



PUBLIC FORUM DEBATE

Implementing Positive Changes to a Popular Event

The Public Forum Debate “craze” is sweeping the nation. It has quickly become one of the most popular forensic events in the country and the excitement surrounding the new event seems to be growing everyday. In the months of October and November alone, over 24,000 individual rounds of Public Forum debate competition were reported to the National Forensic League.

With a growth in the popularity of Public Forum comes a responsibility to evaluate its definitions, guidelines, and overall organizational structure. In an effort to do just that, the NFL Executive Council asked President Tate to appoint a national committee of coaches to review all aspects of Public Forum Debate and make recommendations to the Executive Council that it felt would improve the event.

This past summer a national committee consisting of nine coaches from around the country met to participate in an in-depth review of Public Forum Debate. At the conclusion of its meetings, the Committee presented the Executive Council with a thorough report of its discussions, considerations, and recommendations for change. At its fall meeting, the Executive Council reviewed the report, considered all recommendations, and then took action on many of the items.

Defining the Event

The Committee recommended a comprehensive definition of Public Forum Debate that spoke to its specific and unique characteristics. The Executive Council agreed with the committee and passed the following NFL definition of Public Forum Debate to be included in League manuals:

Public Forum Debate is a team event that advocates or rejects a position posed by the resolution. A central tenet of the debate is that the clash of ideas must be communicated in a manner persuasive to the non-specialist or “citizen judge”, i.e. a member of the American jury.

The debate should:

- display solid logic, reasoning, and analysis*
- utilize evidence but not be driven by it*
- present a clash of ideas*
- counter the arguments of the opponents (rebuttal)*
- communicate ideas with clarity, organization, eloquence, and professional decorum*

Public Forum is a unique debate form. While Policy Debate focuses on a plan to solve the problem(s) posed by the resolution, and Lincoln Douglas Debate focuses on the core value of the resolution, Public Forum Debate focuses on advocacy of a position derived from issues presented in the resolution, not a prescribed set of burdens.

Topic Selection

The Committee also proposed a formal method in which Public Forum resolutions should be created, worded, revised and ultimately chosen.

Resolution creation and selection in Public Forum presents unique challenges for a few reasons. First, Public Forum Debate topics change each month which means that there are more resolutions to produce in a single year than there are in Policy or Lincoln Douglas Debate. Second, PFD topics are to be “stripped from the headlines” so to speak in that they should be as timely as possible which requires that the resolutions be written within a few months of being debated. Also, information on the topics should be easily accessible



through multiple online sources. Finally, the resolutions must be narrow enough that the topic can be covered and debated in front of a community judge in a short time span of less than 40 minutes.

In order to produce the best resolutions, the Executive Council, with the assistance of recommendations from the Committee, created a specific protocol for Public Forum Topic selection. The protocol will be as follows:

Appointment of the National Topic Wording Committee

- In the fall of 2005, the NFL President will select a committee (comprised of 1 chairperson and 6 members) to serve as the National Public Forum Topic Wording Committee.
- The committee will consist of individuals that reflect geographical diversity and have shown expertise in both the coaching of the event and resolution development.
- All committee members will serve a two-year term. Initially, the committee chairperson and three other members will be appointed to terms that will expire in the fall of 2008 and the other three members will be appointed to terms that expire in the fall of 2007. Subsequently, the NFL President will appoint future members as required by the established rotation.

