

CHAPTER 16

FORMAT AND SPEAKER BURDENS IN PUBLIC FORUM DEBATE

Public forum debate is, without question, the fastest-growing competitive debate event in America. Public forum adopts popular media debates as its model—formats such as CNN’s *Crossfire* and *Capital Gang*, PBS’s *McLaughlin Group*, and Fox’s *Beltway Boys*. Because CNN founder Ted Turner was one of the early promoters of the event, it was originally called *Ted Turner debate*, although it also went by the name *controversy debate*. In most parts of the country, the event is now called public forum debate.

THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC FORUM DEBATE

This event, launched in 2002, was the brainchild of National Forensic League (NFL) executive council member Donus Roberts of Watertown High School in Watertown, South Dakota. All of the original rule structure and framework was created by NFL executive secretary James Copeland, with assistance from NFL council members Frank Sferra of Mullen High School in Denver, Colorado, and Ted Belch of Glenbrook North High School in Northbrook,

Illinois. They intended to create an event that would appeal to any bright students who wanted diversified activities—the kinds of students who enjoy academic decathlons, model United Nations, or similar contests. The hope was that public forum debate would enable many more high schools to sponsor competitive debate programs. This event lowers entry barriers for participating schools in three primary ways: (1) The topics are ripped from the headlines and change monthly; (2) The media focus helps avoid complicated argument theory or debate jargon; and (3) Any intelligent adult can judge the event (no special training or certification is required).

Donus Roberts predicted that by presenting exciting, current, controversial topics within a lively, brief, dramatic format, adults and the media would be willing to listen and students would be drawn to participate. His prediction proved true: merely five years after the launching of the new event, NFL reported more than 64,000 rounds of competition occurring within a sample two-month period.

PUBLIC FORUM DEBATE FORMAT