IN SEARCH OF LIBRARY HORROR STORIES:
AN EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH CRITICAL TO
PUBLIC ADDRESS EVENTS IN FORENSICS

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For anyone who has participated in forensics and individual events, the library has become a second home. Interpers can spend days trying to find pieces and poems, extempers regularly catch up on the weekly events changing the world around us, and of course, public address people work diligently on research. While public address is a combination of delivery and information, the latter is often the least considered. The forensics adage, "it's not what you say, but how you say it," inherently emphasizes style over substance; and while both are theoretically important, I believe judges and competitors alike need to remind themselves of the importance of good research. By first, looking at the problems and pitfalls of research; and then, identifying some of the reasons for the need of good research, all of us associated with individual events can reflect on why the hours of time spent with our eyes focused at black print on white paper have not gone to waste.

Any good speech starts with a good topic, and whether your topic is simple or complex, common or uncommon, narrow or far-reaching, research is the difference between a good topic and a good speech. Trying to find that research, however, is no easy task, and three basic problems and pitfalls exist in research: relying on one source, plagiarizing other sources, and failing to do one's own research.

Archimedes once said, "give me a firm place from which to stand and I will move the world."; well, in forensics, give a student one good article with a lot of good internal source citations and a public address is born. Let's fact it—it is really not that hard to do. National Geographic or a Popular Science cover story easily provides enough information for a solid informative; one 60 Minutes episode can give you a strong persuasion, complete with problem, reasons for problem, dead bodies, solution for problem, and at least one gut-wrenching, sob story for an introduction and conclusion; even Vogue and Cosmopolitan can provide the impetus for an after dinner speech, including a rough outline and cute definitions. Situations abound that are tempting and easy ways to avoid doing research and pitching a tent in the library.

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Unfortunately (or fortunately), this approach to public address has two big problems. First, most judges and competitors, at least good judges and competitors, can tell if a speech is from one source. Either you cite the same source over and over again, or you don't cite any sources at all—the forensics' version of "damned if you do, damned if you don't."

Second, most current articles that provide such great information and make wonderful topics have more than likely been seen by others on the circuit, including judges. People who do research recognize topics they themselves have seen, and often know the same articles and same information. If it is a new articles about an "old" topic, judges and experienced competitors can probably stand up and give a synopsis of the speech themselves. If it is that great an article, in and of itself, chances are someone else has done it, is doing it, or there will be so many speeches out on the topic one source simply won't cut it.

While we all hope to find "The Article" that will make our speech, a good researcher knows it will take more than one article, more than one perspective to make his/her case. It will take time in the library, discussions with librarians, and an understanding of the resources available; it will take research, rough drafts, critiques, re-research, re-critiques, and countless rewrites to make a speech successful.

Even if we are able to find the sources needed for a quality speech, there lurks the familiar and recurring problem of plagiarism. In recent months, numerous studies have appeared in various journals highlighting the problem of plagiarism on college campuses, and the forensics world has certainly not been devoid of its own controversies as well. While reasons for plagiarism range from being too lazy to rewrite information to being too arrogant in thinking no one will check false sources, I believe some plagiarism occurs because it is difficult to make research sound like part of a speech. There are only so many times you can say "according to...", "...reports" and "...concludes" without getting redundant and boring.

The ability to incorporate and cite information within an address is a skill that often separates good speeches from great speeches; it is one of those intangibles that goes unnoticed if done well, but remains a constant comment on judge's ballots if ignored. With the emphasis on "how you say it" over "what you say," the trap is there to make inferential leaps, gloss over and ignore problems, or even plagiarize information rather than answering questions with research that might be difficult to incorporate. The integrity of the argument is sacrificed to preserve the polish and grace of delivery; it is easier to plagiarize the information within the speech rather than working to incorporate the source citations. This type of plagiarism reflects the easy way out rather than
learning one of the finer skills of forensics, a definite problem that only hurts the forensics circuit.

