

# The Forensic

## *of Pi Kappa Delta*

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### **SPECIAL ISSUE: BOOKS AND FORENSICS**

**Books are for More than Reading**  
RYAN LOUIS, OTTAWA UNIVERSITY

**Moving from Forensics Tournaments to Book Writing**  
BRIAN KAYLOR, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

**BOOK REVIEWS**



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The *Forensic of Pi Kappa Delta* invites authors to submit manuscripts related to scholarship, pedagogy, research and administration in competitive and non-competitive speech and debate activities. *The Forensic* welcomes submissions from forensic coaches, communication/rhetoric scholars, and students (undergraduate and graduate).

The Editor and Editorial Board invite scholarly discussion of making competitive individual events and debate powerful tools for teaching essential citizenship practices, including clear and ethical communication. Topics of particular interest to the Editor and Editorial Board include, but are not limited to: ways to increase diversity in forensics, speech/argumentation pedagogy, and transfer as it relates to forensics (e.g., transfer among individual events, debate, and interpretation; transfer between competition and the classroom, and vice versa; transfer between forensics and careers).

The journal seeks submissions reflecting perspectives from all current debate and individual event forms, including, but not limited to: NDT, CEDA, NEDA, NPDA, IPDA, Lincoln-Douglas Debate, as well as NIET, NFA and non-traditional individual events. The journal also welcomes explorations of non-competitive speech and debate activities, including classroom projects, interdisciplinary efforts, and civic programs. *The Forensic* may also publish reviews of books, activities, and other educational materials. Potential authors should contact the Editor regarding the choice of material for review.

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All submitted works must be original, unpublished, and not under review by other publishers. Any research involving human subjects must have the approval of the author's institutional review board. Submissions should conform to APA guidelines (latest edition). E-mail submissions to the editor in Word format with no specialized internal formatting. Manuscripts should not exceed 25 double-spaced typed pages, exclusive of tables and references. The title page should include the title, author(s), correspondence address, e-mail address and telephone number of the author(s). The second page should include an abstract of between 75 and 100 words. The text of the manuscript (including its title) should begin on the next page, with no reference to the author, and with the remaining pages numbered consecutively. Avoid self-identification in the text of the manuscript. Notes and references should be typed and double-spaced on the pages following the text of the manuscript. Tables should be clearly marked regarding their placement in the manuscript.

**SEND MANUSCRIPTS TO:** Josh Compton, [josh.compton@dartmouth.edu](mailto:josh.compton@dartmouth.edu). Do not fax submissions. Authors should have an editorial decision within three months.

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# A Note From the Editor: Books and Forensics

I'm excited to share this special issue of *The Forensic* with you: Books and Forensics.

When I began thinking of this special issue a couple of years ago, I brainstormed a few key themes that I thought I would highlight in an introductory note. But then, I received Ryan Louis' and Brian Kaylor's essays, and the 14 book reviews, and I realized there wasn't much more that I needed to say. They said it so well.

I suppose my main take-away from this issue is this: Forensics teaches us a lot about books—about how to read them and even how to write them; books teach us a lot about forensics—about how to write, speak, think, evaluate.

My biggest regret with this issue is that I couldn't get it to you before summer, so that you might get some neat ideas for your summer reading lists!

I hope you enjoy this issue as much as I enjoyed putting it together. And again, let me say thanks to my essayists and reviewers, and another thanks to the publishers for providing complimentary review copies of the books.

Josh Compton  
Editor, *The Forensic*



Missing



# Books are for More than Reading

RYAN LOUIS, OTTAWA UNIVERSITY

My forensics students rarely start with a book. Like many at other institutions, no doubt, my students first look for material elsewhere, probably on the Internet. They end up retreating from the “labor” of bookshelves while entreating search engines for poem titles that perfectly match their program themes. I listen to the resultant introductions that sound something like “...with poems, ‘Love’ by Poet A, ‘Love is Terrible,’ by Poet B; ‘I Wish I Could Find Love’ by Poet C and ‘The Meaning of Love’ by Poet D.” I then spend the next eight minutes trying to think of a nice way to explain to them the value of nuance.

