A Critique of Source Citations in Forensic Speeches

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Every competitive activity probably develops some peculiar practices that are so common they become conventions that are virtually mandatory to succeed in the activity. Intercollegiate forensics is no exception. Some conventions are a result of the application of communication theory and research to competitive forensics and have sound justification for their use. Some conventions, however, become established as competitors model themselves upon successful performances or attempt to adjust to judges' preferences. Regardless of their origins, practices that become an expected part of forensics should be examined periodically to determine if they promote sound rhetorical practices that should be continued, or are unnecessary trappings of the competitive environment that should be discouraged. A current practice, seen at the highest levels of prepared public speaking events, is the use of detailed dating the first time any source is cited. Detailed dating is saying the entire month, date, and year for sources, such as newspapers, popular magazines, scholarly periodicals, televised news magazines, and television talk shows. Detailed dating is often presented as, "Newsweek, October 9, 1995, reports" or "Richard Shapiro, executive director of the Congressional Management Foundation, was quoted in National Journal, September twenty-third, 1995." The practice of using detailed dates in source citations has arisen in competition with little apparent consideration of its rhetorical or educational value, so it is time to consider if such detailed dating is a practice that forensic educators should promote.
As a conventional practice required for competitive success, detailed dating is both unjustified by rhetorical principles and creates problems in the educational mission of forensics. Certainly general dates should continue to be included in source citations, but the conventional practice in forensic speeches should be to cite the general time when the material was published. General dating would take the form of "two years ago the Center for Disease Control stated," "last December President Clinton vowed," or "according to Time magazine in April 1994." In addition, when particular circumstances call for detailed dates, the speaker should make the reason for the detail clear to the audience.

LACK OF RHETORICAL JUSTIFICATION

The subject of source citations has been given little attention in communication scholarship. "Citations," "source citations," and "introducing evidence" are not even listed as key words in Index to Journals in Communication Studies Through 1985 (Matlon). "Citations" was added as a key word in the 1990 edition, but none of the indexed articles concerned source citations in public speaking. J. Michael Sproule summarizes research concerning the rhetorical value of source citations:

Research bears out what public speakers know by intuition: listeners are quite sensitive to how specific a source citation is. In one experiment, speakers used either vague or detailed citations. When using vague source documentation, the speakers would describe their remarks as being based upon material obtained from "a study" or "in the newspaper." When citing evidence more precisely, the speakers mentioned exact names and affiliations. Results showed that listeners rated speakers and speech content significantly more favorably when source documentation was concrete. (189-190)
Although Sproule's summary explains the desirability of specificity in source citations, it is important to note the "detailed citations" of the research he mentions include the source's "exact names and affiliations," not the entire date of publication.

Sixteen standard public speaking texts were examined to ascertain what is commonly suggested for documenting sources. Citing sources is usually not listed in the index or table of contents of public speaking texts. Although suggestions for introducing evidence by citing sources is found in several texts (Barrett 156; Beebe & Beebe 127; Gamble & Gamble 143; Ehninger, Gronbeck & Monroe 104; Lucas 330-332; Nelson & Pearson 114-116; Samovar & Mills 109 and 112; Sproule 189-191; Wilson, Arnold & Wertheimer 173-174; Wolvin, Berko & Wolvin 134; Verderber 103; Zeuschner 230) many give no apparent suggestions for citing sources (Osborn & Osborn; Peterson, Stephan & White; Ross; Taylor, Meyer, Rosegrant, & Samples).

Public speaking texts that do give advice on how to cite sources usually recommend something similar to Gamble and Gamble's suggestions: "If you are citing a speech or article, you might say: 'In his January speech on economic indicators, President Bill Clinton told a Washington audience . . .' or, 'According to the World Almanac last year . . .'" (143). Only one of the texts examined suggests providing detailed dates (Samovar & Mills, 109, 112). Most texts do have examples of evidence in sample speeches. When evidence is introduced in those examples, it very rarely is accompanied by anything more than a general indication of its recency, and it often does not even include that much information, unless the example is a forensic speech. Clearly, the discipline of speech communication does not believe detailed dating is a necessary part of source citations.