Beyond the problems of lack of research and plagiarism, there also exists the problem of not doing one's own research. It is one thing for a fellow competitor, teammate, or coach to give an article to another person; it is a problem when that person incorporates the information into that person's speech. It is one the thing to work with coaches on critiques and rewrites; it is another for a competitor to enter a coaching appointment, be handed a speech, and simply start the memorization process.

While there is no way to determine how prevalent the problem is, the amount of scuttlebutt and gossip that exists on the circuit concerning the problem is too overwhelming to ignore. The benefits of doing one's own research are too obvious to enumerate (although I'll mention some later), but there are some who apparently disregard them. Too often, it is apparent that a competitor really doesn't know what he/she is talking about, and is merely reciting somebody else's words rather than informing, persuading, or critically analyzing. The problem manifests itself as eight to ten minutes of basically wasted time for competitors and judges alike, with no one learning anything.

Now by no means do I wish to diminish the importance of delivery and style in public address, and I don't want to argue that substance is more important than style. I believe the best speech has a balance of both elements, and that balance can only be achieved by elevating our concerns for research. Currently, though, there are definite problems in how we view research, and how it relates to individual events. There is a definite importance to research beyond merely proving to someone that you know how to use a card catalogue or a periodical index. Research has some definite, positive effects on forensics, and of the many reasons for good research in public address, three of them are worth noting here.

First, good research ensures that we know what we are talking about. Whether our purpose is to inform, persuade, entertain, or analyze, our primary, ethical responsibility is to be knowledgeable ourselves. Good research ensures that we know more than what fits into a neat, ten-minute oration; that we are aware of conflicting stories, of problems, of other information that allows us to be knowledgeable speakers. One of the greatest feelings in forensics is when someone is interested enough in what you have to say, that they ask you for more information; and there is nothing more fulfilling than to have that information for them.

Second, the research skills that we learn in forensics helps us as students in all parts of our academic life. The organization and research
skills that public address emphasizes are skills that professors demand and employers need. The ability to find good, solid research, and then know how to convey that research to others, is a valuable tool in the academic and corporate worlds.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, good research makes forensics enjoyable, and makes the events worthwhile. Often, I was asked why I did forensics—why someone would want to give up nearly every weekend of their college career to spend time at other college campuses with a small group of people and "talk" about "stuff." It is a very good question, and one I think anyone who participates in forensics needs to ask himself/herself. Every competitor needs to ask why he/she does forensics, and more pertinent to this article, why does he/she want to do public address. With ten to twelve events available each week, why does someone want to devote hours upon hours of time, work, coaching appointments, and determination to a topic?

Whether I was writing an informative, persuasion, rhetorical criticism, or an after dinner speech, I participated in forensics because it was enjoyable, and I did public address because in every speech, I had researched information that I wanted other people to know. Good research keeps judges curious, other competitors interested, and makes people want to come back next week and see how a speech changes over time.

A good researcher makes use of judges' ballots. Every week, a competitor gets a ballot back that reads, "need some research/information/source citations for this point." While some ballots are good, some not so good, they do serve a purpose. If we do nothing with judges' ballots but check and make sure the scores match those on the tabulation sheets, we are missing out. Judges' ballots give you a feel for what people want to hear, and this needs to be encompassed with what you as a competitor want to say. What research needs to be included, where it should go, and what information could be emphasized are questions that an individual and judges input can help answer. This process of communication between judge and contestant is what makes forensics worthwhile, research important, and keeps the competitor involved in the events. Because I think forensics is a worthwhile endeavor, I believe doing quality research is a basic commitment to keeping public address alive and healthy. Using one source for a speech, plagiarizing, or letting others do my work would only harm the events, hurt the learning process, and make them unenjoyable for everyone. If we are going to take so much time out of our lives to participate, the least we can do is take the time to prepare.

I am sure there are veteran forensicators around the country that have "library horror stories" to tell, and I think that is great. It means
there are people out there attempting to do quality research, people willing to pitch a tent next to the card catalogue and settle in on the search for the research that will transform "the topic" into "the speech." By looking at the problems and pitfalls of public address research, and the reasons why good research is needed, I hope all concerned with individual events will spend a little more time emphasizing research and quality information, ensuring "library horror stories" concerning our home away from home will exist for many years to come.