The perfect competition piece does sometimes appear out of nowhere. It can strike like lightning (open a book of essays, flip to the third entry. Print. Cut. Done). More often, perfection entails hours—perhaps days—of [re]searching. One student will ask me: *What’s wrong with the Internet, Ryan!?* There is a clear assumption that I’m a fuddy-duddy who doesn’t understand the logistics of this generation. I remind them that I’m a Millennial, too. Skepticism fogs the space between us.

I am lucky to have enough resources to keep a little room next to my office, ostensibly for research. I’ve designed it to be a calm space: relaxing colors and comfy chairs; there’s a desk in there, too. Several bookshelves organize each genre of literature. For a self-described book nerd like me, the room is wonderful. As a forensics educator who actively encourages students to find their own source material for interpretive events, the room is a disappointment. I am often sad to find the room absent of people—the only sounds over there coming from crickets. [Chirp chirp.]

So anyway: I’m teaching a lesson about nuance. I take my student by the hand and walk next door. I explain: *These are books! They are wondrous, mysterious and intelligence-enhancing objects!* I explain that though publishing is often political and fraught with bias, it sometimes acts as a buffer against suspicious and untested literature. Someone besides the author, after all, found this important, interesting and/or intelligent enough to pay for its binding, promotion and distribution. I encourage students to use the Internet, of course (we

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must embrace its role as *the* great democratizer!), but here I pull up a chair and direct the student to sit; then I hand over a book. It's at this point they usually have somewhere else to be.

## II

I joined a virtual library called "Goodreads." It quickly became a storehouse for potential additions to my resource room. As a social media site, it allows my students and me to share book recommendations. I hear about a great collection of plays, an anthology of poems or a great prose and I add it to a list. A student looking for a source can peruse my "shelves," then read synopses and excerpts. Because it's online, they feel less like they're emitting labor. If something looks intriguing to him or her, I order a copy.

Reading—of any kind, whether digital or in-hand—is important to me, personally and professionally. It is more than an act of entertainment, however; more than a performance of learning. It is a vehicle for physical and mental wellbeing. Reading can promote a safe and nurturing environment. But it is often the mere presence of books that indicates a set of expectations. A student must navigate *around* books in order to enter my office and greet me. He or she must therefore assign meaning to this barrier. Walk into my office and the décor sends a clear message: learning happens here. It is a respected activity. Join me.

Not too long ago I created a Pinterest board (I named it "Nerdy Book-Themed Décor") with a score of potentially reputation-reducing pins. Did you know that functional furniture can come from repurposed card catalogues? Stacked, glued or hollowed books can become almost anything: planters, end tables, jewelry boxes, clocks. I *paid for* artwork with cartoon characters drawn onto torn-out pages from a dictionary. Tear out pages from a different book and sew them onto fabric to create stylish couture. Some innovative people even make bookshelves...out of books! Needless to say, books are an important part of my life. They read well, but they also help to create a setting that turns an idiosyncrasy or a hobby into a lifestyle of learning—for me, for my students.

## III

A defense of books can quickly become a jeremiad: *Read for your life! The wisdom of the ages is at your fingertips if you would only choose to tap into it!* Words like "empathy," "empowerment" and "acumen" evangelize the benefits of reading, often to no avail. But these arguments are already known to us. We employ them to motivate our students as best we can (re: *Dead Poets Society*). But this defense treats books as an abstract idea: through magic, they become knowledge. And this is only half a defense. I certainly read so I can incorporate new ideas into my lectures, assignments and class discussions. But it is not only the *content* of a book that provides benefits to the professor and student. Books qua books make an atmosphere livelier. I keep scholarly



volumes on the shelves. I read them, interpret them and incorporate them. I also keep romance novels. I keep antique books featuring the speeches of Cicero, the tales of Winnie-the-Pooh and acting tips from Stanislavsky. They may go unread—forensics speeches may not directly become more nuanced because of them. Their simple presence, though, helps to make a point about what books achieve. They remind students about knowledge while providing comfort; they reveal personality *and* expectations.

