

### Debate

Most respondents were individual events coaches and four said that they did not feel qualified to discuss debate norms. Four respondents mentioned a common perception of debaters by individual events competitors and coaches. They felt that debaters are arrogant and "personality void." The rivalry between debaters and individual event participants seems to be a common norm. Two of the respondents also mentioned that speed was expected in debate and four of the respondents mentioned the types of arguments that are typical in debate.

*RQ 2: What is the affect of norm violation on forensic competition?*

### Norms to rules

Because of the perception that written rules stifle creativity, many norms will not become written rules. When asked whether there were any norms that they felt should become written rules, nine respondents said no. Two of the respondents felt that written rules stifle creativity and prevent the activity from evolving. Others did not like the norms that are in place right now and were against making them rules.

### Violation experience

Violating a norm in forensics will typically result in some kind of punishment. Eight respondents said that breaking a norm would either result in a dropped rank or not breaking into finals. Four of those respondents clearly indicated a drop in rank would be the result, while others said punishment in general. Six respondents said that if the violation was justified, then a positive outcome could occur. Also, being an established competitor increases the likelihood of a positive outcome, whereas a novice competitor would just be seen as making mistakes.

### Violation judging paradigm

While norms typically result in some kind of punishment, there appears to be a fine line that competitors walk when violating norms. Within the pool of respondents, norm violations were acceptable. Ten of the respondents said that they were accepting of norm violations. Five of those qualified their statement by saying that the violation needs to be justified. Four of the respondents said that they would write a comment on the competitor's ballot, even if the norm violations were not a reason for decision. One respondent said that they would comment on the ballot because while it may not be an issue for them, it may be an issue for other judges. One judge said that they would tell them to fix the violation because it demonstrates the person's skills better, while another said that the violation would be the tiebreaker between two close ranks.



## DISCUSSION

As a result of this survey, it was discovered that there are six main normative themes in forensics. These norms affect the competitor in a number of ways, including competitive success. Respondents found that norm violations frequently resulted in competitive disadvantages for students, especially new students or if the violation was not justified. The pool of respondents seemed to be more open-minded about norm violations than they perceived the rest of the community to be. Ten respondents said that they were accepting of norm violations, but some included stipulations about the violation needing to be justified or that they would comment on the student's ballot.

This study affirmed previous research by Rice and Mummert (2001). Rice and Mummert's study provides empirical evidence that unwritten rules exist in forensic competitors' minds. Some of those rules include: less than two minute preparation time in impromptu, first person narration in interpretation, and an organizational structure in public address events. These norms were also found within this study, thus affirming Rice and Mummert's results (2001). This research took it a step further and determined the possible effect of violating these unwritten rules. By surveying coaches/judges, these researchers were able to determine some possible outcomes of norm violations.

### *Limitations*

There were three limitations to the survey that was conducted. By using an open-ended survey, it allowed the respondents to use the norm specific questions as an opportunity to disclose their own judging paradigm. Instead of commenting on the norms that are apparent in forensics, some of the respondents said what they expect competitors to do in the rounds. The second limitation was the sample size. With only twelve respondents the significance of this research is limited. Even with the limited number of respondents, there was a diverse sample from various regions and occupations. The final limitation was a faulty question on the survey. Question number six, "Are there any norms in forensics you believe should be written rules?" was not an open-ended question and yielded "yes" or "no" answers from the respondents.

### Future research

Through the survey, further research can be pursued with regards to expectancy violation. A slight correlation exists between norm violation and positive outcomes. Three respondents stated that a well known competitively successful performer will experience positive outcomes during norm violation. This parallels Burgoon's research when a positively valenced individual violates an expectation they are more likely to experience positive outcomes (Burgoon, 1988). This correlation can guide future research in determining a direct link to expectations in forensics and further explain the effects of norm violation. In order to accomplish the future study, research needs to be



conducted to establish not only norms but also expectations within the forensic community.

Having a larger sample size and cross applying the demographic information with the results can also expand this study. Through conducting an expanded study, this will create more significant results. Further it will allow the researcher to determine regional differences within the forensic community. This ultimately will further the knowledge about norms in the activity.

## CONCLUSION

Even though the study of norm violations in forensics is still young, its importance cannot be underestimated. The study of norms provides competitors and coaches with a broader understanding of what is expected of them within the activity. Further, by understanding where forensics has been and where forensic activity is now helps to determine the future of the activity. Norms provide an outlet where creativity and standards merge. Knowing the range of acceptable behaviors and the consequences of stretching those lines will only provide positive growth for the forensic community.

