When Criteria Becomes Formula:  
The Search for Standardization within  
Competitive After-Dinner Speeches  

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When students are introduced to competitive individual event  
speaking, they are often presented with the rules and guidelines for  
each event. Although these descriptions of events are perhaps  
adequate, many people in forensics believe that the guidelines are not  
always accurate or complete. An event's functional definition is  
frequently much more narrow than the written one. Every individual  
event seems to have a formula or "cookie-cutter" that must be  
followed in order to be successful, except after-dinner speaking.  

Countless researchers, such as Swanson & Zeuschner (1983), Mills  
(1984), Hanson (1988), and Holm (1993), have attempted to offer  
after-dinner speaking guidelines in an attempt to establish uniform  
judging criteria. Yet, a decade later, judges and students alike are  
frustrated by the inconsistencies. Dreibelbis & Redmon (1987)  
argue that while the rules for after-dinner speaking are very clear,  
"what is not clear are the reasons for so many different  
interpretations of the national rules for after-dinner speaking" (p.  
95). They claim, because of inconsistencies in the event, "coaches  
and competitors...may eventually come to the conclusion that never  
have so many been entertained by so few" (p. 95).  

Although after-dinner speaking is designed to be a breath of  
fresh air amidst more serious events, the lack of parameters for a  
successful after-dinner speech hinders the event. Rather than  
accepting the lack of a standardized criteria, judges often supply  
their own "cookie-cutter" formula for the successful after-dinner  
speech. These different formulas often bear little resemblance to one  
other and, most problematically, a judging criteria and a winning  
formula are often used interchangeably in after-dinner speaking.  
This study makes two arguments. First, the use of judging criteria
is integral to assessing after-dinner speeches. Second, a formula for the successful after-dinner speech is not necessary. This study argues that after-dinner speaking criteria and formula have often become hopelessly mixed and that this confusion is one of the main problems in assessing competitive after-dinner speeches. This study's goal is not to take sides on the current dispute regarding the contents of a proper after-dinner speech; rather the study illuminates differences in order to establish that after-dinner speeches can be performed in many ways and forms, which argues that diversity is a positive good.

The proper formula of an after-dinner speech is debatable, for theorists disagree over what the event should or should not be, often defaulting to textbook definitions of after-dinner speaking. Osborn and Osborn (1994) offer persuasion and humor as the two integral elements that an after-dinner speech should contain. They believe that after-dinner speeches are inherently persuasive for they "leave a message that can act as a vision or guide and inspire future events" (p. 438) and humor, they argue, arises from this inspirational situation. Anderson and Martin (1983) agree that after-dinner speaking is persuasive in nature and that humor should be derived from the situation or topic that is presented. Contrastingly, Mills (1984) divides the after-dinner speaking criteria into two main categories: content and style. Humor, he states, can be located within each of the facets of the speech through the use of various humorous techniques.

Hanson (1988) questions the criteria used in all public address events. Ultimately, he argues that after-dinner speaking can adhere to the same standards as other written speeches, yet after-dinner speeches are likely to have other genre-specific standards as well. He builds upon the notions of Swanson and Zeuschner (1983) who list four elements that should be included in an assessment of after-dinner speeches:

1. Was the subject suitable?
2. Did the speech reveal originality and creativity in the development of the subject?
3. Was the speaker's use of language appropriate to the audience and the occasion, and did it enhance the ability to compel attention and secure interest?


Consequently, it is easy to identify many different approaches offered by researchers of after-dinner speaking. Some fail to mention the role of the audience, while others, such as Mills (1984), state that audience reaction is an integral element of the after-dinner speaking experience. In essence, the difference between the judging criteria for after-dinner speaking and the criteria for other written speeches lies within debates of which of the criterion should be emphasized. Holm (1994) even goes as far to state that proof is not always a necessary component of after-dinner speaking judging criteria, while Klopf (1994) and Perella & Brydon (1994) both argue that while the after-dinner speech should contain the same structural elements as other written speeches, after-dinner speaking should place it's emphasis on entertainment for Brydon notes: "Public entertainment is the most obvious defining feature of this event" (p. 115).

In an attempt to unify where most judges place emphasis, Holm (1993) conducted a survey that asked the question: "What types of evaluative criteria do you apply when judging A.D.S.?") Responses were:

- 70% Structure and organization of the speech
- 65% Delivery and style of the speaker
- 53% General use of humor
- 41% Significance of topic
- 35% Amount of humor
- 29% Thematic unity
- 24% Use of evidence

While the survey helped to clarify judging emphasis placed on certain areas of an after-dinner speech, respondents were allowed to list more than one option. Consequently, a respondent could list six of the criteria, but there was no way to tell which of these six
received the highest emphasis.

Researchers indicate different stances on the use of appropriate humor, ranging from highly conservative to highly liberal. No clear consensus is apparent. Miller (1974) perhaps offered the best argument concerning humor in stating that "some speakers use various forms of humor better than others" (p. 157).