I certainly don't sacralize books. I do, however, believe that they can inspire respect. Consider this: stop at a bookstore the next time you take students on a long van ride. The rides are tough on our bodies and being in a place where we can walk around, grab a coffee and be calm does more to center a mind than any predictably tumultuous scene at a restaurant or in a hotel room. Thankfully our elementary school librarians ingrained in us the instinct to conjoin quietude and books.

I have accepted that maybe the research room next to my office may not motivate students to sit for hours, leafing through published texts. Not everyone has the tenacity to be as bookish as me. But when they pass by the room on the way to my office, a nonverbal exchange takes place. Books delineate the path to a shared experience. It is from their tactility that I can teach nuance—assuming I can convince a student to sit in a chair for more than 15 minutes before he/she has to leave for “dinner.”

Sitting in the company of books sometimes teaches more than what I say in a lecture or critique. Whether we read books or don't (though, hopefully, we do), just make sure to have them within reach.





Missing



# Moving from Forensics Tournaments to Book Writing

BRIAN KAYLOR, INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

*"It's none of their business that you have to learn how to write. Let them think you were born that way." –Ernest Hemingway*

Even as a small child I dreamed of being an author when I grew up. The prestige and the money would soon follow, I believed. With three books published (and others in various stages of dress), I still dream of the money to come! Looking back on my short writing career—or at least I claim it is still short so that I sound younger—I recognize one wise decision I made to launch my book career came when I joined my high school speech and debate team. I added to that smart move by following up my three years in high school tournaments with another four years of competitive forensics in college. I did not make those decisions with the intention of growing as a writer. I competed because I enjoyed researching, debating, and speaking. And I quickly came to also enjoy bringing home hardware and the glory I felt from the wins.

Now that I am (just a little) older and (much) wiser, I recognize how forensics helped prepare me for a (hopefully long) career as an author. I will quickly offer a few of the ways forensics helped me fulfill my childhood dream of picking up a book and finding my name on the cover. I hope these thoughts inspire others to move from flipping their pens at tournaments to penning their own tomes.

## Meaningful Research

My entry into competitive forensics came with high school Cross-Examination Debate, which remained my main and most successful high school event. I continued debate (mostly Parliamentary Debate) in college and drastically expanded my event repertoire. Although not always as heavy in research needs, the various events kept me reading and collecting various notes so I could write better manuscripts for events like Communication Analysis and Informative Speaking or be better prepared for topics in Extemporaneous Speaking. Over the years, I learned how to find relevant and helpful sources, how to pick

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out the best quotations and data, and how to effectively work citations into speeches.

As one who primarily writes nonfiction, I continue to use the research skills I honed in forensics. The research grounds my writings and adds depth and credibility to my arguments. I also think it makes my work stand out in the midst of so many books by people with sloppy, unsubstantiated claims (do I need a citation here?). In an age when urban legends fly on the Internet (and land in books), good research skills are essential for authors. Now I hope that some forensics competitor will stumble across one of my books and cite it in a speech!

### Niche Search

As college summers wound down and a new academic year started, I found myself desperately searching for my new hit speech topics. I needed something original that would stand out. I could not give a Persuasive Speech on some tired old pet topic or last year's winning topic at the state tournament. My coaches would not have allowed it, nor would judges have been impressed. But my unique topic still needed to rise to the level of importance expected in winning orations. Similarly, my chosen artifact for a Communications Analysis needed to be fresh but also worthy of talking about (and listening to). My couple of forays into the worlds of Duo Interpretation and Prose Interpretation came with similar expectations: find some new literature worth exploring. Older topics could find success, but only if given a new angle; literature could be reused, but with a different cut and interpretation.

