Chapter Twelve

Research Strategies

In order to analyze a motion effectively, debaters must use evidence to construct arguments to support their case and to refute their opponents’ arguments. To construct and refute arguments, debaters must be adequately prepared and must already know something about the motion’s topic. How is this kind of preparation achieved? Debaters must conduct research in advance. Research is important in debate because it provides a basis for narrowing and focusing the scope of the motion, which can result in a better debate. Most importantly, research enables debaters to construct arguments with claims supported by evidence (as addressed in Chapter Sixteen). Research can also be helpful when debaters choose to construct a model or counter-model. Since debaters will not always know the topic that they will be arguing prior to a debate, they need to be prepared to speak on a number of different subjects. A good starting point for most debaters involves developing good research habits, selecting appropriate information resources, learning to search for information, and knowing how to evaluate both the information and its source.

Chapter Outline

- Developing Good Research Habits
- Selecting Appropriate Resources & Formulating Searches
- Evaluating Websites
- Summary
- Terms and Concepts From Chapter 12
- Discussion Questions For Chapter 12
- Exercise For Chapter 12

Developing Good Research Habits

Not only will individuals come to debate with varying levels of public speaking and argumentation skills, but individuals will also have different levels of familiarity with current events and common debate topics. Effective debaters need to have competence in content (the “what” or substance of an argument) as much as they need to have competence in form (the “how” or reasoning behind an argument). One way that debaters can ensure competence in content is to develop good research habits.
First, debaters should read widely, and not just within their areas of study or personal interest. While having an area of expertise on which to draw in debate rounds is very useful, it is even more beneficial to have at least some familiarity with a significant number of current issues. To achieve that kind of knowledge about a broad number of current issues, debaters should read and become familiar with a variety of information sources. Newspapers, magazines, academic journals, blogs, websites, encyclopedias, non-fiction books— all these and other information sources have their own strengths and weaknesses. Some information sources will be better for supporting particular arguments and providing evidence than other information sources. Debaters must keep in mind the points they are likely to make and should use information sources accordingly. Knowing the types of information that are commonly found in various information sources will make effective research easier for debaters.

In addition to reading widely in terms of topic areas, debaters should read information sources that discuss the same topic from contrasting viewpoints. Knowing both sides of an issue means that a debater will be better prepared to argue either side. Obtaining information about both sides of an issue can be particularly important when using websites as information sources. The use of such websites is discussed further in the section on evaluating websites.

Debaters should also conduct background research on important governmental and financial organizations that are regularly mentioned during debates (e.g., the United Nations, the European Union, the World Trade Organization, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the International Criminal Court, NATO, OPEC, the Arab League). Because these entities are frequently part of debate motions or are referenced by other debate teams during their cases, debaters with a good working knowledge of the history, goals, and scope of these entities stand to benefit. Similarly, debaters who are familiar with international treaties and agreements such as NAFTA, the Kyoto Protocol, SORT, the WIPO Copyright Treaty, or the Geneva Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War will be better prepared for motions on issues of economic trade, environmental policy, arms reduction, intellectual property, and human rights. The United Nations Treaty Collection (http://treaties.un.org/) is one good source to locate this kind of background information.

Finally, debaters must recognize that bias exists in virtually all information sources. Because of those biases, debaters need to develop the habit of questioning the validity of what they read. Is the source of the information readily apparent? Can the information be verified through a second independent source? If information cannot be attributed or verified, or if it comes from a less credible source, debaters must be prepared for the possibility that the opposing team will attempt to discredit the information.

Beyond those rather general guidelines for developing good research habits, debaters will need to know how to locate and evaluate information. Access to information may vary based on the resources available through an institution’s library or via the Internet. Libraries may drop some subscription resources or add new ones based on curricular needs and budgetary constraints. Because the specific tools can change, this chapter focuses on more general strategies that can be used for research queries rather than on strategies for specific tools.
Selecting Appropriate Resources & Formulating Searches

When conducting research, debaters can use many different kinds of information resources. Regardless of the type of resource, debaters need to keep a few important principles in mind. At the forefront, debaters need to consider the type of information they are trying to find and where it is likely to be located. For example, when looking for information to support the claim that all children under the age of 16 should be required to attend school, debaters need to think about which types of information would best support that claim. Statistics demonstrating that people with more education earn more money could be useful in advancing a debater’s argument. But where might a debater find such information? Many possibilities exist—for instance, a government agency might compile this information regularly and make that data available to the public on its website, an education advocacy organization might produce an official report, or economic researchers at a university might publish a study in a journal. Debaters should also realize that the format of information might play a role in the ease with which it can be found and interpreted. Although many valuable resources are available electronically, some information is still easier to locate in print, and some materials are still only available in print.