Yet another issue within the realm of after-dinner speaking judging criteria is the use of overdone topics. Wartman (1988) and Holm (1993) listed topics that were used in after-dinner speaking in the late-1980s and early 1990s. They included etiquette, small town life, dieting, fear, and benefits of smoking, all of which could easily be found in a round of after-dinner speaking today. Many after-dinner speaking topics are timeless and, as a result, overdone which has become a serious problem as the event has evolved.

Feeling the need for rigid guidelines in after-dinner speaking events, many of these same theorists, including Anderson and Martin (1983), Dreibelbis & Redmon (1987), Mills (1984), and Hanson (1988) offered solutions to the problem that usually included the expansion of the definition of after-dinner speaking and the standardization of formalized ballots. Perhaps the one thread of consistency throughout all prior research is that lack of consistency is a problem worth addressing.

METHOD

A total of 115 short questionnaires were completed by both students and coaches within the realm of forensics. These questionnaires were collected in two ways: responses from an e-mail list-serve (ie-l), and also through individual e-mail distribution to coaches and students. A total of 42 coaches and 73 students took part in the study. Respondents were largely from the midwest, but many also were from all regions of the country, allowing for generalizability across forensic district boundaries. The sex of respondents was nearly equal: 60 males, 55 females. Subjects were asked just four questions, 2 multiple choice and 2 open-ended
questions. Questions were derived in an attempt to pinpoint some of the major issues facing after-dinner speakers in the 1990s. These questions were:

1) What is more important: research, humor, or both?
2) People using over done topics is a: big problem, moderate problem, minor problem, or non-existent problem.
3) What is the biggest problem with after-dinner speaking today?
4) Can you think of any way to increase participation in after dinner speaking?

Results were then compiled using a single coder and then analyzed through converting multiple choice responses to percentages. Open-ended responses were analyzed using content analysis.

RESULTS

Perhaps the most divisive question in the study was: "What is more important: research, humor, or both?" Of all respondents, 35% felt that humor was more important, 28% stated that research was the integral facet to an after-dinner speech, with the remaining 37% offering the argument that both elements were of equal importance.

Such divisiveness was not found in regard to the question concerning overdone topics. Eight-five percent of all respondents stated that people using overdone topics was either a big or moderate problem in current day after-dinner speeches (54% big; 31% moderate). Eleven percent felt it was a minor problem, while only 4% of all respondents felt it was a non-existent problem. Obviously, overdone topics are likely a problem in all four categories of public address speeches; however it is particularly a problem in after-dinner speaking because some topics "never go out of style," as one respondent noted in an open-ended response: Overdone topics is an extreme problem in after-dinner speaking because, while other events
require timeliness of topics, after-dinner speaking often does not. Successful A.D.S.' of the 1990's have dealt with topics such as stereotypes against Asian Americans, credibility, and public displays of affection. All of these topics could have been done twenty years ago. Needless to say, when 96% of all participants can identify overused topics as a problem to some degree, it is easy to see, despite popular belief, that some consensus can be found within the forensic community.

Eleven respondents extended their arguments on the issue of overdone topics in open-ended responses. Four stated that the current solution to the "no topic is a new topic" problem has been to make every issue into a "syndrome" or an "ism." One respondent wrote, "If a speech on patriotism has already 'been done' then the topic becomes 'Patriot syndrome: America's obsession with supporting it's own." Respondents stated that any old topic can be finagled into sounding like a new topic and that therein lies the problem.

The open-ended responses also had some common threads of sameness. Ten respondents felt that the biggest problem with after-dinner speaking is its current position that is perilously close to persuasive speaking, which hurts after-dinner speaking as an event. Twelve noted that informative topics are virtually non-existent. "Topics," as one respondent stated, "are beginning to resemble stereotypical persuasion topics too closely. Policy speeches should be discouraged in after-dinner speeches because I would not want to see the two events become too like each other." Another coach had a very interesting point in stating that not only do most students write persuasive after-dinner speeches, but another problem arises when they attempt to meld informative and persuasive organizational patterns together. He gave the following example:

Consider a speech in which the first point is devoted to what "x" is or the history of "x." This is followed by a second point on the problems of "x" and a third that deals with solutions. The speech begins with an informative first point, yet most
speeches that propose solutions to problems are persuasive in intent and design. Thus, several different arguments within the realm of the "after-dinner speech as persuasion" argument were easily identified in the responses.

The other common thread found within the question of the "biggest problem facing after-dinner speeches today" was, not surprisingly, the lack of uniform judging criteria. Students were more concerned with this lack of consistency than their coaching counterparts, as 35% of all students, but only 12% of the coaches, noted the problem. The debates over humor versus research, persuasion versus informative, overtime versus undertime, visual aids versus lack of visual aids, serious point versus lack of serious point, and style versus substance were all cited as reasons for concern in the forensic community. As one student directly stated: "It's difficult to encourage people to compete in the event when no one really knows what the rules are."