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### Appendix A

#### How a Forensic Norm is Formed

1. A talented student tries something new/different;
2. Talented student is rewarded by judge for a strong performance (judge may not even have liked the new approach, yet votes for student because overall performance was strong);
3. Student continues to win at a variety of tournaments;
4. Other students observe the winning student and attribute success to the new/different approach;
5. Other students adapt the new approach into their performances;
6. Judges see "everyone" doing the new approach and assume this is how it is supposed to be done;
7. Judges start expecting everyone to include the new approach;
8. Judges start penalizing students who fail to include the new approach;
9. Students believe they *must* include the new approach to be competitive;
10. Seniors graduate;
11. Forensic alumni return (as either graduate coaches or hired judges) the next season and employ the "unwritten rules" they learned as competitors in order to render decisions;
12. The unwritten rule is perpetuated by the community until we return to Step One when a talented student tries something new/different.

### Appendix B

(Cronn-Mills & Golden, 1997, para. 4)

#### Forensic Coaches Survey

##### Instructions:

We are conducting a survey on norms or unwritten standards of behavior in forensics. If you could please fill out the following survey as completely as possible, we would greatly appreciate it. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact us at \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

1. What norms are prevalent in forensics in general?
2. What norms are prevalent in Limited Preparation Events?
3. What norms are prevalent in Interpretation Events?
4. What norms are prevalent in Public Address Events?
5. What norms are prevalent in Debate events?
6. Are there any norms in forensics you believe should be written rules?
7. In your coaching experience, what is the outcome of not following a norm?
8. As a judge, how do you react if a competitor is not following a norm?

##### Demographic information

1. What is your Gender?  
Male                      Female
2. What is your position on your coaching staff (i.e. Director of Forensics, Graduate Assistant, etc)?
3. How many years have you been a part of the collegiate forensic community?



4. With which school are you affiliated?
5. What events do you primarily coach?

The electronic version of this survey was identical in questions, but contained the following caveat for coaches completing the survey:

All responses are completely anonymous and if you so chose, you can withdraw from this survey at any time. If you have any questions or wish to know the results of this survey, please feel free to contact us at \_\_\_\_\_. Thank you very much for your time and consideration. By replying to this survey you consent to the use of your responses for our study.

Once again thank you for your time.





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# Winning on a Prayer: Invoking the Supernatural in Athletic Disclaiming

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the rhetoric of professional football player Brett Favre after the death of his father during the NFL season by using Pamela Benoit's communication theory Telling the Success Story: Acclaiming and Disclaiming Discourse, which can be used to analyze how athletes promote themselves. By examining Favre's rhetoric and applying the theory, one is able to determine whether or not the communication model can be used in analyzing the rhetoric of professional athletes. In the case of Brett Favre, he was indeed successful in disclaiming discourse and the model proved to be a successful tool in performing the research.*

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*"Something is going on here. I've been around people who have lost a family member...and they say that a person's there watching or angels, whatever. I would say two weeks ago I didn't believe in that, but I think we'd better start believing in something."*

With these unscripted, emotional words, Brett Favre sounded more like the Reverend Billy Graham or any local clergyman rather than the starting quarterback for the Green Bay Packers. While Brett Favre's referencing of higher powers may be witnessed as more of a Sunday School moment, it reflects an important rhetorical trend that can be best explained using Pamela Benoit's (1987) communication model, *Telling the Success Story: Acclaiming and Disclaiming Discourse*, which can be used as the analysis of how athletes promote themselves. This communication theory has great value in the field of communication as she examines this phenomenon of interpersonal communication that involves the balancing of complimenting, bragging, modesty, and self-enhancement.

In the scholarly community, the topic of sports is seldom used as an area of study. Scholars have not tended to think that the sports industry has much relevance to different research projects, even though the sports industry has permeated pop culture. Whether a fan or not, the sports industry offers communication scholars new avenues to explore because some of the most relevant issues in the sports industry happen off the field, not on it. In the following communication analysis the author will first discuss the situation surrounding the quotes of Brett Favre; next this researcher will briefly examine Pamela Benoit's theory of *Telling the Success Story* and witness how it works. Next, this study will examine the rhetoric of Green Bay



quarterback Brett Favre following the days after his father's death and apply the theory to the artifact, the rhetoric surrounding that event, then finally will evaluate the theory and examine what it might allow people to learn about Favre by applying it to the artifact.

