

Public Forum Debate: An Inspiring Addition

by Jason Kline

Although only five years old this Fall, I think it would be an understatement that Public Forum has been a successful addition to the National Forensic League's cadre of events. Throughout the country, tournament directors report that Public Forum is now their most popular debate event. Even at 'national' level tournaments, where Lincoln-Douglas and Policy have been the primary focus for the last two decades, Public Forum is fast achieving parity in numbers.



Why has the high school debate community so quickly embraced Public Forum? I think the answer is complex. Many believed that Public Forum would pull students away from Policy Debate. This does not appear to be the case. I think that Public Forum has become popular due to the specific skill sets it requires.

These particular skills are necessary in a variety of other events, but Public Forum has created a condition where they can be used in coordination.

Foremost, Public Forum is an event that requires strong, clear, and precise speaking skills. Because the event is judged by a wide variety of people, the student must be able to communicate on a variety of levels. In my experience, this particular ability is the foundation of a good PFD competitor. Judges who are comparing ideas and evidence are often swayed by a team that presents their position well. Yet this goes beyond the concept of 'clear speaking' and really forces students into the realm of 'available communication.' Students must meet the needs of their audience. This particular ability, found more in speech events than debate events, really distinguishes the 'good' PFD competitors from the 'great' PFD competitors. Communication requires not only excellent diction and solid delivery. The issues of word choice and issue framing also come into play.

As well, because Public Forum Debate changes topics each month and speeches are limited to four minutes, the competitors are required to quickly become focused on the topic. There is little time for extension arguments to be developed. Again, from some perspectives, this could be seen as limiting. I believe it is beneficial. Because students competing in Public Forum are required to 'meet the judge where they are,' arguments and warrants generally have to stay on point. This forces students to find depth in stock arguments and become mini-experts on the topic. The reduction in argument variety puts an emphasis on solid research skills: those who know more are more likely to win the most key arguments. Finally, this particular aspect of the event prepares students for real-world application of the critical thinking skills they have developed in high school debate. In business, law, medicine, and education, there is a clear need for high-level thinking. At the same time, though, when presenting to a client, a patient, a jury, or a classroom of students, a professional must always remain focused. Public Forum forces students to identify what their audience wants to hear, what they need to hear, and how they will best receive it.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the one aspect of Public Forum that distinguishes it from all other debate events: The Crossfire. In the Crossfire, students discuss the issues of the round, rather than simply question each other. Crossfire is probably the hardest thing to teach students to do well. Students need to know when to speak, when to listen, and how to respond in order to be successful in the Crossfire. They are required to be persuasive and confident, but not overly aggressive and uncivil. Students are forced to strike a balance to which they are not accustomed. Most high school students are very good at arguing, but few are talented at discussion. No doubt, in our global age, it is vital that a job seeker be able to demonstrate quick thinking and clear communication. Public Forum is the best forensic event for developing this skill.

Public Forum is a new event and, not unlike Lincoln-Douglas 20 years ago, still augmenting its identity. What have remained consistent over the last five years are the skills required for solid performance. Students who are available communicators, strong critical thinkers, good researchers, and able to discuss issues back and forth are likely to find success in Public Forum. As this event continues to develop, I believe the future for it looks very bright.

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