topics into groupings, it would be extremely arbitrary. I decided to have "experts" also put the

topics into categories. The experts were colleagues in the Communication Department at Mansfield University that teach the basic oral communication course. All these instructors teach the principles and theories of persuasive speaking in their classes. I supplied each person with a list of topic categories with the direction to create new divisions if it were more accurate. Each person was supplied with a stack of note-cards with one topic sentence on each individual card. The cards were shuffled to randomize them. Each expert was given several blank cards to record new category divisions if necessary. Besides the author, four colleagues served as experts. Topics were then placed into categories arrived at by the experts. When the experts disagreed, the topic was placed in the group with the plurality of votes. Topics like "Ritalin is overused in hyperactive children" received three votes for the medical category and two for the children's grouping. It was placed in the medical group. Categorizing the topics proved to be a difficult task. Of the 169 usable topics, all five experts agreed completely on 85 topics. There were 20 topics that were placed into a specific category because they received a 9-to-2 vote plurality.

### Findings

Table 1 is the breakdown of topics into the categories devised by me and my experts. (A complete listing of topics by category is included in Appendix A.)

**Table 1 Breakdown of Topics by Category**

1. Medical	...35 topics
2. Ecological	...30
3. Political/Legal	...18
4. Consumer	...14
Crime	...14
6. Education	...13
7. Children	...10
8. College/University	... 8
Business/Industry	... 8
10. Elderly	...5
11. Drug Abuse	...4
12. Social Issues	...4
13. Women	... 3
14. Miscellaneous	...3

These categories are the ones agreed on by the five people who grouped the topics. Even with the use of five people to place the topics into appropriate groupings, it is an arbitrary grouping. I am sure others might disagree. The four drug abuse topics, for example, could have been included in the medical, crime, or even the social issues group. The majority of my colleagues felt it should be a separate category, and like all the other category decisions, the group that received the most choices became the final classification.

The rules of the National Forensic Association call for a contestant competing at the national tournament in Persuasive Speaking to place in a final round of the event at a regular season contest. These topics are the ones that have stood the test of competition throughout the forensic year. This might help to explain the surprising lack of duplication of topics at the national event. Of the 169 contestants, 128 used a unique topic (over 75%). Judges at regular weekend tournaments could be rewarding the contestants with unique topics, thus accounting for a relatively small number of duplicate topics at the national event.

**Table 2 Most Frequently Used Topics**

1. Recycling	..... 8 contestants
2. Danger of Dioxin	..... 4
Censorship of the Arts	..... 4
4. Illiteracy	..... 3
5. High insurance rates	..... 3
Poorly-trained Coroners/ Medical examiners	..... 3

There are several topics I could only label as "Golden Oldies." They were topics I have heard and even coached over several decades of forensics—oldies like organ donation, vitamin overdoses, animal research, noise pollution, hazing, charity deceptions, and capital punishment appear never to go out of circulation.

With the names and contestant codes available, it was possible to examine what topics were given in the elimination rounds at the national event. It would be erroneous to assume the topic alone was the reason for a contestant's advancing to the out rounds of IE Nationals. It does, however, offer some interesting observations, since topic selection must play a role in reaching the elimination rounds. It would be impossible to eliminate criteria like organization, delivery, use of evidence, logical thinking, etc., but it might indicate certain trends as to what the top competitors in persuasive speaking were talking about.

The following chart illustrates the breakdown of topics used in the elimination rounds of persuasive speaking:

**Table 3 Topic Categories In Elimination Rounds**

QUARTER-FINAL TOPICS		SEMI-FINAL TOPICS	
Ecological	..11	Ecological	..8
Crime	.. 4	Consumer	..2
Medical	.. 4	Medical	..1
Consumer	.. 3	College/University	..1
College/University	.. 1	FINALS TOPICS	
Elderly	.. 1	Ecological	..4
		Medical	..1
		Consumer	..1

It is clear that topics from the ecological category dominated in the elimination rounds. Of the eleven ecological topics in quarterfinals, three were all concerned with the problem of dioxin.

### **Conclusions**

Reynolds' (1983, p. 124-125) categorization of the "Dreaded Disease" topic in persuasive speaking does seem to be true for the topics used at the NFA National Tournament. While there were only a few speeches that dealt specifically with actual diseases, medically related topics comprised 20.7% of all the topics used. Contestants and coaches must conclude as did Reynolds that these topics are interesting and disturbing.

A second significant area used in national competition was the ecological category. It was the "hot" topic in elimination rounds and the runner up for topics used in preliminary rounds, with 17.1%. It is possible to add a new type of topic category we can call the "Dreaded Toxin" speech. The same logic that helped to explain the amount and success of medically related topics can be extended to the ecological group. These topics areas present subjects that are disturbing, interesting, and potentially dangerous to the American public. These two areas account for almost 40% of all the topics at I.E. Nationals #20. Interestingly enough, the ecological category was the one that had the most duplicate topics. Eight different contestants had topics concerned with some aspect of recycling, and four had speeches concerned with dioxin.

