

CHAPTER 18

STRATEGY IN PUBLIC FORUM DEBATES

Public forum is a lively, audience-centered style of debate. The successful debater must provide logical support without resorting to technical jargon. Also, the time limits—which are much shorter than for other forms of debate—make it impossible to use more than four or five quotations from authority in any one speech. Public forum debate places a premium on a competitor’s ability to provide simple yet powerful logical explanations.

ANALYZING A RESOLUTION

Success in public forum debate begins with the proper analysis of the resolution. Policy debaters have only one resolution for the entire year, whereas Lincoln-Douglas debaters keep the same resolution for two months at a time. For public forum debaters, however, the resolution switches each month.

Debate resolutions fall into three types: questions of fact, value, or policy. Resolutions of fact ask whether a statement is true. An example of a resolution of fact is the National Forensic League (NFL) resolution used in early 2006: “Resolved: That big box retailers benefit the communities in which they are located.” Resolutions of fact focus on the past; they ask us to examine historical evidence for the purpose of verifying the truth of a statement about the past.

Resolutions of value ask how highly we should value something or how highly valued one object should be as compared to another. Consider the following value topic: “Resolved: Human genetic engineering is morally justified.” Resolutions of value usually focus on the present, asking us to verify or compare the worth of something.

Resolutions of policy ask whether a specified action should be taken. In 2005, the following resolution of policy was used in NFL public forum debate: “Resolved: In the United States, public high school science curriculum should include the study of the Theory of Intelligent Design.” Resolutions of policy focus on the future, asking whether a specified action would be more or less desirable. Policy debate resolutions use the word *should* as a way of signaling the focus on future action.

In the first five years of public forum debate, 45 resolutions have been debated (see Appendix E for a list of these resolutions). Of the 45 resolutions debated so far, 71