

Questions of Fact

Questions of fact concern what is or is not true, what does or does not exist, what did or did not happen. Some questions of fact are easily answered. These include the many academic questions you're all familiar with: what is nihilism? Who was Gertrude Stein? When was the first satellite launched?

Questions of fact also include the more mundane questions like, what's on television? When is the meeting? And what's Jenny's e-mail address? These questions can be easily answered by looking at some reference book, finding the relevant web site, or asking someone who knows the answer.

The questions of fact that we deal with in persuasive speeches are a bit different. Although these questions also have answers, the answers are not that easy to find and in fact may never be found. The questions concern controversial issues for which different people have different answers. Daily newspapers abound in questions of fact. For example, in a recent *New York Times* (February 22, 2001, p. B2), rap star Sean Puffy Combs is standing trial for gun possession and bribery; it's alleged that Combs had a gun the night of the shooting at the Club New York on December 27, 1999, and offered \$50,000 to his driver to say that the gun was his. These are questions of fact: did Combs have a gun? Did he bribe his driver?

In another story, two teenagers were arraigned in the killing of two Dartmouth professors (p. A10). Did they commit the crimes? In still another story, a neurosurgeon is suing the New York state department of health for slander, libel, and a violation of his civil rights (p. B3). Was he slandered, libeled, and deprived of his civil rights? These questions are potentially at least answerable but we may never discover those answers with any degree of certainty.

In the Sean Combs case, the defense attorney and the district attorney involved in these cases will likely each be giving speeches revolving around these questions of fact, and a jury will have to decide on the basis of the persuasiveness of the evidence presented (and beyond any reasonable doubt) if these questions can be answered with a yes. The same will be true in these other cases if they go to trial. Like these lawyers, your job as a speaker persuading an audience on a question of fact is to get them to believe that your answer is as close to the fact as possible.

In some cases, you'll formulate a thesis around a question of fact in such speeches as:

- This company has (doesn't have) a glass ceiling for women.
- Iraq is hiding (not hiding) chemical weapons.
- Wellington was (wasn't) slandered (or libeled or defamed).
- Ali's death was (wasn't) a case of physician-assisted suicide.
- Marijuana does (doesn't) lead to hard drugs.
- Gay men and lesbians make (don't make) competent military personnel.
- Television violence leads (doesn't lead) to violent behavior in viewers.

If you were preparing a persuasive speech on, say, the first example given above, you

might phrase your thesis as, this company discriminates against women. Whether or not the company does discriminate is a question of fact; clearly the company does discriminate or it doesn't. Whether you can prove it does or it doesn't, however, is another issue. Once you've formulated your thesis, you can generate your major propositions by asking the simple question, how do you know this? Or why would you believe this is true (factual)? The answers to one of these questions will enable you to develop your major propositions. The bare bones of your speech might then look something like this:

Thesis: this company discriminates against women.
General purpose: to persuade
Specific purpose: to persuade my listeners that this company discriminates against Women.

- I. Women here earn less than men.
- ii. Women here are hired less often than men.
- iii. Women here occupy fewer managerial positions than men.

Once these propositions are identified, you would then begin searching for information (evidence) to support them so that you can convince your audience that (1) women earn less, that (2) women are hired less often, and (3) that women occupy fewer managerial positions than men.

Taking the first proposition, you might develop it something like this:

- A. Over the past five years, the average salary for editorial assistants was \$2000 less for women than it was for men.
- B. Over the past five years, the entry-level salaries for women were \$1500 less than the entry-level salaries for men.
- C. Over the past five years, the bonuses earned by women were 20% below the bonuses earned by men.

As you see, this speech focuses entirely on questions of fact; the thesis itself is a Question of fact. In other speeches, however, you may want just one of your propositions to center on a question of fact. So, for example, let's say you're giving a speech advocating that the military give gay men and lesbians full equality. In this case, one of your propositions might focus on a question of fact, and here you might seek to establish that gay men and lesbians make competent military personnel. Once that is established, you'd then be in a better position to argue for equality in military policy.

In developing a persuasive speech on a question of fact, consider the following guidelines:

1. Emphasize logical proof. Facts are your best support. The more facts you have, the more persuasive you'll be in dealing with questions of fact. For example, the more evidence you can find that women earn less than men, the more convincing you will be in proving that women do in fact earn less and ultimately

perhaps that women are discriminated against. At the same time, beware of anecdotal evidence. Although helpful in illustrating and clarifying certain issues, anecdotes do not prove anything.

2. Use the most recent materials possible. The more recent your materials, the more relevant they will be to the present time and the more persuasive they are likely to be. Notice in our example, if you had said that in 1980 women earned on average \$10,000 less than men, it would be meaningless in proving that the company discriminates against women now. Such evidence might be useful in showing a history of discrimination but it doesn't say anything about what is going on now, which is what your speech is focusing on.
3. Use highly competent sources. When you use the testimony of others or you cite research, establish the competence of the source. Let the audience see that the people you're citing know what is going on and have the competence to speak authoritatively.
4. Clearly connect your major propositions to your thesis in your introduction, when introducing each of the propositions, and again in your summary. Don't allow the audience to forget that the lower salaries that women earn directly supports the thesis that this company discriminates against women.
5. Generally, a topical organizational pattern as we used in the "discrimination against women" example will prove most effective. Each of your propositions will be approximately of equal value and importance in supporting your thesis.