Selecting a Topic

- The new procedures for Public Forum Topic Selection will begin with the March 2006 Topic.
- Resolution ideas from the NFL membership are encouraged and welcomed throughout the year, including the summer. Ideas are to be submitted to the NFL via the website, www.nflonline.org. All recommendations received will be forwarded to the National Topic Wording Committee Chairperson.
- The Committee will consider the resolution recommendations from both the NFL community and individual committee members at least one month prior to the release of a topic.
- Resolutions will be evaluated by committee members on the following principles: timeliness, clarity and precision of wording, availability of online research on both sides, presence of fair and equal ground and overall argument balance, immediacy, media relevance, excitement and perceived student interest, perceived community interest, and ability to be understood by a public audience. In addition, resolutions used in September and October should be easy and accessible to coaches and novice debaters as well as ignite interest.
- After receiving feedback from committee members on the recommended resolutions, the Chairperson will determine the top three to five resolutions for consideration and solicit specific wording and revision recommendations from the Committee.
- Through online communication and telephone conferencing, the National Wording Committee will determine the best wording for each of the three to five resolutions being considered. Then, the Committee, through a majority vote, will determine the resolution that will be submitted to the National Secretary.
- The Chairperson will forward the committee's resolution recommendation to the National Secretary for final consideration at least 7 days prior to the topic release deadline.
- The National Secretary must approve the final wording of each resolution. The National Secretary may send the resolution back to the Committee for further review and/or consideration.
- The NFL National Office will release the official resolution on its website, www.nflonline.org, on the first day of the month preceding the month in which the topic is to be debated. The National Tournament Resolution will be released on May 15th of each year.

Recommended General Topic Areas (Not Exclusive)

To provide students and coaches with a variety of debate experiences, the committee should consider the range of topics areas in the news. The categorical areas of the resolutions should vary as much as possible while upholding the principles described above. Recommended potential categorical and topic area examples:

PFD Topic-Areas Examples:

Legal Issue	Justice Issues	International Economics	Culture Wars
Domestic Economics	Domestic Politics Popular	Culture	Media
Artistic/Literacy	Philosophical Issues	Global/Environmental	Militarism
Foreign Policy	Education	Business	Technology
Bioethics	Medical	Science	Election Issues
Moral Issues	Societal issues	Transportation	Sports
Entertainment	Conflicts (Urban, Regional, Global)		Domestic Policy



PFD Topic-Categorical Examples:

Politics (elections, culture wars, bioethics)
Science (technology, medical, environment)
Cultural (artistic, literary, moral, social)
Business (Wall Street, jobs, ethics)
Education (No Child Left Behind, accountability)

Economics (transportation, international, domestic)
Entertainment (media, popular culture, sports)
Military (militarism, conflicts, intervention)
Foreign Policy (conflicts, Middle East, genocide)
Judicial (legal, courts, Supreme Court)

The Ballot

A sample of the new and approved Public Forum Debate ballot is on page 12. There are two noticeable differences in the new ballot. First is the use of team speaker points. The Executive Council and the recommendations committee felt that the use of speaker points rather than letter grading would be more useful at regular invitational tournaments for breaking ties and creating speaker point awards. The team speaker point concept was established as a new and unique way of emphasizing the "teamwork" nature of debating. Second, the ballot has more space for judge comments and the reason for decision.

Rules Clarifications

The summer recommendations committee conducted a thorough analysis of all current Public Forum rules/guidelines. The committee recommended a few rule clarifications/changes which were approved by the Executive Council.

•Crossfire-The NFL rules will now clearly state that debaters should stand for regular Crossfire and remain seated for Grand Crossfire.

•Plans and Counterplans-The NFL rules will clearly state that...

"In Public Forum Debate, a plan or counterplan is defined by the NFL as a formalized, comprehensive proposal for implementation. Neither the pro or con side is permitted to offer a plan or counterplan; rather, they should offer reasoning to support a position of advocacy. Debaters may offer generalized, practical solutions."

•Evidence Rules and Citation in Public Forum-The Executive Council agreed to common language for the proper citing and use of evidence for all areas of debate. Students and coaches should refer to item #4 on page TD-6 of the District Tournament Manual for clarification on all debate evidence rules.

The Committee discussed additional issues in Public Forum Debate such as the Coin Toss and Final Focus, but did not recommend any changes in these areas.



The Executive Council and the National Secretary would like to thank the National Public Forum Recommendations Committee for its incredible work this summer. The recommendations from the Committee were instruments of positive change.

**NFL Updated Manuals
available on the NFL website
www.nflonline.org**