On Sunday, December 21, 2003, Green Bay Packer quarterback Brett Favre was sitting with his teammate Doug Pederson when he received the news. At the age of 58, his father Irvin Favre had suffered a heart attack and passed away. Fortunately, the Packers did not have a game that day as they had the Monday night game, but Favre had to decide whether or not he would participate. Knowing his father would have wanted him to play, Favre made the trip to Oakland and with a heavy heart, entered into one of the most rowdy and feared NFL atmospheres within the league. Favre proved that he was up to the challenge as he and his teammates came out firing against the Oakland Raiders. In the first half alone, Favre accomplished some statistics that most NFL quarterbacks would consider a good game, completing fifteen of seventeen passes for 311 yards and four touchdowns. Favre's coach Mike Sherman stated that nobody could have scripted this game for Favre any better. Naturally, Favre chose not to be interviewed that night due to his emotional situation.

A week later, it was Green Bay's last game and they needed a win and a Minnesota loss to get into the playoffs. The Packers had done their part as they had a commanding lead over the Denver Broncos; however, Minnesota had a 17-6 lead over Arizona with a little over 2 minutes remaining. After an Arizona score and a recovered onside kick, the Packers playoff hopes were still alive. It was on fourth down with time running out that Arizona quarterback Josh McCown threw an unlikely and almost impossible 28-yard touchdown pass to receiver Nate Poole, giving Arizona the 18-17 win and miraculously putting the Green Bay Packers into the playoffs.

Pamela Benoit's model, *Telling the Success Story*, differs from William Benoit's *Image Restoration Theory* in that instead of looking at ways to defend one's image or salvage a damaged identity, one would boost their image through self-promoting. Benoit defines a success story as "a narrative that interprets a behavior as a success, selects and orders events relating to that success, and includes a causal attribution for the success. Stories are not simply reportings of behaviors and experiences but tellings that interpret their meaning" (Benoit 23). Benoit also discusses the success story as a means of constructing a personal identity. Through various self-presentation strategies, communicators seek to negotiate positive self-images, carefully navigating conflicting goals of garnering recognition and demonstrating modesty. Modesty is shown when the athletes do not constantly talk about themselves and come across as a braggart or being egotistical, but instead they give credit for their success to others who aided in the process. The model is framed around the question, "How do individuals tell their own success stories when they want self-praise to stick but they also want to avoid an impression of arrogance?" (Benoit 1) The answer to



this question comes in the form of two categories, which are acclaiming and disclaiming.

Benoit identified three case study areas that help to illustrate her communication theory, which include how Nobel Prize winners, Mary Kay consultants, and athletes promote themselves through their rhetoric. What makes her theory even more interesting is that the same strategies that Mary Kay consultants use to promote themselves can be the same strategies that athletes use to promote themselves. In the athletes' section, there are 15 strategies in the analysis of athletes' self-promotion; they are also separated into two categories. The first category is *acclaiming messages*, which are focused on recognizing the accomplishment that was completed. Examples include when "tellers" describe their self-motivation, "tellers" indicate their success might not be repeatable, and "tellers" describe their success as fulfilling a dream. The second category is *disclaiming messages*, which are focused on achieving modesty goals. Examples include when "tellers" share responsibility for their success and "tellers" note their success is less noteworthy compared to other accomplishments. In the following analysis, this researcher will focus on a strategy of disclaiming where the teller, Brett Favre, attributes his success to external or uncontrollable causes. Benoit uses the examples of St. Louis Cardinals outfielder Rex Hudler and Olympic gold medallist Trent Dimas as her illustration for this strategy. It was in 1990 when Hudler hit a two-run homerun, to put the Cardinals ahead in their game against the Mets, where he describes the connection between the bat and the ball as serendipitous. Trent Dimas described his performance on the high bar as coming together as if it had an identity apart from itself. By using this rhetoric, he distanced himself from the performance by using this agent, thus appearing modest and not taking complete credit for the outcome enhancing his image through this strategy.

