The Question in Rhetorical Criticism:
A Response to Levasseur and Dean

Keith D. Green and Larry Schnoor*

In the Fall, 1989, issue of the National Forensic Journal, David Levasseur and Kevin Dean presented arguments in favor of the use of the question in Rhetorical Criticism. The arguments presented identified important reasons why questioning was valuable; however, equally important arguments as to the disadvantages of questions were omitted. To provide for a balanced discussion of the use of questions at hand, this essay will offer support for the opposing position: that the return of the questioning period to Rhetorical Criticism is simply unwarranted. To arrive at this conclusion, two avenues will be explored: 1) an overview of the controversy at hand will be presented to establish perspective and to set parameters for the argument; and 2) an argument supporting the removal of the question will be advanced.

To begin, there are two factors vital in understanding the scope and importance of this issue. First, it is important that we remember that the concern over the use of questioning in Rhetorical Criticism is an Individual Events National Tournament issue only. The action taken at Upsala in April, 1989, has no regulatory authority in the operation of any tournament anywhere else in the country. There are those who might argue that since NFA has removed questioning from the event, individual directors of forensics will now remove questioning from their respective invitational tournaments. This is most certainly a possibility; however, invitations traditionally offer rules, formats, and events different from those used at the national level. Thus, any argument about impact on invitational tournaments is moot; these are tournament host decisions. We must keep the argument in perspective; and we are talking about one tournament only.

Moreover, we suggest that invitational tournaments are the more appropriate place for the use of the question, if it is to be used at all. By the time of the national tournament, rhetorical criticism should have been evaluated sufficiently to provide answers to questions raised during the year. Also, since one purpose of questioning is to stimulate students to consider revisions in their criticisms, we wonder how many criticisms are actually revised after the national tournament is ended.


KEITH D. GREEN is an Instructor of Speech Communication and Director of Forensics at Mankato State University in Mankato, MN, 56002; LARRY SCHNOOR is Associate Professor of Speech Communication and Chair of the Department of Speech Communication at Mankato State University in Mankato, MN 56002.
A second aspect of this controversy which is crucial to achieving perspective is the understanding that each of us may argue a position based on different value hierarchies. We can certainly all agree that the concept of questioning students has educational value; however, for these authors, tournament operation and event equity is of higher value. This is in no way intended to demean the value of posing a question to a student. Rather, it is an attempt to balance educational value with fairness and tournament pragmatics. The importance of this issue is that the conflict is not over the value of questioning, per se, but it is over questioning balanced with other tournament concerns. Thus, the value of the question should not be the focus, but rather the relative merit of its use when weighed against other variables. With this overview in mind, we can develop a more precise discussion of the reasons supporting the removal of questions from student competition, and we will show that questioning in rhetorical criticism does not achieve a healthy balance with other concerns of forensic competition.

From a tournament administration perspective, we can't deny that the use of questions increases the amount of time needed to complete each round of competition. As all tournament managers know, being able to anticipate the length of a given round is vital to effective tournament operation. Without this ability, the scheduling of judges, rooms, students, and the entire tournament becomes increasingly difficult. Dr. Christina Reynolds, Executive Secretary of the National Forensic Association and Tournament Manager, reported that removing the question period from each round of competition has increased the effectiveness of tournament operations (1990). Given the size and complexity of IE Nationals, actions which decrease the complexity of operating the tournament must be valued highly and given careful consideration.

Second, from a fairness perspective, there are two concerns. Since the use of questioning had been at the discretion of judges in the round, it is a feature which is unevenly applied in each event. Not all judges asked questions; and if they did, many did not ask questions of all contestants. Thus, judges' uneven application of questioning may actually have created inequities in the round itself. Those students being questioned had that additional time to clarify, in some way, their positions; those students left unquestioned did not.

Furthermore, even if judges did choose to employ the question, the danger of abuse existed. As Harris asserted, "Not only are tournament schedules totally devastated by such practices, but the renown of rhetorical criticism finals as a model for the 'Inquisition' quickly turn novices away from an important educational experience" (1987, p. 24). Although idealistically all judges treat students with tact and consider-
ulation, to assert that such abuse did not occur would be hiding one's head in the sand. To sanction this avenue for abuse certainly seems inconsistent with strong educational goals.

Additionally, the presence of questioning was inconsistent with other events; not, as Levasseur and Dean assert, establishing a false dichotomy (p. 153), but rather, the equitable application of tournament procedures to all events. Rules of events such as time limits are established, among other reasons, to encourage fairness in the structure of the event itself. Since questioning was unevenly applied by judges, the structure of the event allowed for inequities rather than guaranteed fairness.

Third, from an educational perspective, it appears that questions taught students that lack of clarity and completeness within a given time-frame was acceptable. This stance is certainly contrary to basic, effective public address. Virtually any textbook on speech preparation will stipulate that the final product must fit within the given time-frame. Use of the question suggested that time limits could be "fudged" a bit, and that the rhetorical effort might be completed after the fact. Levasseur and Dean assert, "A complete and concise rhetorical criticism is impossible within a ten-minute time-frame. "At least with questions, judges can compensate for the time limit and explore areas which the student simply could not address" (p. 154). If students cannot address these areas within the speech, to allow them to be addressed after the fact violates the basic parameter of "fitting the time limit."

Finally, the entire issue of the question is highlighting a symptom of an underlying problem in Rhetorical Criticism: we as coaches/judges may be demanding too much to be accomplished in the ten-minute time-frame. As Levasseur and Dean acknowledge in their essay, "In no other event do we ask for so much in so short a time...." In short, we ideally expect a twenty-five page journal article condensed into a ten-minute insightful and invigorating presentation" (p. 154). By utilizing questioning in order to mitigate these extreme expectations, the NFA community was, in effect, endorsing a poorly defined event. As Harris argued in 1987, there is "a major problem with the event—its lack of definition in the minds of forensic judges, coaches, and students" (p. 21). If questioning were still in effect, the symptom (lack of clarity) might be treated, but the disease (too much material) would still be present. Rather than utilize questioning as a stop-gap measure, "the forensic community [should] develop a clear statement of rhetorical criticism as a competitive event" (Harris, 1987, p. 24). This redefinition must provide for allowing students to satisfy judges' demands for information within the ten-minute time limit.
In balance, the educational value of the question to rhetorical criticism, when compared to tournament administration concerns, fairness concerns, and other education concerns, falls well short of justifying its re-introduction to the event. The value of questions in any forensic event is obvious; however, when weighed against other factors, its use is not warranted.

References