A similar tension exists in the book publishing world. Books must fill a unique niche: something not done before but still something worth writing/selling. In every book proposal I have created for a publisher, I had to compare my book to others on the market. How is it different? What does it offer that others have not already accomplished? At the same time, I also had to answer other questions explaining how this book would find an audience. What is the target audience? How do we reach the target audience? Great book ideas can die if publishers do not see a marketing strategy—this seems increasingly an issue in an overcrowded book market with declining sales and budgets (especially for academic books). Fortunately, I learned how to find a unique approach in forensics, like my state-winning After Dinner Speech on funeral homes. Find a niche!

### Crafting Language

The slogan of Pi Kappa Delta captures the essence of forensics competition: "The art of persuasion, beautiful and just." Regardless of the event, competitors must craft meaningful arguments and narratives that appeal to judges' hearts and minds. The forensics community taught me the power of language. Words matter. Words bring meaning to our experiences and lives. Words shape and change reality.



This love of words inspired me in my speeches and led me to switch career plans as I trekked off to graduate school to study communication even more. This love of words also moves me to sit down and type, to keep writing. I understand how words—in speeches or books—can make a difference. And I learned how to craft more beautiful and just arguments and narratives through forensics.

### **Edit, Edit, Edit**

After researching and writing and rewriting and practicing and rewriting my speeches, I often found a point when I thought I had it ready. Then I would perform it for one of my coaches, who would send me back with suggestions to edit and write some more. Eventually I would reach the point when I would get the green light to take it to the next tournament. Yet, even then I would continue to edit and rework parts of the speeches based on new information or feedback from judges. Only as I finished the last tournament of the year could I consider my editing and rewriting complete.

The discipline of writing is much the same. I write and rewrite. Then later I read larger chunks and edit again. Family members and friends will offer feedback and suggestions that lead to more edits. Eventually I reach the point when I think it is ready and send it off to a publisher. An editor (or multiple ones) at the publisher offers feedback that leads to another round (or rounds) of edits. I later receive proofs of the manuscript for one last round of proofreading before it heads to print. Only as the book goes to print can I consider my editing and rewriting completed (except when my second book's publisher later requested an updated and expanded paperback version). As I read writing advice from various authors, I repeatedly notice the suggestion to read chapters out loud to get a better feel for the flow and feel. I did not deliberately do this at first, but thanks to my forensics background I have always practiced my writing out loud, sometimes talking through multiple versions of a section before actually starting to type it out.

### **Thick Skin**

Each forensics tournament brought familiar rituals. The positive climax came as I stood up front with fellow finalists and we were named off (with a nice one-clap) to receive our plaque or trophy. Shortly after the awards ceremony, we crammed 15 people and luggage into a 12-person van to head back home. At some point on the ride or back on campus I would get to look over the ballots from the rounds. Although I enjoyed reading the ballots from the events I placed in, the ones I really wanted to see were the ballots from the other events. I hoped to answer the haunting question: "What could those judges who marked me down have possibly thought (and what was wrong with them)?" It did not take long to learn that I could learn more from those ballots than the praising ballots. What do I need to fix? What did and did not work?



Writing continues to bring the need for thick skin and knowing how to read criticism constructively. Sure, I wince at the 1-star review on Amazon or a negative blog review, but I do not allow it to stop me from continuing to write. More importantly, I do not allow fear of critiques to keep me from writing or publishing. I have a friend who quit writing for years after just one negative response from a publisher. When a publisher rejected my second book, I walked away from the rejection email angry and hurt. A couple of hours later I returned to read the critique carefully and consider any helpful advice. By the next day I made a few small changes (and ignored their larger complaints that I disagreed with) and sent it off to a new publisher. That publisher quickly sent me a contract. Thanks to forensics judges who I did not like at the moment I got my ballots back, I have the thick skin needed to keep pushing forward.