Although one may with good reasons include source citations when presenting evidence in any speech, whether in forensic competition or not, one's detailing the exact publication or broadcast dates of evidence used in a speech is not justified by the usual reasons given for citing sources. One reason to cite sources is to
avoid plagiarism, which is the act of presenting another's words or ideas as one's own. Plagiarism can be avoided by attributing the information to the original source with a source citation. Such an attribution is not aided with a detailed date of publication because the attribution is to an author, a group of authors, or a publication, not to a date. Once the name of the source is presented one might want to provide more information, such as the date, in the citation, but none of the additional information is needed to avoid plagiarism charges. Avoiding plagiarism is a good reason to cite sources, but it is not a justification for presenting detailed dates in those citations.

A second reason to include source citations in any speech is to enhance the speaker's credibility. John C. Reinard writes:

It may be part of the Western cultural tradition for people to prove their worthiness to speak by backing up what they say. Showing that we have done our homework by having clear evidence is almost expected by receivers. We prefer listening to advocates who are in command of the facts. In fact, one unwritten rule of communication may be that people want arguers to know what they are talking about. (104)

Specific names of characteristics associated with speaker credibility vary, but research indicates three general components to credibility: expertise, trustworthiness, and dynamism (Bettinghaus and Cody 125, Simons 130). Citing sources adds to the expertise component, which includes perceived knowledge of the subject, by showing the speaker is familiar with the subject. As Rudolph Verderber says, "efforts to include sources not only help the audience evaluate the content but also add to your credibility. In addition, citing sources will give concrete evidence of the depth of your research" (103). However, no evidence warrants the claim that speakers are perceived as more knowledgable because specific dates are presented in source citations.

Citing sources potentially adds to the image of trustworthiness by providing details that allow listeners to verify
information in a speech. Listeners might consider speakers who include detailed dates more honest because the listeners recognize that they could, if they wanted, go to the exact sources and check what was said. The benefit is mitigated because few listeners are likely to make that connection and even fewer—in or out of forensics—are able to remember the full citations they hear in a well documented speech. Moreover, as Robert L. Frank's research indicates, detailed dates are not needed to check the original sources; usually all that is needed is "the title of a book and the name of an author or simply the name of a journal and the year it was published" (104).

A third reason to cite sources in speeches is to provide backing for the evidence by indicating the expertise of the source of that evidence. John C. Reinard's discussion of the role of evidence in advocacy, which summarizes the research findings of several studies, explains how the use of high quality evidence, with source citations that emphasize the source's qualifications, is more persuasive than evidence without the source's qualifications or without citations at all (103-117). The credentials of the source, however, have nothing to do with the exact date the information was published or when the interview was broadcast. The general date may affect those credentials, because it does usually make a difference if the words were said in 1990 or 1993, but in most cases it does not make any difference if they were published in April, May, or June and probably even less difference if they were published on a given day of a month.

A fourth reason to include source citations is to provide information that will help critical thinkers in the audience to determine the quality of the evidence and its suitability for the arguments the speakers make. Typical tests of evidence are known by many names, and include recency, context, reliability, expertise, objectivity, internal and external consistency, and relevance, among others (Freeley, 127-134; Warnick and Inch, 79-82; Ziegelmueller, Kay, and Dause 96-99). Giving detailed dates in source citations provides very little help for critical thinkers to evaluate the worth of
evidence. The only test relevant to the use of dates in source
citations is the test of recency, and that test is rarely applicable to
the kind of detailed dating done in forensic speeches. The year
something was said is often relevant to testing the worth of the
evidence. The month it was said is sometimes relevant, but it often
does not really matter, especially if the evidence uses information
that does not change rapidly. Although an exact date of the month
is occasionally relevant, those instances are rare, and are the only
times when speakers should use detailed dating.

A fifth reason for citing sources is to meet the constraints of
the particular rhetorical situation by presenting information the
audience expects. In other words, competitors cite detailed dates
because their judges expect them to cite detailed dates and those
judges make their expectations known on ballots. Those
expectations do not transfer outside the contest situation, though,
because other audiences do not expect to hear detailed dates
throughout speeches. Without a theoretical basis for teaching
students to provide the month, date, and year with each initial source
citation, forensic judges should not expect detailed dates in source
citations, for such a practice is not justified. Rather than teaching
students to include detailed dating in their citations, we should teach
judges such a practice is an unnecessary convention that, in most
cases, should not result in higher rankings or ratings.

EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS WITH DETAILED DATING

The practice of detailed dating is educationally unsound
because it teaches students to act in a way that not only has no real
benefit, but has the potential to weaken their speeches if practiced
outside the tournament context. Forensic educators try to teach
students to develop rhetorical habits and skills they can use in places
other than in front of a judge and a few people in college classrooms
on weekends. Any convention that subverts that purpose ought to
be changed.

Some judges and competitors may argue that rewarding
detailed citations with higher rankings, which encourages the practice, is justified because remembering and presenting several detailed dates is more difficult than using more general dates. Such an argument subverts the educational value of forensics by altering the purpose of rhetoric, thus changing the judging emphasis from what communicates best to what is most difficult for the performer to do. Awarding higher rankings to speakers because their source citations are difficult to remember or to present is unacceptable unless the forensic community abandons the educational goal to help "students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively" (McBath 11). Surely the purpose of forensics is not to teach students to convince the audience that their speeches are harder to present than other speeches.

Another problem associated with detailed dating is the damage it does to the sentence structure of the speech. Too often speakers eliminate connecting words and insert the date as if it were a footnote, resulting in something like "According to Newsweek—April 10th, 1993—" instead of "According to the April 10th, 1993 edition of Newsweek." Many speakers have difficulty incorporating the entire date into the structure of the sentence, which leads to awkward wording that apparently is overlooked by judges. Since part of the justification for forensics is to teach students to excel in their use of language, any convention that diminishes that excellence diminishes the value of the activity. Certainly the problem with sentence structure is not inherent to the use of detailed dates and competitors could reword citations to make them better, but the problem occurs with disquieting frequency even in the final rounds of national championship tournaments.

In addition to poor sentence structure, including detailed dates in footnote form several times during a speech becomes repetitive and uninteresting, which is compounded when six speakers in a round do it round after round, tournament after tournament. Although not inherent to the use of detailed dating, since speakers could discover more original ways to include dates by varying the way they are introduced, the current practice encourages competitors
to use almost identical, awkward, and choppy language in forensic speeches.

The most significant problem associated with detailed dating is the effect the practice can be expected to have on audience members. Detailed dating is both distracting and a source of informational overload. Detailed dates are distracting because the audience has to decide quickly how to process the precise information, but is given no cues to help them. Thus, if seriously attending the speech, the audience must adjust its attention from listening for general concepts to listening for precise information, even if the speaker does not intend for the audience to retain the precise information. Then the audience has to discern why the speaker thought the exact date was important enough to remember and to include in the speech. Listeners who were paying enough attention to notice the detailed dates might infer that since the exact dates kept recurring in the speech, some connection must exist. Seldom is that connection articulated, so the audience must supply the connection while hearing the speech for the first time. The listeners may wonder if there is a chronological progression, if one authority's research updated another's, or if they were supposed to remember the exact date of other evidence cited two minutes earlier. Any listener who does try to interpret the importance of detailed dates cannot easily attend to other information and may miss more important parts of the speech.

Unlike the rest of source citations, which satisfy the audience's need to know the qualifications of the source of information, when a competitor presents the detailed date it does not help the audience interpret information and often hinders interpretation. A common suggestion in public speaking texts is to avoid verbal clutter because it interferes with understanding. The common use of detailed dates in source citations is one form of verbal clutter.

Critics may claim that detailed dates do not really interfere with the reception of information, as audiences do not pay attention to detailed dates in citations. Those critics might be right. If so,
their argument denies the value of using detailed dating in speeches in the first place.

SUGGESTIONS

As unnecessary and disruptive detailed dating in citations arose over a period of time through competition, the practice will only be eliminated over time through coaching and competition. Changing the convention of using detailed dates in forensic speeches will be difficult to accomplish since the practice is well accepted. Many coaches and judges do not read journals and may not consider changing their expectations because it does not occur to them. Many influential critics are hired judges with no other connection to communication scholarship than their experience as competitors and judges. They were told to use detailed dates as competitors, accepted the advice, and perpetuate that expectation when they judge. Even so, the forensic community can take some steps to change the convention.

The first and most important step is to coach students to avoid overloading the audience with detailed dates during source citations. Such coaching should not be too difficult with new students, since beginners usually need to be coached to do more with their citations than they would do on their own. The more experienced students may be more difficult, for they have seen successful competitors use detailed dates in their citations and may have received judges' comments calling for them to cite the exact date of a magazine from which their information came. Coaches can teach both the experienced and inexperienced students to use general methods of dating sources, and to heed Harold Barrett's advice to "be brief in citing a source. Give just enough information to satisfy essential needs" (156).

