

## General Remarks:

Both teams in this debate did a good job of presenting arguments, and each team made a number of effective points. Some of these points began to get at the crux of the distinction between speaking and writing, although it often seemed as though neither team was aware of their most crucial points. As the strengths and weaknesses in this debate were common to both sides, most of my comments will be general and directed at all four participants. I will also provide each debater with some brief commentary on his or her individual performance, focusing primarily on style of speech rather than content, but those individual comments will be sent to the individuals and not made public.

Each team wisely made some attempt to define terms at the outset of the debate. Only the affirmative team seemed willing to return to these definitions though, and even the affirmative team regarded the definitions as one issue among many rather than a central and unifying component of the argument. This inadequate attention to definitions is chiefly responsible for the overall scattered character of the debate. While each team responded to arguments on the other side, it never became clear to the debaters nor to the audience just what the key issues to consider were. What was really being argued about?

It is therefore symptomatic that neither team actually mentioned the resolution in the entire debate. The teams weren't sure what exactly they were arguing about. In a debate over a resolution, a careful look at that resolution can often reveal strategic possibilities, or subtle aspects of the debate that could play in favor of one side or the other. In this debate, not only were the ideas of speaking and writing important, but so should have been the notion of *inferior*. What would make one medium inferior to another? Without some sense of what *inferior* is supposed to mean, we have no basis on which to judge success in the debate. The affirmative team was heading in the right direction when they offered a definition of effective communication, but even then, this definition should have been consistently and immediately related back to a resolution. The negative missed a major opportunity by not taking advantage of the presumption built in to the resolution: they did not need to show that writing was better than speech, only that writing was *not inferior* to speech. One way, for example, to show that writing is not inferior is to argue that both forms of communication are utterly essential, and as such neither can be dispensed with. Or the negative team might have argued that writing cannot be strictly distinguished from speech, and so cannot be judged inferior. The bottom line is that without an examination of the resolution, debaters and judges have no strong sense of what they are arguing about or how to decide.

This weakness — the lack of central argument — characterized not only the content of the debate but also the form of the individual speeches. Without some sort of center to the arguments, each speech tended to be a list of points, with no unifying principle and no rhetorical structure. A list of points is difficult to keep in mind (as the negative team sometimes pointed out in the midst of their list!), so such a list is not only hard to follow but generally not very compelling.

To correct this deficit, I offer a number of pieces of advice for future speech-makers. First, choose one (or maybe a few) themes, a basic point that you want your audience to bear in mind, and return to this theme throughout your speech. But don't just repeat it for the sake of hearing it again; rather, in the course of making your detailed arguments, show how those arguments are related to that basic theme. In this debate, the theme might have been nothing more than a statement of the resolution, but both teams would have done much better to spell out the consequences of their arguments rather than just offering the arguments. When you are giving a speech, it is too easy to become caught up in your own ideas, and you don't always realize that your audience is not necessarily drawing the same conclusions or seeing the same points that are clear in your head. You are better off spelling it out, drawing the connection explicitly to avoid misunderstanding.

Second, try to have a shape to your speech. As Plato says, a good speech has a beginning, a middle, and an end. While this sort of structuring can be very difficult in an impromptu speech, you should do your best to have some sort of architecture. Before starting to speak, write down a couple of lines of conclusion that summarize your best arguments and tell the audience why your side is correct. Then read these lines at the end of your speech, driving the final nail into the opponent's coffin. Think of some device (acrostic, catchphrase, break down of the subject) that could organize your points. Even if your points are just in an outline, let your audience see the shape of this outline by saying it out loud, reminding everyone of what you have already said and what you are about to say.

Third, be explicitly rhetorical. Use alliteration. Make jokes. Be sarcastic. Vary the pitch of your voice. Pretend to be a character for part of your speech. Argue with yourself. Be dramatic. Gesticulate. Emote. Look someone in the eye. Put on airs. Use famous quotations. Repeat a catchphrase at selected moments. Etcetera, etcetera. Of course, any of these techniques must be used wisely, as superfluous or unnecessary rhetorical flourish will just look silly or obvious. But when used well, these techniques add a great deal of interest to your speech, not only

drawing the attention and sympathy of your audience, but shaping your ideas as well. These things are also hard to do on the spur of the moment. I recommend that you practice doing them, perhaps with your debate partner. Give spontaneous speeches to each other when you are practicing, and see if you can't find ways of injecting some of these performance techniques.

