The debate over whether or not to include a questioning period in contest rhetorical criticism is as old as the event itself. While some argue that such questions "serve a viable educational purpose" (Levasseur & Dean, 1989, p. 151), others insist that the questioning period often results in a "forensic horror story" (O'Rourke, 1985, p. 165) for competitors. Since the national Forensic Association voted to remove the questioning period at its Individual Events Nationals, this debate has intensified. Those who supported the questioning period view the decision to discontinue it as a threat to the educational objective of the event. Those who endorsed dropping the questioning period insist that it was no longer serving as a valuable asset to the event. Although we agree that good questions can contribute to the learning experience in contest rhetorical criticism, we do not believe that the educational value of the event has been weakened by eliminating the questioning period. In the following paragraphs, we address some of the speculations about the impact of eliminating the questioning period. We discuss the role of questions in the general context of education, and in the specific process of training young critics. Finally, suggestions for future experimentation are offered.

**Questions and Education**

Initially, we suggest that the process of "questioning" students during a round of competition, regardless of the event, is amoral. In other words, oral questioning can serve a positive end or a negative end. When used appropriately, questions might serve a positive purpose. When used inappropriately, they might serve a negative purpose. In this portion of our essay, we offer two observations from an educational perspective. First, we argue that oral questions can and have served a negative purpose by creating an atmosphere of unhealthy anxiety for competitors. Second, we reject the claim made by Levasseur and Dean (1989) that oral questions are "better suited for rhetorical criticism than any other individual event" (p. 154).
It is important to note that we agree with Levasseur and Dean (1989) when they reject the argument that questions should be eliminated because they "impede tournament timing" (p. 153). The matter of tournament administration is irrelevant to the legitimacy or illegitimacy of questions. Tournament managers can arbitrarily schedule fewer speakers in rounds of rhetorical criticism if they wish to accommodate questioning periods. Our concern is that oral questions as they have been used in contest rhetorical criticism have created a threatening atmosphere for students.

The questioning period, as it was used at the Individual Events Nationals, allowed each judge to ask one question. The nature of these questions, however, varied greatly among judges. Unfortunately, the questioning period was abused by many judges. Reynolds (1985) describes the discomfort such abuse can pose for contestants when she states, "The question-answer session is more often than not a grueling, defensive experience for competitors when it should be both positive and constructive" (p. 174). Carl Rogers (1983) cautions us to consider the possible negative consequences for the student [contestant] when the teacher [judge] governs the communication situation by placing the student in a "state of fear." In the case of oral questions during contest rhetorical criticism, students are threatened with "public criticism and ridicule" and "the fear of failure" (p. 186). Even more disturbing is Rogers' claim that "this state of fear appears to increase as we go up the educational ladder because the student has more to lose" (p. 186). If questions in contest rhetorical criticism produce such anxiety, why do some students ask that they be continued? Perhaps the "personal satisfaction" of having "beaten a pompous judge," as described by O'Rourke (1985, p. 166) actually serves to motivate veterans of contest rhetorical criticism to advocate the continued use of questions. Still, the question remains: How many students have quit competing in or avoided contest rhetorical criticism altogether because they felt threatened by the questioning period? If students turn away from the event because of the questioning period, what educational purpose are the questions serving?

Levasseur and Dean (1989) suggest that, because contest rhetorical criticism asks "for so much in so short a time," it is the individual event best suited for questions (p. 154). We agree that contest rhetorical criticism is a demanding event. We contend, however, that the demands of the other individual events are such that they are equally worthy of having question periods. For example, in oral interpretation
events, students are asked to unravel a plot and develop characters within ten minutes. Similarly, public speaking events require contestants to create a sense of understanding or develop a set of adequate arguments for accepting a controversial position on a public issue within the same ten minute time limit. We agree with Manchester (1985) when he states, "The forensic community must embrace the notion that all national events are unique and sufficiently complex to challenge the student's [sic] development as communicators (p. 172). Simply put, the topics of the rhetorical criticism event are not necessarily any more extensive than those of other events. All events require the use of a critical perspective.

Questions and the Training of Young Critics

Levasseur and Dean (1989) claim that the question period serves to "encourage more knowledgeable rhetorical critics" (p. 152) and that without the encouragement of questions, "students will cease to possess such knowledge" (p. 153). They consider the argument that students will continue to conduct research about their artifact and method, beyond what is necessary to write the speech, to be rooted in "idealism" (p. 153). We contend that such student research is not idealistic. We argue instead that it is a realistic and essential component in the process of training young critics. Specifically, we contend that describing such research as idealism fails to recognize the vital elements of motivation, reasoning, and responsibility in the process of teaching students the art of rhetorical criticism. The elements are described in the following paragraphs.