It appears that one of the single significant essential factors in choosing a topic for national competition would be topic uniqueness. The use of a compelling, disturbing, and even an unusual topic appears to be the explanation for the two largest categories. The advice that some authors give persuasive speakers to choose topics that are timely and of wide public interest is not followed at the national contest. Sellnow and Ziegelmueiler (1988) seem to be correct in their analysis that topics should be fresh and unique.

What topics weren't used at the national event? It appears the ultra-controversial topics are not found in significant numbers. There were no topics on abortion. Except for the topic on "Saving the Elephant," there were no topics on foreign affairs, though some authors suggest using it as a topic area. The traditional judge for a round of persuasive speaking held during the year is most likely a college educator or former college competitor. In spite of the obvious potential of college and university concerns, this topic category comprised less than 5% of all the topics used at NFA Nationals.

The topics used in competition at the National Tournament are topics that affect people's lives, that are disturbing, and probably not

controversial. It struck me that a great majority of topics were what I will call "Infosuasive" speeches. In an attempt to secure uniqueness, speakers choose topics that are unfamiliar to their potential judges. The judges must first be informed about the topic before the speaker can move to the persuasive points of the speech. Judges will be less likely to argue with a speaker and less likely to give a lower rank.

Topics employed at the national event do appear to be topics of widespread concern for the potential judges. The final round topics of overreaction to cholesterol; the danger of asbestos removal; the glut of paper products; the hazards of disposable diapers; the leaking of underground gasoline tanks; and pension plans are going broke all are topics that could have an impact on the people judging the persuasive speech.

It would be interesting to discover what topics rise to popularity and which ones fade away. Having found some tried and true topics, we could probably predict what topics will still be used in years to come. The late 1980s are the decade of ecology and recycling, and the specific topics reflect it. I can't help but wonder what persuasive speakers will be talking about when the National Forensic Association celebrates its 30th anniversary.

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## APPENDIX A Topics by Category

("Q" = Quarterfinalist; "S" = Semifinalist; "#" = Finals Place)

### *MEDICAL*

"Fluoride is harmful."  
 "There is a potential danger from fluoride in our water."  
 "Surgery on premature babies should be done with anesthesia."  
 "Cholesterol mania."  
 "We are overreacting to cholesterol." Q,S,3rd  
 "We still need organ donations."  
 "Organ and tissue donations are needed."  
 "Computer usage causes health problems."  
 "Trauma centers are in critical condition."  
 "The infant mortality rate in the U.S. is too high."  
 "Infanticide is being allowed to occur in U.S. hospitals."  
 "The problems of artificial insemination."  
 "There is a lack of adequately trained medical examiners."  
 "There is a problem of poorly trained coroners." Q  
 "There is a problem of poorly trained/equipped coroners." Q  
 "Tanning beds are dangerous."  
 "The dangers of generic drugs."  
 "The abuses of estrogen."  
 "The problem of closing of rural hospitals." Q  
 "We need to protect against lung disease."  
 "Ritalin is overused in hyperactive children."  
 "Faulty medical equipment is causing serious problems."  
 "Drug reactions occur due to the interaction of different medicines."  
 "Stop Hepatitis B."  
 "The problem of Obsessive-Compulsive disorders."  
 "Give acupuncture a chance."  
 "Plastic surgery is a serious health problem."  
 "The problem of vitamin overdose."  
 "There are serious health dangers at weight-loss clinics."  
 "Over-the-counter drugs are still a serious problem."  
 "We need national trauma centers."  
 "Physicians dispensing drugs causes deaths."  
 "Use animals in medical research."  
 "Animal research is necessary."  
 "The health benefits of walking."

### *ECOLOGICAL*

"Dioxin is a serious problem."  
 "The problem of dioxin." Q  
 "There is harmful dioxin in paper products."  
 "There are harmful effects from dioxin." Q,S  
 "Asbestos removal may be more harmful." Q,S,1st  
 "We need to minimize electro-magnetic radiation." Q,S  
 "We need to recycle."  
 "We need to recycle."  
 "We need to recycle."  
 "Recycle plastic."  
 "There is a glut of paper—we need to recycle." Q,S,2nd  
 "Paper product packaging is wasteful."  
 "Irrigation practices are causing serious damage."

"There are harmful effects from factory farming."  
 "Our nation's bridges are unsafe."  
 "U.S. buildings are suffering from metal corrosion."  
 "Our seafood is contaminated." Q,S  
 "Disposable diapers are hazardous." Q,S,4th  
 "Stop chemical backhauling." Q  
 "The EPA has failed to respond to the public."  
 "The Defense Department is selling toxic waste."  
 "We should save the elephant."  
 "Tropical rain forests are being destroyed."  
 "Degradable plastics are not the solution."  
 "Our drinking water is contaminated."  
 "Noise pollution."  
 "The problem of leaking gasoline tanks." Q,S,5th  
 "The problem of toxic clouds." Q,S  
 "Oil spills are a serious problem."  
 "We need to remove lead from our drinking water."