### **Competitive Drive**

Not long after graduating from college, I realized a void in my life: people quit giving me trophies every other weekend! I jest (a little) but I do honestly miss the thrill of competition, the excitement of victory, and even the sting of defeat. The competitive side of forensics—as opposed to just giving public speeches in general—pushed me to be the best I could be at whatever speech or debate I tried. That competitive drive was not merely for rocks and plastic, but also to be better. Hearing my talented competitors inspired me and drove me to improve.

When I write, I want to craft the best book on the chosen topic. I do not just want a book published, I want it loved. I do not always reach that standard, but the drive to write better makes my work better. Fortunately, books can even help fill that winning void. My second book—the one that the first publisher I tried rejected—won three awards! Those plaques inspire me to write more (and help relive my post-forensics withdrawal pains).

### **Conclusion**

I dedicated my second book to a great forensics coach, mentor, scholar, and friend: Dr. Bob Derryberry. I started my doctoral dissertation that eventually transformed into that book while sitting in the exact same office at the University of Missouri that Dr. D had sat in four decades earlier (I do not think it had even been painted since then). However, it was not just the shared history that led to the dedication. He made me a better writer and person as my professor and coach. Dr. D., my other coaches, coaches at other schools who judged me, and many competitors who challenged and inspired me in rounds all helped craft me into the author I am today (but I hope none of them expect a cut of my small royalty checks). I enjoyed forensics, but it was more than just a game; it shaped me with critical writing skills I continue to employ almost every day.



## BOOK REVIEW

**Bartanen, M. D., & Littlefield, R. S. (2014). *Forensics in America: A history*. New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.**

Reviewed by PHILLIP VOIGHT, GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

We stress that forensics, as practiced from its modest roots in the 1880s to its global presence at the end of the twentieth century and beyond, is epistemic. Each person who chooses to engage in any of its varied competitive forms uniquely understands its value. Generations of forensics alumni have testified to the life-changing qualities of forensics education. It would almost obscure the point to list the substantial number of prominent figures in all walks of life who include forensics participation as a part of what contributed to their vocation and success. (Bartanen & Littlefield, p. x).

Michael Bartanen and Robert Littlefield's *Forensics in America: A History* is an indispensable reference text for anyone interested in the theory or practice of high school or intercollegiate forensics. The book, written by two of the field's pre-eminent scholars, is an intellectual history of the development of forensics as a specialty area during the twentieth century. Along the way, the authors trace the rise of Communication Studies as a distinct discipline and the influence of trends such as Progressivism on the evolution of higher education and intercollegiate forensics. Simply put, this book is an enormously valuable tool for anyone conducting strategic planning or producing a program philosophy or mission statement.

There are many reasons that an intellectual history of the discipline of forensics is a valuable enterprise. Historical works allow readers to draw connections between seemingly disparate events. Bartanen and Littlefield suggest that historical works help to identify patterns and create what Allen Nevins has called a "consciousness of unity" that contributes to an understanding the differences between actions that are planned and those that simply resulted from "aimless drifting" (quoted in Bartanen and Littlefield, 2014, p. 7). Perhaps most importantly, however, an understanding of the history of forensics is central to facing squarely the strategic challenges that confront contemporary forensic programs of every shape and size. "History plays a crucial role in providing meaning and context to prior events," the authors note, "that can be productively applied to understanding similar events regardless of their different contexts" (p. 7). Particularly in the present environment, where the forensic community is splintered, challenged by a budgeting process that is both highly competitive and often zero sum, and threatened by assessment regimes that imperfectly measure the value of intercollegiate competition, the



book provides a new vocabulary and new lines of argument that underscore the value of forensic competition.