To return to the issue of content, my sense is that both sides had trouble thinking through the sheer conceptual size of this topic. Rather than focusing on the essences of speaking and writing, each team focused on certain particulars. In fact, most of the remarks about speech seemed to have in mind something like *delivering a speech*, whereas speech itself is clearly much broader. Delivering a speech is only one example, and rather a strange one. Speech, as opposed to writing, is marked by spontaneity, a fact that both teams referred to but didn't make central. Also, speech is famously associated with presence, that is, with the presence of the speaker. While the affirmative team recognized this and based many arguments on it, these arguments looked more at the superficial effects of this supposed presence rather than looking at its essential nature. I had imagined that Plato's *Phaedrus* would point the debaters in the right direction; Socrates relates the story of the Egyptian god Theuth, who invents writing but, according to the story, completely mistakes its effects.

Both teams hint at the essences of speaking and writing without pointing to them directly. If writing is better suited for storage, why is this, what does this tell us about what writing is? (Writing is graphical rather than acoustic, so it can be stored as material. Writing is two-dimensional. Writing has a very different temporality associated with it, in many ways. Each team noticed these things, but neither team insisted on these characteristics as essential. The emphasis I put on definition was intended to point debaters toward the essential character of their terms.) If speaking can be understood to some extent by someone who does not share the spoken language, what is there in speech that exceeds the meanings of the words? Where does this affective or emotional element come from in the speech? These are only examples of questions that point toward the basic natures of the two terms, but these are the questions that the debate might usefully have pursued with greater intensity.

I regard this first debate as a learning experience, and the debaters are not being penalized for having to go first. Moreover, there were many strengths in this debate, including a number of points where arguments seemed to reach out of the murk and achieve a kind of clarity. All participants are to be congratulated for holding up under the gaze of their classmates and the even more intimidating

blank stare of the camera. We will discuss the debate further on Tuesday.

Kevin,

Your two speeches were as strong as any in the debate. You spoke clearly and were only a little too fast, with no obvious verbal tics ("um," "like," "ya know," etc.) Your points were consistently understandable, as your listeners were not only able to follow your individual points but also could relate these points to the larger claim that framed your speech.

Still, the general criticism that I offered to everyone applies in your case as well. Your speeches were not especially dynamic, coming across as a list of arguments rather than an impassioned attempt to persuade. Though you wisely offered definitions at the outset of your opening speech, you didn't refer back to these definitions much, so they failed to earn much weight in the debate overall. And though you were very clear, you were also very "flat" in your presentation, as you didn't use tempo, dynamics, or pitch to good effect in making your points.

The cross-examinations were generally not very strong in this debate, probably because no one really knew what to argue about. Nevertheless, I thought you held up rather well to Carolyn's scattered interrogation of you after your first speech, as you answered her questions directly and candidly without giving up any ground. Your cross-examination of her was more organized, but my sense was that Carolyn also didn't really give you any openings, seemingly having reasonable answers to your questions.

Your rebuttal speech was probably the best attempt in the debate to win favor with the hypothetical judges, as you tried to point out some "voting issues." This was certainly the right strategy to take, and if it was not wholly successful, that is only because you didn't have a lot of great material to work with.

Overall, a good job, one that your classmates can learn from.

3.0 out of 4

Samantha,

Your speeches were the most dynamic and exciting of the debate. You injected some personality into your presentation, which made it more engaging and more persuasive. You could go still farther in this direction, adding even more rhetorical flourish where it fits. However, the flip side of this dynamism is that it can result in a lack of clarity, and your speeches at times suffered from this too, especially because you tended to speak rather too quickly. Your enthusiasm or emotional investment does not necessarily make the concept clear to your audience, so make sure to explain fully even while you show your commitment to your ideas.

