

KEYS TO SUCCESS IN FORENSICS

So you're convinced: winning in forensics is more fun than not winning. You want to do your best. After all, if you're going to devote this much time and energy to an extracurricular activity, you might as well make it worth your while, right? This is all easy to say. The reality is that success in forensics does not come nearly as easily. The competition is stiff; there are many talented students who also have devoted themselves to doing their best. The judging is inconsistent; even the most talented and most experienced students don't win *all* the time. Your success depends on many factors, including your health and state of mind on a given day, the opponents which you are randomly assigned to compete against, and so much more. In short, success in forensics does not come easily. It is an elusive goal that takes time, patience, and dedication to achieve. Still, there are a few things you can do to help you succeed in forensics competition and take home more than your fair share of awards, no matter which event you choose.

1. Work hard.

2. Work hard.

3. Work hard. There is no substitute for hard work, dedication, and determination in forensics. Many competitors with superior talent achieve only mediocre success because they don't put forth the proper effort. Conversely, many students without the same natural ability take home numerous awards because of hard work. To win in forensics, you absolutely must spend hours upon hours preparing yourself for competition.

When I played basketball in high school, my coach would tell us that we could achieve whatever we wanted in sports if we were willing to work for it. He was wrong. Sure, an athlete will get nowhere without hard work, but athleticism and talent are also essential. I am six-foot tall, slow, and think I've jumped really high if my feet actually leave the floor. These are not qualities that

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professional basketball scouts look for when scouting talent. No matter how hard I worked, my physical limitations would have always kept me from becoming a professional basketball player. In this respect, forensics is different from athletics. Almost all students can achieve great things in competitive speech if they set high goals and do whatever it takes to reach those goals.

4. Be coachable. By coachable, I mean willing to learn from others. Many people — your coach, teammates, teachers, friends, and family — have expertise that you may not have. Benefit from this expertise! Why make a mistake in competition if that mistake can be corrected by your coach or another observer before you go to a tournament? Additionally, these people have something else that qualifies them to help you with your performances: perspective. When you are performing, you are often not aware of certain tendencies that may distract the audience. A detached observer will certainly notice such tendencies.

Don't make the mistake of thinking that the only people who can help you improve your performance are those with training in forensics. *Everyone* can make suggestions that can help you improve. When I competed, I often practiced in front of my parents. Though neither of them have any education or training in forensics or speech communication, they still made many helpful suggestions. In fact, people with no training in forensics offer a different viewpoint and expertise in different areas. One of my top students, an orator, will often perform his speech as an example for beginning speech classes in our school. After he finishes, he always asks for suggestions, even though his entire audience has just begun learning about speech. Because he realizes that there is no one from whom he can't learn, he enjoys great competitive success.

5. Become a student of forensics. Do everything you can to learn about forensics, particularly about the events in which you compete. Read anything you can get your hands on about forensics. The more perspectives on forensics to which you are exposed, the more you will understand what it takes to be successful and understand the different perspectives judges use. Attend as many rounds of competition as possible. Watch videotapes of past final rounds at the national tournament, or, if at all possible, attend the national

tournament. The students who have made it this far obviously know something, so learn from them! Talk to other competitors and coaches about forensics. Read and study your ballots carefully after a tournament and be responsive to reasonable suggestions made by your judges.

6. Have patience. Very few competitors win awards when they first begin participating in forensics. The longer you compete, the more knowledge, experience, maturity, composure and, consequently, success, you will gain. Think about something you're good at: singing, dancing, athletics, writing, acting, or even playing video games. When you first started, how good were you at this activity? Chances are, not very. Forensics is like any other activity. The longer you compete, the better you will become. If you understand this, it will help you have patience as you work to achieve success in forensics.

FINALLY, A WORD ABOUT JUDGES

As already noted, judging in forensics is very inconsistent. As judges have different opinions, philosophies, perspectives, levels of training, and backgrounds, the scores and ranks they award vary greatly. This can be extremely frustrating for forensics competitors and coaches. The nature of being judged itself is very frustrating. Another person, usually someone you don't know, determines whether or not you will succeed and achieve your goals. However, as you compete in forensics, there are a couple of things you need to remember about judges:

1. A judge is never at fault when you get a poor ranking. Many competitors will complain when they receive a poor ranking saying that it was the fault of an incompetent judge. Remember this: no matter who is judging you, it is your job to communicate to them. This is an important communication concept known as audience adaptation. Hamilton Gregory says, "All good speakers are audience-centered." He quotes professional speaker Phillip D. Steffer who notes, "The most common mistake [when presenting] is the failure to educate yourself about the specifics of the audience to

which you will be speaking."² Admittedly, presentations made in most forensic events (except for extemporaneous speaking and debate) are prepared ahead of time and not open to much adaptation during the presentations. Still, you should choose topics and literature that will appeal to most of your judges and do all that you can to communicate with your judges during rounds of competition.

2. Judging will always be inconsistent. This cannot be overemphasized. Though you should select pieces and a performance style that appeals to most of your judges, you must remember that no two judges ever see a round in the same way. Understand this, and try not to become frustrated when your ballots have conflicting messages. Even the best forensics students receive poor rankings some of the time. However, if you prepare yourself thoroughly for competition and follow the rules of effective presentation, you will minimize low ranks and maximize your success.

Now that you know the basics of forensics competition, you're ready to move on and prepare for competition. Take your time, follow the advice given to you by this text, your coach, and anyone else you can find to help you, learn as much as you can, and strive to do your absolute best. If you do all of these things, you will enjoy your experience in forensics, learn a tremendous amount, and most likely do well in competition.

²Public Speaking for College and Career. (New York: Random House, 1987.) p.20.