Eight responses also dealt with the controversy of the increased use of "spontaneous" jokes. Many speakers have begun adding jokes to their speeches by relating them to other speeches within the room or relating jokes to the tournament as a whole. Some judges found this practice to be quite intriguing, as evidenced through the increased number of national finalists who participate in this practice once there is a larger audience. Yet, respondents stated that this was hurting the event for several reasons. First, such jokes often make speeches last longer than the allotted time limits. Second, they believe an after-dinner speech is supposed to be a written, memorized speech rather than an extemporaneous one for these jokes are obviously extemporaneous. Third, the perception that many students do not compete in after-dinner speaking because they "are not funny" is verified in this practice of extemporaneous jokes. It appears that the "naturally" funny speakers, who can add spontaneous jokes, percolate to the top of a round because of this practice. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, judges argue that this practice grants an unfair advantage to competitors who speak
toward the latter part of the round because these speakers have more material with which to extract additional humor. Once again, this debate has served to polarize judges and competitors without any vision for compromise or resolution in the near future.

The other open-ended question asked respondents to think of a way to increase participation in the event. The most common response (44%) was that there was no way to increase the number of competitors in after-dinner speaking. However, of the people who did identify ways to bolster numbers, the most frequently mentioned idea was to offer novice after-dinner speaking at more tournaments. One coach stated that "it's difficult to get freshman [sic] to do after-dinner speeches when they know they will be competing against the top speakers in the country every weekend. It's much easier to do a prose or compete in impromptu: they require less preparation and the chance for success is higher because of the novice designation."

Eighteen respondents, seventeen of which were students, also cited the lack of uniform judging criteria as the reason for low participation. Students argued that if they knew what the judges were looking for in an after-dinner speech then they would more readily compete in the event.

DISCUSSION

After analyzing the results of the study, the long-standing divisions between different modes of thought remain prominent in current-day competition. Majority agreements could not be reached on the research versus humor debate. Open-ended responses resulted in controversies mentioned by several scholars in prior research on whether speeches should be persuasive, whether speeches should address significant societal issues, and what is the ever-changing role of humor.

The solutions to problems currently facing after-dinner speeches can be divided in two ways: feasible and impractical solutions. For instance, the need for novice after-dinner speaking
can be resolved simply through offering a novice division or designation. The actual definition of the event could be clarified through working with the national committee to ensure that the N.F.A. definition of after-dinner speaking accurately reflects the criteria that are currently being employed at tournaments. The problem with over-done topics appears to be so universal that it could be solved by judges' rankings that reflect their distaste for the overdone.

However, problems concerning judging preference are difficult to solve. With such a division concerning the importance of research and humor, no consensus is likely to occur in the near future. Whereas problems within after-dinner speaking can be solved through rules changes and tournament offerings, one cannot make judges think more uniformly. As with most events, this is one area in which students may constantly be frustrated, as they will likely never know what judges' criteria are for any event.

The answer to the question of which is more important, research or humor, is that a speech should contain both. Seventy-two percent felt humor was most important or equally important, while almost two-thirds felt research was most or equally important. Additional research should be conducted to examine the question further and detect whether all judges agree that the criteria should contain both research and humor, even if the order of importance can not be determined. This appears to be the most heated argument currently facing after-dinner speaking. Some judges abhor the use of sources within after-dinner speeches, while others consider it a seminal criterion to the speech. The dichotomy is apparent, which frustrates students in tailoring their speeches to fit the majority of judges and it can deter students from participating in the event.

CONCLUSION

This study has presented the polarizing issues within competitive after-dinner speeches. The debate over standardization of after-dinner speeches will remain within the forensic community.
for the foreseeable future. Perhaps the most amazing aspect of after-dinner speaking research is its dire lack. Although many textbooks discuss the format or structure of the speech, the competitive after-dinner speech is a different breed. Yet, even with this fact in mind, the search for standardization of the event is at the forefront of many judges' desires. Rather than continuing to ask the question of "what standardization needs to take place," future researchers should be asking if standardization needs to take place. Research should clarify a standardized judging criteria, yet the formula for a successful after-dinner speech should be left to each individual student. The responsibility of the judge would then be to evaluate, rather than impose, as formula. The guideline that an after-dinner speech should be a "speech that makes a point through the use of humor" (Bartanen, 1994) should help determine the judging criteria, but not a judges' perceived formula.

After-dinner speeches are very diverse and this diversity makes the activity stronger. As the event currently stands, no one speaker can be all things to all audiences. They can adhere to judging criteria much more easily than they can dissect a judges' "success formula," especially when it often changes each round.

One of the strengths of after-dinner speaking is its lack of a "success formula." A final round can witness a speech with two sources followed by a speech with twenty. Speeches can employ different types of humor, from slapstick to deadpan. While preferences for certain forms of humor and formats will always be a matter of taste, this diversity makes the event stronger. Future research should continue to clarify judging criteria, but leave the "success formula" to the students.

REFERENCES