Two chapters are most useful in this regard: Chapter 2, which describes the public oratory era, chronicles a period of great growth in the development of forensic programs on campuses nationwide. By illuminating the historical roles that speech and debate programs played on their campuses and within their communities, Bartanen and Littlefield provide a path that contemporary programs could follow to re-establish their central intellectual relevance within higher education. During the public oratory era, they observe, speech team members were local celebrities and “orators and debaters enjoyed the fun of often being popular figures and student leaders, causing the public to regard forensics as an elite activity and uplifting its status in schools and across college campuses” (p. 224). Moreover, the local focus of forensic activities, combined with frequent appearances before universal audiences and an explicit connection between speech activities and the development of social capital, served to reinforce the perceived centrality of forensics to a college’s or university’s mission. During the technical era, the primary rationale for participating in forensics shifted from the public good of civic engagement to the private good of individual self-actualization or personal sophistication in the development of critical thinking, research of public speaking skills. Understanding the historical nature of this shift, however, empowers Directors of Forensics to reverse it by re-linking their programs with rationales based on public goods, local involvement, civic engagement and the development of social capital.

Chapter 8, which discusses the social dimensions of forensics, also provides a wonderful justification for the continuation of competitive forensics programs. The authors begin by describing forensics competition as a form of play and highlighting three distinct benefits that emerge from participation: simulation, socialization and conversation (p. 212). Ultimately, they suggest, participation in forensics contributes to the formation of social capital and strengthens the civic infrastructure of campuses and communities. By emphasizing ethical deliberation and shared values of reciprocity and fair play, speech and debate participation created communities of students across the country that were dedicated to democratic forms of decision making. Particularly during the public oratory period, they note, “the connection between forensics and play and the creation of social capital was straightforward” (231). As the authors note, however, the metaphor of play is not without its drawbacks, and contemporary directors would do well to think carefully about how to reinforce the connections between tournament competition and the propagation of democratic values.

*Forensics in America* is clearly a scholarly book, but it is also highly accessible and largely free of academic jargon. In addition to speech and debate coaches and participants, it would also be of interest to many alumni, and it would be an excellent required textbook for a



forensics class if your institution offers one. After an introduction to the study of American Forensics, the authors divide the book into three parts: Part I overviews the historical context of forensic practice; Part II highlights the tensions that shaped the development of forensics; and Part III focuses on the sociocultural dimensions of forensic practices. The authors also divide the historical evolution of forensics into four eras: (1) The Pre-Competitive Era (prior to 1880); (2) The Public Oratory Era (between 1880-1945); (3) The Technical Era (which they subdivide into two sub-periods called "Crossroads" from 1945-1970 and "Divergence" from 1970-1995); and finally, (4) The Postmodern Era (from 1995 to the present).

Although chronologies are important to the structure of the book, the authors also identify five important themes and that guide their analysis and that are developed throughout the book: The history of forensics; The relationship between collegiate and high school forensics; Forensics as a promise and consequence of American higher education; Forensics as a resilient and enduring educational form; and finally, The relationship between forensics and the communication discipline. For researchers, these thematic treatments as well as the thorough documentation of works cited at the end of each chapter and the comprehensive subject index make the book an easy to use reference guide.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, Bartanen and Littlefield stipulate that forensics is both epistemic and rhetorical. "Forensics is epistemic," they suggest, "in that participation in the activity, in and of itself, created a kind of knowledge that could not be gained without engagement" (p. 11). For competitors, no doubt, the epistemic nature of forensics is its most attractive feature. It has also been widely (if not universally or consistently) viewed as rhetorical insofar as it emphasized the study and practice of persuasion and argumentation, and the mastery of a particular set of performative or intellectual skills. The tensions that inevitably arose between those who assumed the activity was geared for a universal audience and those who felt it was designed for technical audiences highlight the degree to which a consensus view of the justification for forensic programs collapsed – particularly during the divergence phase of the technical era. As the authors note, however, forensics undeniably provides firsthand knowledge – "even knowledge that would help the participant identify bad practices" (p. 11).

Even if one were uninterested in the book's comprehensive historical approach, free standing chapters on the social dimensions of forensics, the experience of African Americans and women in forensics, the rise of the national intercollegiate forensics organizations and the evolution of high school forensics would be well worth the purchase price. Most readers, however, will find *Forensics in America* to be a highly useful treasure trove of practical information. Bartanen and Littlefield's analytical frameworks, for example, are quite useful in conceptualizing the dimensions of contemporary policy disputes



about presentation style, mutually preferred judging, and a host of other issues. The authors' analysis of the critical tensions between the public oratory and technical eras – universal versus particular audiences, style versus delivery, education versus competition and whether the activity should be tightly or loosely organized – are just as relevant in characterizing a program's mission statement or understanding a director's coaching philosophy today as they would have been in 1945 or in 1970.