Following Favre's incredible performance on the Monday night game against Oakland and the miraculous entrance of his team into the playoffs, Favre finally decided to express his views on his and his team's success to the media:

Something is going on here. I've been around people who have lost a family member or have lost someone close to them and they say that person's there watching or angels, whatever. I would say two weeks ago I didn't really didn't believe in that, but I think we'd better start believing in something. Because the odds were against us and they were really against us at the end of the Arizona game. We didn't put up numbers like we did on Monday night, but the bottom line is that we won. Something is going on here, you know. My emotions right know, I'm numb. I've cried as many tears as I possibly could cry, and so proud of this team and what we have been able to overcome. I don't know what it is, but right now I'm riding it. (Adamski)

Brett Favre is one of the most respected players in the NFL, due to his steady performances and his "hard-nosed" image both on and off



the field. The reason that Favre is so respected and well-liked by fans all across the league is that he does not come across as a braggart; instead, he lets his play on the field, which also includes statistics, do the talking for him. Favre can get away with this, because success in the sports industry is based on wins and statistics, meaning that his success is factual and he does not have to try to bolster his image by bragging. He could have easily taken all of the credit for his stellar performance in the game against Oakland and the guidance of his team into the NFL playoffs because of his high profile and the importance of the position that he plays in the game of football. Instead, this veteran used his rhetoric to distance himself from taking credit for his team's accomplishments. While it was subtle, each time Favre mentioned something that was accomplished, he never talked about what he accomplished, but rather what the team accomplished. His statement also fits with Benoit's disclaiming strategy, tells attribute success to external or uncontrollable causes, by implying that there was something spiritual, or having an angel (his father) or a higher power watching over him and his team. Favre gave credit for their accomplishments to an external or uncontrollable cause instead of taking all of the glory for himself. So Favre, while having a major role in his team's success, stepped away from taking all of the credit and let the audience know that he believed that only a higher power could have allowed him as well as his team to be in that triumphant position.

After learning about the theory and evaluating the artifact, there is one last question that needs to be answered. Was using this theory an effective way to analyze whether or not Brett Favre was successful bragging about himself? According to Benoit's model, the answer is yes, because the analysis of Favre's comments was easily placed into one of the many success telling categories that this model established. When Favre gave credit to a higher power for helping his performance, the publics' perception of him was increased because he gave the glory to a recently deceased angel, his father. The rhetoric used by Favre was viewed as more favorable because he did not seek the glory for himself. When athletes do this, they come across as modest, which is more enjoyable to listen to than to hear athletes "go on and on" about themselves. It is the disclaiming of success that is more attractive for the sports fan to shape their impression of the athletes and their performances. After Favre gave the credit to his father, the sports media made this situation the most talked about story in the nation. Commentators like Cris Collinsworth, a Fox Sports TV analyst, were talking about it weeks after the death of Favre's father by saying, "Somewhere, Irv Favre is watching a heckuva ballgame" (Roeper). Boomer Esiason of CBS even said that, "There's definitely a guardian angel flying over the Packers and Brett Favre" (Roeper). Even the *Chicago Sun-Times* writer Richard Roeper, who covers the Green Bay Packers fiercest rivals, the Chicago Bears, had good things to say about him:

"Brett Favre is such a great quarterback — such an exuberant competitor, with immense talent, unlimited guts and a gunslinger men-



tality straight out of the old AFL — that even most Chicago fans respect and admire the guy, despite the fact that Favre and the Packers have consistently mauled the Bears over the last decade" (Roeper).

Through the disclaiming of Brett Favre, he also was able to make the sports nation discuss the many great things he had done and how successful he was on the field, while the sports nation generally left out the unfortunate situations that occurred in his life such as his addiction to pain pills. This theory was effective in analyzing this one athlete's story and due to its broad range of categories, it would undoubtedly be successful for analyzing the success stories of many more athletes to come. Due to its consistency with the analysis of Brett Favre, and through the analysis of several success stories Benoit uses to illustrate her model, scholars could discover similar findings if they apply this model to similar artificats.

While Brett Favre was already one of the most popular players in the NFL before the crisis that he faced, the way he handled himself with his comments after the success of his team as well as his own success, helped to bolster his image even more. Benoit's *Telling the Success Story* theory allowed this researcher to analyze this communication phenomenon and to understand fully why disclaiming one's success story is more effective in the public's eye, than just bragging about one's performance.

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# A Call for Papers

## *For the 2005 Pi Kappa Delta Undergraduate Forensic Scholars Competition*

*In conjunction with Pi Kappa Delta Division activities at the National Communication Association National Convention (NCA) to be held in Boston, MA, November of 2005.*

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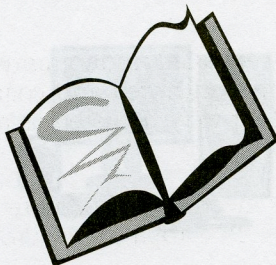
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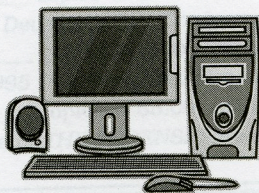
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