**WHY SPEECH AND DEBATE IS IMPORTANT FOR ALL STUDENTS**

A few years ago, my son and I attended a debate between well-known atheist and author Christopher Hitchens, and a professor/author from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The debate was entitled “Does a Good God Exist?” The event was held at a large church in North Texas, filled with middle and high school students from nearby private schools. That day, Christopher Hitchens eloquently communicated the message of atheism with a sophisticated British accent and witty, persuasive style, while the seminary professor attempted to argue in technical, complicated terms why science and Christianity were not incompatible. If there is a God, Hitchens asserted, why does He stand by passively allowing horrific evils in the world? Much of the evil in the world has been perpetuated in the name of religion, he proclaimed. Hitchens “won” the debate with wit and passion before an audience of hundreds of impressionable teens that day, while Truth was buried in a mire of complex scientific reasoning. Sitting in the audience that day, I was more convinced than ever of the importance of participation in speech and debate.

Speech & debate sharpens student’s ability to think and listen critically, and articulate their thoughts confidently and persuasively. The ability to think critically is essential for our children today, who are being bombarded with humanistic ideas and political agendas in movies, TV, social media, music, literature, and even their textbooks.

Let’s go back to Hitchens’ claim that God stands by passively allowing “horrific evils” and that much of the evil in the world has been perpetuated in the name of religion. What does an atheist even mean by “horrific” and “evil”? Here Hitchens assumes a universal and objective standard of morality, a claim not warranted by atheism. The seminary professor attempted to press Hitchens on this, but wasn’t able to set-up his argument convincingly.  Hitchens side-stepped the issue and continued on with seemingly reasonable assertions for atheism, riddled with unproven assumptions supported by inadequate justifications.

Political correctness can also obscure lurking messages beneath seemingly benign rhetoric. For example, phrases like “reproductive justice” often serve as euphemists for the pro-abortion agenda. Speech & debate training helps students hone the *thinking skills* that they need in order to identify and expose the underlying premises and assumptions behind ideas. By teaching students to question the *underlying assumptions* behind public policies and the positions of others, they are better equipped to filter the ideas that they are bombarded with in our culture. Through this process, they develop the skills to articulate *what* they believe and *why*. Their training advances respectful and clear communication as the most effective and productive method of discourse.

No matter how our children are bent, the ability to analyze ideas, and articulate their views confidently and persuasively will set them apart in whatever field they pursue. Many executives, lawyers, teachers, public relations officers, radio and television personalities, and prominent public figures testify to the benefits of their forensics participation (forensics is the term for competitive speech and debate). Many of them found life-long friends through their involvement, and gained valuable skills to that set them apart in the workplace.

**8 BENEFITS OF SPEECH & DEBATE**

* ***Critical thinking skills****.* Students involved in Speech & Debate develop higher-level thinking skills through application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and creativity. They come to understand *what* they believe about the issues that confront them in our culture and *why*.
* ***Increased problem-solving abilities*** and overall academic performance. Speech & Debate students score higher on standardized tests including the SAT, ACT, and AP.
* ***Research skills.* Speech & Debate students learn more about their world and the policies and value system that affect them and their communities as a whole.**
* ***Critical listening skills***
* ***Think quickly on their feet***
* ***Confidence under pressure***
* ***Present compelling responses to difficult questions***
* *Best of all:****Life-long friendships!***

# Skills Learned in Speech and Debate are Long Lasting

By Jonathan Wahl

The skills I learned in my high school speech and debate club have been useful in all areas of my life. As a young child I was always very shy. When I talked, I seldom looked people in the eye, and I did a lot of mumbling. Today this has changed. I am now able to speak with confidence and in front of large groups of people. While there are a lot of factors that have contributed to my learning to be a better speaker, I consider my high school speech and debate club to be the number one factor.

When my homeschool co-op began offering a speech and debate class during my junior year of high school, I wasn't sure what to expect, but being a determined student, I signed up to take it. During that yearlong class I gave several speeches and debated twice. It was during this class that I realized that I actually really liked speaking.

The next year my co-op began to compete in the National Christian Forensics and Communications Association (NCFCA). The speech and debate tournaments I attended during my senior year of high school are some of my fondest memories. That year I competed in four tournaments, including the nationals.

I will never forget the excitement of those tournaments. It wasn't until ten minutes before the debate that we would find out who we would compete against, and what side of the debate we would argue.

It was speaking and debating at these tournaments that taught me to think and speak on my feet. I learned that I had to know both sides of an argument to win. I also learned to look critically at an argument to find strengths and weaknesses. I can honestly say that speech and debate have changed me forever. I grew from a shy little boy into a confident adult.

The skills I learned in speech and debate were crucial when I later interviewed for a job at the Missouri Attorney General's Office. I was offered the job and became the first high school student to work at the Springfield location. Working at the attorney general's office allowed me to further my communication skills.

In December of 2009 I traveled to India as the assistant director of a mission team. During our 16-hour flight, the director turned to me and said, "Oh, by the way, Jonathan. You will be speaking when we get to India." This was where the rubber met the road. If it weren't for my speech and debate experience, I would have panicked and most likely told the director I couldn't do it. Instead, I said okay and began to prepare myself to speak.