Perhaps the book's most delightful feature is its ability to synthesize and condense complex information – in particular, to convey that information in easily readable charts. I found myself marking charts that I intend to copy and incorporate into an opening presentation to help students understand the philosophical orientation of the forensic program at my own institution. For the sake of brevity, let me mention just a few of the charts that I found most useful: Table 1.2, the summary of differences between the public oratory era and the technical era, provides a succinct way to differentiate universal and technical audiences, public and private goods, and educational versus competitive rationales (p. 15). Beginning next year, my institution is requiring forensic team members to also participate in formal undergraduate research activities. Tables 4.1 and 4.2, the summary of the methodological differences in forensic scholarship and the framework for considering forces that have influenced forensic research, provide wonderful vehicles to help students conceptualize the importance of methodologically framing their research questions (p. 94). Table 3.1, which identifies the differences between a public oratory and a competitive model, is useful as a means of helping students understand the differences between on-campus or community events and intercollegiate competitions (p. 64). Likewise, Table 5.1, which contrasts the differences between lay and expert judges, is a helpful coaching tool to explain the differences between public forum debates and more technical formats (p. 129). Finally, Table 6.1, which identifies factors associated with the structural marginalization of forensics within speech departments, provides a cautionary tale for Directors of Forensics, and hopefully, a roadmap by which they can reinforce the connections between forensic programs and sponsoring departments (p. 159). These and many of the book's other useful practical items will undoubtedly find their way into power point presentations, mission statements, program recruiting and fundraising brochures, and explanations of program goals and objectives. I recommend the book wholeheartedly, and if you are reading *The Forensic*, you are clearly its target audience.





## BOOK REVIEW

**Berger, W. (2014). *A more beautiful question: The power of inquiry to spark breakthrough ideas*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.**

Reviewed by PHILLIP VOIGHT, GUSTAVUS ADOLPHUS COLLEGE

As a journalist for *Fast Company* and *The Harvard Business Review*, Warren Berger had ready access to entrepreneurs, top business leaders, and many of the world's best economic consultants. In *A More Beautiful Question: The Power of Inquiry to Spark Breakthrough Ideas*, Berger capitalized on this access to provide readers with hundreds of interesting examples where business strategy and execution were driven by thoughtful questions. A paradigmatic example was the question that led to the development of Netflix: Finding a bag of videotapes that he had forgotten to return to Blockbuster, Reed Hastings wondered how he was going to explain the late fees to his wife. "Why should I have to pay these late fees," he asked himself (p. 343). After thinking about an alternative, he hit upon the idea of running a video rental business on a subscription basis — like a health club. Shortly thereafter, Netflix was born. The thesis of Berger's book is that good questions drive almost everything that's important to a business, including innovation, product development, market research, customer service and in many cases, even survival. "The most creative, successful business leaders," he notes, "have tended to be expert questioners" who have understood the importance of questioning the conventional wisdom of their industries and the "fundamental practices of their companies" (p. 12).

In what follows, Berger identifies the obstacles to developing an organizational culture that rewards creative inquiry and he provides an exhaustive list of fundamental questions that can be used to spark strategic planning, and trigger organizational change. Although the book is clearly written for business owners, managers and other strategic professionals, it is also a wonderful resource for teachers, and it offers many insights that can be directly applied in classroom settings. Chapter Two, "Why we Stop Asking Questions," provides a detailed analysis of academic obstacles to inquiry, as well as specific suggestions for curricular changes that would cultivate the five mental habits that Berger associates with creative inquiry: Evidence, Viewpoint, Connection, Conjecture and Relevance. He even provides a generic lesson plan for teachers interested in provoking "beautiful questions." The teacher selects the general topic area (torture, for example). Students produce sets of questions, improve them (rewording them to avoid ambiguity, or making them either open-ended or closed), and prioritize which questions should be considered first. The teacher then selects the next steps (assigning readings to help address the



issues raised in the questions, for instance, or assigning writing exercises) and students reflect on the process at the conclusion (p. 89).