Motivation

Andrews (1989) explains that the initial step towards training students to be effective rhetorical critics is to develop in them a "wise skepticism" (p. 178). He explains that, by developing this skepticism, students will become "better consumers and producers of communication" (p. 183). Andrews' observations are consistent with those of Brock, Scott, and Chesebro (1990), who claim that criticism is fostered by observations of circumstances which "cry out for explanations." They label this human need to evaluate and understand our world, "the critical impulse" (p. 10). Contest rhetorical criticism affords students the opportunity to apply formally their critical impulses to messages they believe are in need of explanation. Thus, contest rhetorical criticism is a formal means of helping students to perfect their critical impulses. It is the critical impulse which should motivate students to explore both the theories and the circumstances surrounding the rhetorical artifact or act which has made them curious. If oral questions are substituted for the critical impulse, the educational value of the event is suspect.
Therefore, it is our position that a genuine curiosity on the part of the students toward the communication they analyze is a real and necessary ingredient for test criticism.

**Reasoning**

An additional aspect to be considered concerns the act of reasoning in criticism. Foss (1989) contends that rhetorical training helps students to "become inquisitive about the symbol use around them—to make habitual the asking of questions about the nature and functions of symbols" (p. 191). To meet this goal, Foss advocates a question-asking approach on the part of the rhetorical critic. Such an approach is fitting with the previous discussion of wise skepticism and the critical impulse. Students begin and develop their rhetorical criticisms by forming questions. The reasoning process within a contest rhetorical criticism is manifested in the questions and related answers generated by the student. Hence, the process of rhetorical criticism itself is a process of asking and answering questions. These questions should be developed as the students direct their critical impulses toward the rhetorical artifacts or acts they select for analysis. Why, then, would the quality of a student's analysis be diminished if a judge does not ask oral questions following a performance? Such outside questions may, if asked appropriately, encourage students to alter their presentation for future contests. They should not, however, serve as the driving force behind the research efforts of the student. At best, these questions serve only to supplement the continuous questioning carried out by the students themselves. Further, when contest rhetorical criticisms foster questions for judges which are not answered in the speeches, judges can articulate such questions on their ballots. Simply put, we see no unique advantage to verbalizing such questions at the conclusions of competitors' presentations.

**Responsibility**

A third aspect of training the critic concerns the teaching responsibility of the coach. Gronbeck (1989) offers a demanding goal for the teacher of young rhetorical critics. He states "Rhetorical training is education for life" (p. 189). Gronbeck insists that, as educators of young rhetorical critics, we should strive to improve their abilities to describe, contextualize, and make judgments about the messages around them. He insists that the true means by which we should evaluate our success or failure in training young critics is through the observation of the "reasoned personal and collective judgments" our students make throughout their lives as they are confronted with socio-political situations (p. 189). Coaches of rhetorical criticism can make a major contribution to this goal. To do so, coaches need to engage in
thought-provoking dialogue with their students. Such conversations should, at the very least, begin when the student identifies an item for analysis, and continue throughout the season of competition. Coaches diminish the significance of such dialogue when they limit it to strategic conversations about potential questions from judges. This limited scope fails to emphasize the importance of applying such concepts to the students' life experiences. If coaches are willing to meet the responsibility of giving their students "education for life," the questioning period is not necessary. Conversely, coaches who are not willing to accept this responsibility and, instead, strategically train their students to "beat" the questions judges might ask, fail to meet the educational objective of contest rhetorical criticism.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

In 1985, Denise Gorsline addressed the abuse of questions in contest rhetorical criticism by stating, "We can change our behaviors or we can change the product" (p. 167). In 1989, the NFA decided to change the product by eliminating the question period. The NFA has not discouraged, and we contend that it should not discourage, the continued experimentation with questions in all individual events. It is, in fact, our hope that forensic educators will continue to experiment with question periods in all of the individual events. When conducting such research, however, we might all do well to review what Pamela J. Cooper (1988) has written on the process of questioning students in the educational setting, as well as what she has to say about the expectations we communicate when we make use of questions (pp. 124-146; 247-259). In essence, Cooper suggests that questions can add to or detract from the educational growth of the student either by fostering interest or by creating a hostile environment for the student. We believe that perfecting the use of question periods in forensic competition is a worthy challenge.

Well-planned questions asked by conscientious judges can supplement the educational objective of contest rhetorical criticism. The membership of the NFA have, however, found sufficient reason to discontinue their use. While this is a disappointment to some and a victory for others, we remain convinced that the educational value of contest rhetorical criticism has not been diminished.
References


Manchester, B.B. "What's good for the goose is good for the gander": Toward a consistent policy on questions in rhetorical criticism. National Forensic Journal, 3, 168-173.