*LEGAL/POLITICAL*

"Ban the use of lie detectors."  
 "People should sign prenuptial agreements."  
 "Censorship is still a problem today."  
 "Censoring the arts is a dangerous practice."  
 "The U.S. Congress should stay out of censorship of the arts."  
 "Write to your congressman on important issues."  
 "We should have life in prison instead of capital punishment."  
 "English-only laws are unfair."  
 "Exporting tobacco products to Asia is a serious problem."  
 "Immigration laws should be changed to allow more immigration to the U.S."  
 "There is a serious stagnation of congressional action."  
 "There is a serious problem of jury misconduct in the U.S."  
 "The National Endowment for the Arts should resist political pressure."  
 "Burning the U.S. flag is nothing to get upset about."  
 "Our lawmakers are very unethical."  
 "The President needs a line-item veto."  
 "We should return the remains of native Americans to their rightful heirs."  
 "We need to curtail "Pregnancy police."

*CONSUMER*

"Pension plans are going broke." Q,S,6th  
 "There is too much graphic violence on television."  
 "There is a problem of unethical trade schools."  
 "There is a problem of fraudulent fertility clinics."  
 "Beware of the problem of Social Security fraud."  
 "Car owners are paying too much for insurance."  
 "Beware of fraudulent charities."  
 "Medical insurance is too high."  
 "Charities in the U.S. are deceiving donors." Q  
 "Beware of unethical financial advisors." Q,S  
 "We need more boat safety."  
 "Beware of telephone fraud."  
 "Insurance rates are too high."  
 "Poor inspection leads to contaminated seafood."

*CRIME*

"Airport security is lacking." Q  
 "Overcrowded prisons can be solved by making them privately owned."

"Machine bolts are being poorly manufactured."  
 "Private security guards are a serious problem."  
 "The U.S. military is covering up accident investigations." Q  
 "Plastic explosives aren't being detected in airports."  
 "We should stop criminals from profiting by selling their stories to the media."  
 "There are problems because of our fear of crime."  
 "There is a military cover-up of accidental deaths."  
 "There is a serious problem of scientific fraud."  
 "Computer databases are being misused."  
 "The problem of art theft."  
 "There is a serious problem of juvenile sex criminals."  
 "The problem of credit theft." Q

#### *EDUCATION*

"Graded schools discriminate against underprivileged children."  
 "We Americans need to be more culturally aware."  
 "Sex abuse programs in school are harmful."  
 "We need to reduce illiteracy in our country."  
 "There is a serious problem of prison inmate illiteracy."  
 "There is a serious illiteracy problem."  
 "Parents should be allowed free choice of where to send their children to school."  
 "Second career teachers are a failure."  
 "There is a problem of emotional maltreatment by teachers."  
 "Driver's Education should be mandatory in the U.S."  
 "We should restructure our educational system to allow school choice."  
 "We need to improve the teaching of sex education."  
 "We should allow tax credits for private/parochial schools."

#### *CHILDREN*

"The problem of adoption."  
 "There is a problem of child care in step families."  
 "Child poisoning is a serious problem."  
 "We need to reform foster care programs."  
 "Dial-a-porn is harmful to children."  
 "We need to fund children's programs."  
 "We should punish mental abusers of children."  
 "We need to insure playground safety."  
 "The day care system in the U.S. needs to be reformed."  
 "There are serious problems associated with adoptive children."

#### *BUSINESS AND INDUSTRY*

"Use the penny."  
 "We need to use the penny."  
 "American businesses need more creativity and innovation."  
 "There is a serious shortfall in the U.S. labor class."  
 "We should allow the commercialization of outer space by private industry."  
 "The problem of employee theft of time."  
 "Handwriting analysis for employment should be banned."  
 "The losses from the savings and loan scandal are too high."

#### *COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY*

"There is a serious crime problem on college campuses."  
 "Eliminate the Greek system on college campuses."  
 "Stop forcing college professors to conduct research."  
 "Collegiate athletics needs to be more responsive to academics."  
 "There are unsafe scientific labs on college campuses."  
 "Eliminate hazing."  
 "There is a problem of racism in our universities." Q,S

"There is racism on college campuses."

*ELDERLY*

"The elderly crisis in America is growing."

"We need to treat the elderly better."

"The elderly need more long-term healthcare."

"There is a serious problem with elderly drivers."

"Elderly drivers are dangerous."

*SOCIAL ISSUES*

"There is a problem of racism in America."

"Give 1% of your income for peace."

"Surrogate motherhood is wrong."

"We need more volunteers."

*DRUG PROBLEM*

"There is a problem of substance abuse in public transportation."

"Our approach to the drug abuse problem is doomed to failure."

"We need to stop meta-amphetamines."

"Legalize drugs."

*WOMEN*

"Women face serious problems with careers and families."

"We should allow women into military combat."

"The women's movement is not getting its message across."

*MISCELLANEOUS*

"We need to add playfulness to our lives."

"Americans suffer from touch deprivation."

"Watch the tv show, 'America's Most Wanted.'"