During our time in India, we held large assemblies for Dalits. The Dalits are a group of people in India who are told by their society that they are worthless. In some parts of India they are even told that they don't have a soul. During each of our assemblies, I was able to stand before hundreds of Dalits and tell them that they have been lied to and that they do have great worth. The chance to speak to the Dalits was, without a doubt, the greatest opportunity I have been given.

Without the lessons and skills I learned in speech and debate, I wouldn't be where I am today. Being able to speak with confidence has opened many doors in my life. Today I am passionate about what I believe, and I am willing to stand up for my beliefs if the need arises. Speech and debate did more than teach me how to speak; they prepared me to face certain obstacles and challenges head-on, with confidence and assurance.

# 5 reasons everyone should take a public speaking course

*By*[*Jeremiah Massengale*](http://college.usatoday.com/author/jeremiah-massengale/)

Public speaking is the number one fear in America. Death is, somehow, a distant second. As the famous Jerry Seinfeld punch line goes, “This means to the average person, if you have to be at a funeral, you’d rather be in the casket than doing the eulogy.” From sweaty palms and bundles of nerves to a cracking voice and butterflies in your stomach, speaking in public can be downright terrifying. So, even though your college offers a course in speech communication, chances are you might be tempted to avoid it like the plague. However, taking a public speaking class has some surprising benefits. Here are five reasons everyone should take a public speaking course:

**1. You’re likely to need the experience it offers.**

Although the majors that are most in demand vary from time to time, the skills that employers seek in their new applicants are nearly identical year after year. A 2013 survey by the National Association of College and Employers found that the ability to communicate effectively is the quality employers most want to see in new recruits. Regardless of the career you have planned, you’re bound to find yourself in situations where you’ll need to give an oral presentation. Whether you’re an accountant, an architect, a surgeon or a scuba instructor — communication skills are essential for your career development.

Furthermore, outside of the workplace, the likelihood that you’ll end up speaking in public is also quite significant, whether that be at church, a school board meeting or a community event. Plus, if you are asked to say a few words at a funeral or are encouraged to give a toast at your best friend’s wedding, thanks to your speech class, you’ll be more than ready. You’ll be confident and experienced.

**2. It will help you ace your other classes.**

The skills you’ll learn in a public speaking course will help you succeed in your other courses. Regardless of your major, many college classes will require some sort of presentation. Why not go ahead and discover how to make your presentations interesting, informative, and entertaining? Additionally, a public speaking class will give you experience in applying your abilities as a researcher and critical thinker, which will surely aid you in other classes.

**3. It will help you be a better listener.**

Listening may be a lost art, but a public speaking course actually teaches you to become a better listener. In the class you’ll hear several different kinds of speeches about a wide variety of topics from people who may be very different from you, which can be a beautiful thing. And while the instruction you’ll receive about being an active listener will help you do things like take better notes in your classes, the real benefits of being a better listener are relational.

Effective communication can help you develop more meaningful relationships with the people you care about and that, of course, starts with listening. After all, listening is the communication activity we do the most, but it’s the skill we’re taught the least.

**4. It encourages you to voice your ideas and take advantage of the influence you have.**

It’s no secret that people throughout history have used the power of public speaking to make a difference. A public speaking course, if you approach it with the right perspective, is a great chance to do the same thing.

You’ll hardly ever have a better opportunity to speak to a captive audience about what really matters to you. You’ll get a chance to influence your peers. You won’t change the world with every speech, but you can easily impact someone in some small way. Then, you can continue to speak up and make a difference long after the semester is over.

**5. It teaches you to punch fear in the face.**

A public speaking course is almost guaranteed to build your confidence. You’ll learn to stand before a group of people, make a lot of eye contact, and engage them with conviction. While the nervousness that comes with speaking in front of a crowd won’t entirely disappear, the course will teach you how to deal with your fears and turn your weakness into strength. By the end of the semester, you can emerge from the class having overcome America’s biggest fear, which is no small feat. After you’ve done that, think of what else you’ll be capable of doing.

## Scholarships for Debate and Forensics

Some high school and college students debate for the thrill of the argument, because they are interested in legal and social issues, or because they just love speaking in public. But another great benefit of joining the debate team is all of the available debate and forensics scholarships for college.

The National Forensic League ([www.nflonline.org](http://www.nflonline.org/)) is the largest speech and debate organization in the country and as such give out thousands of dollars in scholarships for debate team members who participate in tournaments.

Most of the major awards ($10,000) are distributed as part of the National Forensic League’s National Tournament. Individual students cannot register for the tournament themselves, but can certainly encourage their schools to help them compete for debate funding for college.

Winning tournaments isn’t the only way to get scholarship funding for forensics and debate. Some colleges and universities with active forensics programs offer scholarships directly to high-achieving debate team members. Emory College ([college.emory.edu](http://college.emory.edu/)) offer first-year students interested in debate a scholarship that is renewable for up to four years. Emory is only one of the countless universities that give scholarships for debate team members. Your debate or forensics team coach should be familiar with some of the universities that provide the most significant debate funding opportunities.