Presenting dates for sources is analogous to presenting statistics in a speech, and the same sort of advice suggested for presenting statistics applies. As Stephen Lucas says, "Unless there is an important reason to give exact numbers, you should round off
most statistics" (131). Rudolph Verderber advises that "Although statistics may be an excellent way to present a great deal of material quickly, be careful not to overuse them. A few pertinent numbers are far more effective than a battery of statistics" (96). Transferring that advice to the use of dates in source citations means the dates should be given as "last July," or "two weeks ago," or "in December 1990, Time magazine reported," or similar phraseology.

Undoubtedly, a speaker's citing the entire date helps to substantiate the point the speaker wants to make, and coaches should teach their students that detailed dating is a choice to save for occasions when such precision is actually necessary to interpret the information. On those occasions, the speaker should also make the significance of the exact dates clear for the audience. For example, if a public figure made a statement and retracted it two days later, it may be both necessary and effective to emphasize the exact dates, which would be done in the context of demonstrating a rapid change in the official's position. If the evidence is expert testimony regarding the meaning of terms used in the speech, however, the entire date of the article is probably not needed. The exact way the dates are included in citations should be governed by the requirements of the particular case, rather than by a tiresome formula.

In addition, coaches should teach students to integrate detailed dates smoothly into their sentence structure, and to devise a variety of ways to present the citations. Students can apply the same grammatical skill and level of imagination to introducing sources, which they employ to including puns in their previews, in order to avoid awkward or redundant wording.

The second step towards improvement is in the hands of judges. Judges should not place a competitive premium on the use of specific dates in source citations. Given that detailed dating can interrupt the interpretation of information, critics should let competitors know explicitly on their ballots when such detail is unnecessary, irrelevant, or ill-advised. Conversely, judges should use ballots to inform competitors when they appropriately are using
general dating methods. Since most critics would agree that students' behaviors are often based on the responses they get from judges, comments from judges can be powerful tools for shaping students' behaviors.

The suggestion to use more detailed dating is not a suggestion for students either to eliminate dates entirely or to avoid calling attention to their up-to-date research that is valued by many forensic critics. In forensics and other contexts, speakers could beneficially indicate recent evidence by saying "Yesterday, the New York Times reported." This kind of citation demonstrates that the speaker is keeping up on the issue, it is more concise, it easily fits the sentence structure, and it is easier to interpret than saying "The New York Times, January 13th, 1996, reported."

Finally, coaches who understand the need to make the change should communicate it to other coaches and judges. Whether the discussions are one-on-one, part of a coaching clinic, or part of a workshop to introduce new students to forensics, they should explain to other coaches that the inclusion of detailed dates does not necessarily improve speeches, that it can be confusing when used consistently, and that it will not result in higher rankings. These discussions will help reduce the impression that winning speeches require detailed dating. The use of detailed dates should be a rhetorical choice based on the requirements of the particular situation, not a practice required for every citation.

If judges need to check the dates of a competitor's sources, the forensic community could replace the practice of including detailed dates during the speech with the convention of having a written bibliography for judges who want it. Such a convention is similar to the requirement of having manuscripts available at national tournaments, but it could be extended to tournaments throughout the year. As with manuscripts, a written bibliography would not eliminate the need to include source citations as part of the speech, but it would eliminate the need to include all the details of the dates in an oral presentation. It would also have the advantages of allowing the judges more time to check the citations and to think
about them, as well as providing a better check throughout the year on the kind of evidence abuses found by Robert L. Frank.

Whether students present general or specific dates when citing sources may seem like a relatively minor concern to forensic coaches. But the practice is important when it is recognized as a part of the educational mission of forensics, for what is taught in this activity is meant to be used outside the activity. The educational value and justification for the continuance of forensics is predicated, at least in part, on the transferability of its skills to other communication situations (Dean; Preston; Williams, Carver, and Hart). Since using detailed dates in source citations is not justified by rhetorical theory or by the educational goals of the communication discipline, and since the practice diminishes the effectiveness of speeches, coaches and judges should do what they can to discourage the practice.

REFERENCES


Frank, Robert L. "The Abuse of Evidence in Persuasive Speaking."