Above all, Berger advocates using inquiry as means to drive organizational and personal change. "The focus here," he writes, "is on questions that can be acted upon; questions that can lead to tangible results and change," and he defines a beautiful question as an "ambitious yet actionable question that can begin to shift the way we perceive or think about something and that might serve as a catalyst" (p. 16). He writes at length about the importance of seeing things with a fresh eye or a naive point of view. Take, for example, the powerful story of Van Phillips, who lost his foot during a freak boating accident. During his recovery, Phillips was presented with a prosthetic device that was little more than a "block of wood with foam rubber added" (p. 18). Because the market for prosthetic devices was not considered lucrative or desirable, few design changes had taken place during the past one hundred years. Phillips reached a critical point when he asked himself why he should have to accept this "lousy foot." As an outsider, Phillips wasn't trapped by years of experience with what prosthetic limbs were "supposed" to look like, and because he wasn't a doctor or an engineer, he had the luxury of consulting dozens of experts as his designs progressed. His constant questioning led to a process that, over time, researched, designed and tested dozens of failed prototypes. Ultimately, his breakthrough design idea was the realization that a prosthetic foot could function in the same way as a cheetah's tendons. Abandoning the traditionally shaped prosthetic "foot" in favor of a long spring-loaded scoop allowed Phillips to produce a durable, comfortable prosthesis that was not only as good as a human foot, but in many cases, was considerably better. "It takes some effort to see things with a fresh eye," Berger notes, and cultures that value inquiry do not occur naturally (p. 101).

One of Berger's most interesting and compelling arguments is that the intellectual value of known answers has diminished. The ready availability of search engines to answer practically any question at a moment's notice has devalued expertise in favor of those who can skillfully orchestrate, manage and exploit the processes of creative inquiry. The problem, he suggests, is rarely the lack of definitive knowledge. Questions, not answers, are the "cerebral machines" that "convert curiosity into controlled inquiry" (p. 22). While perhaps depressing for professors and others with large sunk costs invested in acquiring the expertise necessary to provide "known answers" to a variety of questions, Berger's argument is a stark reminder of the changing nature of the information economy and the relative speed with which entire industries can collapse.

To successfully cultivate creative inquiry, Berger suggests, organizations need to employ a "Why/What" and "If/How" sequence (p. 48) of "preparation, incubation, illumination and implementation" (p. 49). He provides definitions of open, closed and naive questions and identifies circumstances where each is appropriate, and he articulates



a methodology for encouraging teams to ask challenging questions. For Berger, it is essential for senior level managers to provide space where “heretical questions that threaten the business as it is” (p. 206) can be explored without sanction and without undermining current business operations. Drawing again from the experiences of workplaces that encourage innovation, he points to several technology companies that allow employees to focus exclusively on their own projects for ten percent of their work time (Gore Companies), or that provide space for employees to pursue their own passions, such as Linkd-In’s “Hack Days.” In each of these cases, the innovations that resulted from these free inquiry sessions more than made up for lost productivity. “Gore believes so strongly in the value of inquiry,” he noted, “that it trains everyone in the company on how to ask good questions” (p. 231).

I enthusiastically recommend this book. It is well written and well organized, and it provides readers with dozens of readily applicable lessons for use in academic or business settings. In addition to the chapter focusing on obstacles to inquiry in the educational system, the chapter on personal improvement and the appendix of beautiful questions are each worth the price of the book. Whether readers are focused on personal development, curricular improvement or stimulating innovation in the marketplace, they will not be disappointed by Berger’s fine book.

