

NATIONAL FORENSIC LEAGUE

Speech and Debate Honor Society

Scholastic Benefits of Speech and Debate Activities

Prepared by the National Forensic League

Freedom of expression is the cornerstone of a democratic society, and intrinsic to the mission of National Forensic League. It is also inherent in the purpose of K-12 education to instill literacy and civic engagement. With many experts calling the 21st century economy “cognitive,” it’s more important than ever to teach young people **how to think**.

Speech and debate provide powerful instructional and assessment tool for advancing many of the goals required by such measures as *No Child Left Behind*.



Tired of rote methods of teaching to the test? Looking for a proven method of engaging students at the highest levels of *Bloom’s Taxonomy* with *authentic assessment*? Forensic activities harness student proficiency in the following areas:

- ❖ **Research methodology and information literacy**
- ❖ **Higher-level thinking through application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity**
- ❖ **Listening and speaking—two overlooked zones of language literacy**

1. **Critical thinking skills.** A wide body of research conducted at institutions including Yale University, Truman State University, and the National Forensic League has established that students involved in debate and speech consistently display higher levels of critical thinking skills, which correlates to increased problem-solving abilities and overall academic performance.
2. **Unique benefits for gifted and at-risk students.** Students who need to move at their own pace find intellectual stimulation in debate. When engaged, both groups of students act out less, by as much as 50%, according to a 2005 study.
3. **Higher performance on standardized tests.** Debate students tend to score better on standardized tests including the SAT and ACT, as well state accountability assessments. As high school coach Rusty McCrady notes, “Not only do forensics and debate foster creative and intelligent citizens for the 21st century, they may even help your local school system win the numbers game.”
4. **Improved graduation and retention rates.** Students who participate in debate and speech are more likely to graduate high school and attend college than their peers. A study by Professor Briana Mezuk in the *Journal of Negro Education* revealed, “among African American male students, debaters were 70 percent more likely to graduate from high school, three times less likely to drop out, 50 percent more likely to reach the ACT college-readiness benchmark for English, and 70 percent more likely to reach the ACT benchmark for reading” (from NFL partner, the National Association for Urban Debate Leagues). Additionally, Professors Colbert & Biggers noted in the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* that 90% of debaters go on to earn at least one graduate degree.
5. **Improved access to content material.** Students who speak and debate form personal connections with material, improving their memory and understanding of the material. As concluded by the journal *Argumentation and Advocacy*, incorporating oral language skills into instruction enables students to “build links between words and ideas that would otherwise be perceived as separate and as having less meaning” (2000, p. 163).

R = Reading

S = Speaking

W = Writing

L = Listening

SS = Social Studies

Meeting Cross-Disciplinary Core Standards

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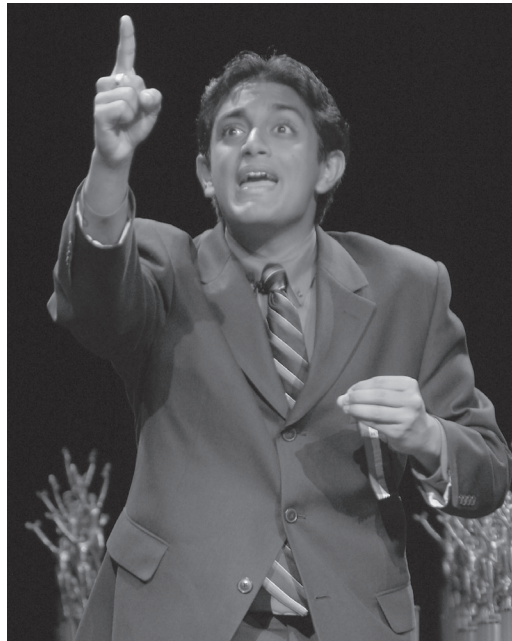
Traditional teaching methods of lecturing to students who would passively take notes have been widely abandoned in favor of more interactive, student-centered, experiential learning. While the *No Child Left Behind* law has attracted immense controversy, it has forced school districts and states to more closely measure and monitor achievement, and hold schools accountable for results. The law advocates experiential learning and higher-level critical thinking, since research has shown those approaches to positively affect achievement.

Mirroring that traditional, passive approach are scholarship programs, such as oratorical contests, where students enter, may advance to further levels of competition, and win prizes. This progression is very linear and quite finite. There is little interaction among students, and once the contest is over, there's little continuity of participants from year to year.

Through fostering intrinsic motivation through contest speaking, students who engage in forensic activities are driven to express themselves and their understanding of issues through research and critical thinking. Here, several skills cultivated through various speaking, debating and literary interpretive events are matched with College Board Standards for College Success (CBSCS) in English Language Arts (<http://professionals.collegeboard.com/k-12/standards>), covering the four zones of literacy: Reading (R), Writing (W), Speaking (S) and Listening (L). The National Communication Association endorses these competencies, which are comparable to standards enumerated by the National Council of Teachers of English.

The following charts also acknowledge where National Council for the Social Studies (SS) standards (<http://www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands>) are met. Finally, where use of media and technology help students construct their speeches, debate cases, and literary programs, they employ several standards of the International Society for Technology in Education (<http://www.iste.org/NETS>).

