

Questions of Value

Questions of value concern what you consider good or bad, moral or immoral, just or unjust. In a recent newspaper (the New York Times, February 22, 2001), there are lots of questions of value debated. For example, was it right for Hugh Rodham (Hillary Clinton's brother) to accept \$400,000 to lobby President Clinton to pardon Almon Glenn Braswell, who was convicted of mail fraud and perjury in 1983 (p. A1)? Was the Supreme court morally justified in ruling that state employees cannot sue for damages for violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act? Is president Bush's decision to not seek sanctions against countries that legalize the importation of drugs manufactured in violation of major drug companies patents fair (p. A9)?

Theses devoted to questions of value might look something like this:

- the death penalty is unjustifiable.
- bullfighting is inhumane.
- discrimination on the basis of affectional orientation is wrong.
- chemical weapons are immoral.
- human cloning is morally justified.
- abortion is wrong.
- sexual and racial discrimination in the workplace is wrong.
- college athletics minimize the importance of academics.

As with questions of fact, you can generate your major propositions by asking a strategic question of your thesis: in this case why is this good? or why is this immoral? For example, you can take the first thesis given above and ask, why is the death penalty unjustifiable? The answers to this question will give you the speech's major propositions. The body of your speech might then look something like this:

Thesis: the death penalty is unjustifiable.
General purpose: to persuade
Specific purpose: to persuade my listeners that the death penalty is unjustifiable.

- I. We can make mistakes.
- II. It constitutes cruel and unusual punishment.
- III. No one has the moral right to take another's life.

You would then begin to search for evidence to show that mistakes have been made, and you might simply itemize three or four high profile mistakes where people were put to death and later, through say DNA, found to have been innocent.

At times and with certain topics, it may be useful to identify the standards you would use to judge something moral or justified or fair or good. For example, in the "bullfighting is inhumane" speech, you might devote your first proposition to defining when an action can be considered inhumane. In this case the body of your speech might look like this:

- I. An inhumane act has two qualities.

- A. it is cruel and painful.
- B. it serves no human necessity.
- li. Bullfighting is inhumane.
 - A. it is cruel and painful.
 - B. it serves no necessary function.

In most cases it would be clear what you mean by inhumane or morally justified or good. But, in cases where it isn't, you might want to include what you mean by, say, inhumane, in your introduction or in your first major proposition.

In constructing your persuasive speech on a question of value, consider these guidelines:

1. Often the type of value you're focusing on will be identified in your thesis statement and will be obvious to your audience. For example, bullfighting is inhumane focuses on humanity as its value, and chemical weapons are immoral focuses on morality as its value. But, in other cases, it may not be clear. For example, let's say that you're developing a speech to persuade high school students to attend college, and you want to stress that college is of value. But what type of value would you focus on? The financial value (college graduates earn more money than non-graduates)? The social value (college is lots of fun and a great place to make friends)? The intellectual value (college will broaden your view of the world, make you a more critical and creative thinker)? Once you clarify the type of value on which you'll focus, you'll find it easier to develop the relevant propositions. And, you'll also find it easier to locate appropriate supporting materials.
2. Begin with shared assumptions and beliefs and then progress gradually to areas of disagreement. For example, in the death penalty speech, it's likely that even those in favor of the death penalty would agree that mistakes can be made, and they probably would be willing to accept evidence that mistakes have in fact been made, especially if you cite reliable statistical evidence and expert testimony. By starting with this issue, you secure initial agreement and can use that as a basis for approaching areas where you and the audience see things differently.
3. Use sources that the audience evaluates highly. For example, if you were addressing an audience of devout Catholics who were active participants in their church, the testimony of the pope or a cardinal would likely be influential. But, if your audience was composed of Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or atheists, for example, then it's unlikely that these sources are going to be as influential. And to some listeners, these sources may even have a negative effect. So, do a thorough audience analysis before you select your testimonials.

Notice that in the example of capital punishment the speaker aims to strengthen or change the listener's belief about the death penalty. The speaker is not asking the audience to do anything about it but just to believe that it's not justified. However, you might also use this question of value as a first step toward

persuading your audience to take some action. For example, once you get your audience to believe that the death penalty is unjustified, then you might ask them to take certain actions perhaps in your next speech to support an anti-death penalty politician, to vote for or against a particular proposition, to join an organization fighting against the death penalty, or to contribute money to an anti-death penalty campaign. Or you might want to use as one proposition the statement of value that bullfighting is inhumane in a speech with the thesis that bullfighting should be declared illegal throughout the world.

When you move beyond a focus on value to urging your audience to do something about it, you're then into a question of policy. For example, in a speech designed to convince your listeners that bullfighting is inhumane, you're focusing on a question of value. If you were to urge that bullfighting should therefore be declared illegal, you're urging the adoption of a particular policy, and you're now dealing with a question of policy.