

NATIONAL PUBLIC POLICY FORUM

A Different Perspective on Forensic Competition

by

Ravi Shah

Anyone who has participated in a speech and debate competition understands the profound impact it has on his or her daily life. Whether discussing politics, learning to interact with others in the workplace, or opening up thoughtful lines of self-inquiry, a debater usually understands the importance of discourse and examining an argument from different perspectives.

Different perspectives apply to forensic competition as well. In fact, we all know, that debate is much more than just speaking, but different events tend to emphasize one or two aspects of speech and debate. But the National Public Policy Forum, a national, written speech and debate tournament is an interesting new format of debate. My experience with the NPPF has broadened my perspective on forensic competition and helped propel me towards my professional goals.

The NPPF format is fairly straightforward. Students still formulate constructive arguments and rebuttals, but the “back-and-forth” argumentation is done on paper. The NPPF allows for any group of high school debate students to enter the competition by submitting a written constructive either affirming or

negating the chosen annual resolution, which is usually very close to the NFL policy debate resolution.

The medium of debate in the NPPF, a written format, differs greatly from standard debate exchanges. A written format requires that students learn to write succinctly but forcefully. Word limits for the competition are strict—usually not a word more than what’s necessary to make a coherent argument.

Students, therefore, are forced to constrain their arguments. Unlike in a standard debate round, where a “spur-of-the-moment” ad-lib may go

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unnoticed, every written word will be scrutinized in the NPPF. Students learn to write deliberately. Deliberate arguments have been a great help for me in term papers, business-style memos, and other class writing assignments. As an undergraduate in a business college, professors expect us to be serious about word economy in our business writings. The NPPF has shown me that with the right effort you can constrain your writing to be as

deliberate as possible.

After NPPF teams submit an initial qualifying paper, judges choose sixteen teams to compete in the “back-and-forth” written exchange. Teams are randomly paired and qualifying students earn the chance to take part in a series of written debate exchanges, where schools are paired for each round and exchange constructive arguments and rebuttals with one another.

Students have only a limited amount of time to prepare papers for each round. Learning to write in a group was the most difficult skill set to master when I helped prepare the papers. Each person has a different writing style and different views on how the paper should be organized. With each paper our team wrote, we learned how best to delegate responsibility, revise as a group, and make the best argument possible.

After each round, judges choose winners, and teams advance. The final four teams fly to New York City, all expenses paid, and continue the competition in a verbal forum. In 2006, my team was selected to compete in the final four in New York City. The NPPF, co-sponsored by New York University and the

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Bickel and Brewer law firm in Dallas, Texas, hosts its final rounds in the NYU Law School.

Preparation for the final rounds was the most intense experience from my debate years. The judges for each round are a panel of experts. Experts like NYU President John Sexton, top litigators from the country and highly respected journalists and political experts, not to mention some of the top NFL debate coaches in the country. This array of experts makes the NPPF semifinal and final rounds particularly difficult. Besides an opening statement and rebuttal, panel judges are given the opportunity to ask whatever questions they would like to both teams.

As I always tell the participants at the NPPF every year, “if you can answer questions before that panel of judges, you can answer questions from anyone.” Whether in an open discussion, my classes or during a business presentation, I am thankful for the ability to think on my feet. And since that ability only comes from preparation, research is a huge emphasis in competition. All of the frustrations of other events—students who fabricate evidence in Student Congress for example—disappear in the NPPF. You must know your topic from all angles.

When I finished the competition, I was holding on to a vast amount of knowledge about that year’s topic, U.S. detainment policy.

Our team had argued both sides of the case, stood up to questioning, and had developed extensive knowledge about the topic—after all, we had defended our positions to people who deal with detainment policy on a daily basis. When I began my undergraduate degree at NYU (which, incidentally, I chose to attend after attending the tournament) I learned of an opportunity to write for the UCLA Undergraduate Law Journal.

Recognizing an opportunity to put some of the work we had done for the NPPF to good use, I proposed writing about detainment policy, from a legal perspective. My article on detainment policy

The ability to think on your feet

(which, to this day, remains one of my favorite public policy issues) was published in fall of 2007. This year, as a sophomore, with one article already under my belt, I proposed to write an article about U.S. Securities Law for the UCLA Undergraduate Law Journal. That article will be published in fall of 2008.

Proposing to write an article is one thing, but actually writing these articles was anything but easy. Both articles required extensive research. Research, which did not just hit the surface of the topic, but

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drove down into the fundamentals of public policy and law. Research was the first step in the NPPF. Before we outlined a paper, we researched. After you receiving a rebuttal, we researched. To prepare for the final rounds, we researched.

Developing researching skills was particularly important for me, because they are necessary in every area of my life, in every role I play—a student, an intern, a citizen. Only by augmenting my research skills have I been able to improve my writing quality.

What is most extraordinary is that when I look back on my writing skills, I can see their development from year to year. But the process of learning how to write, how to frame a coherent written argument, all of those skills seem to stem from the initial experience of the NPPF. In some way, the NPPF allowed me to take what I knew how to do in debate, argue public policy, and transition to something related to my professional goals.

(Ravi Shah is currently an undergraduate business student at the NYU Stern School of Business. He participated in Student Congress, Extemporaneous Speaking, Public Forum Debate, while at the Dreyfoos School of the Arts, the national championship winning school for the NPPF in 2006.)