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Standards Met: Debate, Oratorical, and Extemporaneous Speaking

Skills and Activities	Standards Met
❖ Researching to build a debate case or construct a persuasive speech. ❖ Building vocabulary specific to the discipline to which they speak or debate.	R1. Comprehension of words, sentences, and components of texts
❖ Evaluating credibility of research found, as well as challenging others' in debate. ❖ Drawing on myriad expert sources to develop a credible argument in a speech or debate case. ❖ Showing sensitivity to diverse views and cultures, as well as historical factors that influence perspective is key in building a credible speech or debate case. ❖ Explaining geopolitical and economic factors that influence the inherent forces at work with a particular speech or debate topic. Where applicable, weighing interdependence of foreign policies as they relate to peace, human rights, trade and global ecology.	R2. Using prior knowledge, context, and understanding of language to comprehend and elaborate the meaning of texts. R3. Author's purpose, audience and craft. R4. Using strategies to comprehend texts. SS1/3. Understanding culture, people, places, and communities. SS2. Time, continuity and change. SS4. Individual development and identity. SS5. Individuals, groups and institutions. SS6. Power, authority and governance. SS7. Production, distribution and consumption. SS8. Science, technology and society. SS9. Global connections. SS10. Civic ideals and practices.
❖ Outlining a speech or debate case and tailoring it to the specific type of contest event parameters. ❖ Understanding the ethical importance of honesty, students cite sources they've consulted.	W1. Rhetorical analysis and planning of purpose, goals, audience and genre. W2. Generating content—based on research. W3. Drafting text with an organizational structure and stylistic choices.
❖ Taking feedback from coaches and contest judges to adapt and improve.	W4. Evaluating and revising texts. W5. Editing to present technically sound texts.
❖ Exchanging ideas through debate. ❖ Connecting with audiences when speaking, influencing viewpoints of judges and other contestants.	S1. Understanding the transactional nature of the communication process.
❖ Engaging in cross-examination.	S2. Speaking in interpersonal contexts.
❖ Practicing and repeated presentation engenders enhanced proficiency. ❖ Using a formal, sophisticated, and rhetorical linguistic register.	S3. Preparing and delivering presentations.
❖ Taking notes in debate to track coverage of arguments by both sides. ❖ Preparing to ask meaningful questions in cross-examination.	L1. Understanding the transactional nature of the communication process. L3. Listening for diverse purposes: to comprehend, to evaluate, and to achieve empathy.
❖ Mastering tactics of focusing attention to listening to arguments by the debate opposition.	L2. Managing barriers to listening.
❖ Harnessing a variety of sources by which to consult as evidence for speeches and debate cases, and evaluating their credibility.	M1. Understanding the nature of media communication. M2. Understanding, interpreting, analyzing, and evaluating media communication.

Standards Met: Literary Interpretive Performance

Skills and Activities	Standards Met
❖ Finding literary texts to perform.	R1. Comprehension of words, sentences, and components of texts
❖ Delving into the themes and meanings of texts to create meaningful performances that explore various facets of the human condition, bringing the author's intent to life.	R2. Using prior knowledge, context, and understanding of language to comprehend and elaborate the meaning of texts. R3. Author's purpose, audience and craft. R4. Using strategies to comprehend texts. SS1/3. Understanding culture, people, places and communities. SS4. Individual development and identity.
❖ Deriving themes from literature to craft an original introduction that prepares an audience to understand tone and purpose of the interpretive performance. ❖ Selecting the most poignant passages to perform, to drive expression of their central thematic concept, and to show character progression and/or progression of ideas.	W1. Rhetorical analysis and planning of purpose, goals, audience and genre. W2. Generating content. W3. Drafting text with an organizational structure and stylistic choices. SS2. Time, continuity and change.
❖ Taking feedback from coaches and contest judges to adapt and improve.	W4. Evaluating and revising texts. W5. Editing to present technically sound texts.
❖ Performing dialogue that acknowledges human motivations and conflicts.	S1. Understanding the transactional nature of the communication process.
❖ Working with coaches and peers to improve performance.	S2. Speaking in interpersonal contexts.
❖ Rehearsing and presenting literature that advances thematic ideas, and engages audiences.	S3. Preparing and delivering presentations.
❖ Listening to peer performances and contestants from other schools. Competition motivates students to incorporate tactics and ideas they encounter to improve their own performance.	L1. Understanding the transactional nature of the communication process. L3. Listening for diverse purposes: to comprehend, to evaluate, and to achieve empathy.
❖ Using a variety of media platforms as inspirational stimulus for gathering their literary selections.	M1. Understanding the nature of media communication. M2. Understanding, interpreting, analyzing and evaluating media communication.

Breaking Ranks Through Forensics: Achieving Reform with Debate and Speech Education

The National Association of Secondary School Principals adopted the *Breaking Ranks* series of strategies for high school and middle level reform that recognizes weaknesses in education and strives to bridge certain gaps to promote achievement. Many of these strategies can be actualized by embracing debate and speech education, whether curricular, extra-curricular, or both:

- ❖ **Core Area 1** (professional learning communities) calls for school communities to “*recognize diversity* in accord with the core values of a democratic and civil society” and provide **professional development** “to help educators appreciate issues of diversity and expose students to a rich array of viewpoints, perspectives and experiences.” The NFL is a professional organization for coach-educators, and offers several free and low-cost professional development resources and opportunities, such as **school faculty seminars**.
- ❖ **Core Area 2** (personalized school environment) calls for teachers to “convey a sense of caring.” **Coaching** of speeches, performances, and debate cases is one of the purest forms of teaching, because it’s **one-on-one** and happens over time. Students **build a rapport** with forensic educators, much like they do with counselors and advisers.
- ❖ **Core Area 3** (curriculum/assessment) is reached through the **myriad standards** enumerated above. Students are actively involved in their own learning, with repetitious interscholastic presentations serving as a form of ongoing, authentic assessment where students constantly improve based on **evaluative criticism**. As an honorary society, the NFL encourages students to speak beyond interscholastic contests: in **service** of a cause or community issue, and **outreach in the continuum** of middle and high school forensics.