Otherwise, the comments I offered to everyone apply to your speeches as well. There was little sense of an overarching argument, and you quite explicitly offered listeners a list of claims rather than an organized or progressive investigation of your topic. You generally didn't even frame your speeches by telling us your basic position, and this severely impaired the power of your subsequent claims. You don't want to give listeners a sense of checking items off of a list; rather, you want to give them a sense of a penetrating and comprehensive approach to a complex topic.

Alex's cross-examination of you was typical of the debate, in that you offered correct and defensible responses to his questions, but it wasn't clear what was at stake in this question period. Your interrogation of him, on the other hand, was the one x-exam period in the debate where it felt as though the two sides were really beginning to argue. Your opening question about how to address a large number of people started to unpeel some layers from the proverbial onion, and for at least a moment, we felt as though the argument was beginning to get at something significant. You kept this heat on during the question period, and might have exploited some of this material more effectively later on.

Overall, you did a good job of inventing original arguments, borrowing from your intuition, providing provocative and interesting sources (on your slides, mostly), and presenting with flair and personality. The key down the road will be to hone in on the most crucial and telling arguments, in order to really pin down the topic.

3.0 out of 4

Alex,

Your speech seemed the most comfortable of the debate. Your pacing was excellent and your tone quite clear. You were also the only speaker to make use of any significant rhetorical flourish (when you appeared to search for the word, "radio"), and this was a good moment. I think that still more dynamism could have helped this speech. Furthermore, the general remarks that I sent to everyone apply also to your speech: there was not enough centrality or organization of argument. You offered a list of points rather than a progressive examination and conclusion. While your Forrest Gump conclusion demonstrates a certain measure of humor, it isn't really a good way to end a speech, at least not unless you have already provided a more conclusive conclusion prior to those words.

You deserve credit for coming up with some good original arguments, however. My sense is that your ideas approached most closely to an investigation of an essence of speaking and writing, although I am not sure that you were aware of this proximity. In your writing, I hope you will pursue your thoughts as far as they can take you.

Your cross-examinations were professional and organized if not quite revelatory. When you interrogated Samantha, it wasn't quite clear whether the questions were going anywhere, and she seemed to have pretty good responses that kept you from scoring any points. Her cross-examination of you seemed more heated, as there was a sense that one of you might fall off an edge if he or she didn't choose words carefully. You did, however, manage to choose your words well, and didn't allow Samantha to gain any significant territory. This was the moment where the debate seemed most intense.

3.0 out of 4

Carolyn,

Your speech was quite clear, though probably the least dynamic of the debate. You offered a number of interesting points, and this speech could have been very strong had you chosen to highlight some of these points instead of presenting them as a list. You deserve credit for coming up with these ideas, including the revolutionary value of the printing press and the huge advantage of writing as a medium for storage. But, without telling your audience how important these particular issues are, they just fade into the background of your list of claims, and don't sway your audience to believe you over the other team.

You seemed fairly nervous addressing the group, and you wisely turned this into a humorous advantage by remarking on it at the outset of your speech. Still, this class is intended to provide you with the opportunity to address your concerns about public speaking, and I hope you will continue to practice both in class and elsewhere to overcome some of your anxiety. I know of no particular tricks to dealing with fear of public speaking short of practicing a lot. For me, it helps a great deal to work on the content of my speech prior to delivering it, so that at least I'm not worried about whether I really have something to say or know what I am talking about. You might also try thinking of it as acting, where you really push yourself over the top, throwing caution to the wind.

Your initial cross-examination was unprepared, and I'm not sure why you didn't see this coming. (It is explained in the formats for the debate on the MIT Server.) As such, you weren't really able to muster good questions, and the interrogation was a bit of a wash. Kevin's cross-examination of you was much more interesting, as he seemed to have some real and forceful questions, but you did a very good job of providing candid answers without ceding any ground to the other team. It's clear to me that you are a strong thinker, and when you get absorbed in the ideas, your anxiety fades into the background.

2.8 out of 4