Finding information resources is only the start of the process. Equally important is knowing how to use the resources. Libraries offer many different kinds of resources, from generalized to subject-specific, in both print and electronic formats. Some resources can be complicated to use, and debaters would be wise to take advantage of any user tutorials offered by an institution’s library. Additionally, many resources have help menus built into them that offer tips on advanced searching, subject headings used within the resource, how to narrow searches to retrieve only peer-reviewed materials, idiosyncrasies of searching within the resource (such as whether searches are case-sensitive), and how to save search queries and create alerts. Sometimes, consulting an expert who is familiar with the resources is more useful as well as more efficient; debaters may want to schedule an appointment with a librarian who can help refine specific strategies for searching within databases. Taking time to create a search strategy up front often saves time in the end.

Whether debaters are searching in a subscription database from their institution’s library, browsing in a subject directory, or using a search engine on the Internet, they will need to pay careful attention to formulating searches so they are successful. Each tool will have its own features, as well as a unique algorithm for displaying results. Once debaters have identified what information they are trying to find and what types of resources are likely to have that information, the time has come to consider how to construct a search.

First, debaters should identify the primary keywords from the query. For example, if the information being sought is to support a claim that nations should reduce their dependence on

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1 Much of this section is based on material from Kay Ann Cassell and Uma Hiremath’s *Reference and Information Services in the 21st Century* and Rebecca Sullivan’s *Web Research in Academic Libraries*. 
nuclear energy, then primary keywords might include “nuclear energy,” “reduction,” and “dependence.” Debaters should also think of common synonyms for these keywords, as well as related terms that might produce relevant results when searching. In the example given, synonyms for nuclear energy might include “nuclear power,” “atomic energy,” and “atomic power,” while related terms might include “thermonuclear,” “nuclear fission,” “nuclear fusion,” or “cold fusion.” Debaters should select the terms that are most important to the query and begin searching there. By keeping track of which terms produce successful searches and which terms send the search veering off on tangents, debaters can avoid wasting time during subsequent searches. Limiting vague or generic terms as much as possible is also a good strategy, as less specific terms often add “noise” to the search and clutter the results list. Meta-search tools such as Dogpile, Yippy, or Ixquick, that search multiple tools simultaneously, can sometimes be a useful way to begin a search.

Many databases and search engines allow the use of Boolean search terms (AND; OR; NOT) or quotation marks around phrases to help refine searches. Unfortunately, these features are not standardized among tools, making it necessary to look at the help pages for a given tool to determine what search refinements or command searches are supported. Truncation (using a wildcard character, such as an asterisk, at the end of a root word) enables searching multiple variations of a term. In the previous example about requiring children under the age of 16 to attend school, a truncated search for “child*” would return results that included the terms child, children, and childhood. However, truncation is not supported by all search tools, nor is the wildcard symbol standard among search tools. Debaters should take advantage of both the standard “simple” search as well as the advanced search that is offered for many search tools. Features often found in advanced search include searching by specific languages, domains, date ranges, location, and more.

In addition to standard search engines and databases, subject directories use standardized subject headings to organize information into categories. This alternate method of searching for information can be highly useful, particularly when initial searches may not be focused enough to retrieve relevant results. Debaters must also understand that not all search tools (particularly Web search engines) are created equally. Different search tools will produce different results, and it is a good strategy to try the same search on more than one tool to see the differences.

Evaluating Websites

Websites can be a handy source of information for debaters, but debaters should learn to evaluate a website before using that information to build an argument. When evaluating a website, debaters need to consider authority, bias, accuracy, currency, scope, and relevance or usability. Sometimes the information needed to evaluate a website is not as easy to find as it would be for a printed resource. However, as a rule, debaters should apply the same level of evaluation to websites as they would to printed resources.

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2 Many library websites provide examples of how to evaluate websites. Sullivan aggregates a number of these, and the information presented here draws heavily from her book.
Authority refers to the author’s or publisher’s credentials. Who is responsible for the website’s content? Consider whether an individual has authority in the topic area--where does the person work? What credentials does the person hold? Has the person published other material on this topic? What do other people have to say about the person’s work? Do external reviews exist that discuss what the person has written? Sometimes websites are maintained by organizations rather than by individuals. In that case, consider the type of organization--is it a professional or trade association? A lobbying organization? A governmental or educational institution? A commercial business? Is there an “About” page that describes the purpose of the website? Domain name extensions (.com, .cn, .edu, .gov, .org, and so on) can often provide clues to the type of organization, which can lead to clues about potential bias.

Bias refers to the point of view and degree of objectivity expressed by the author. Is the website sponsored by a corporation or other entity? Is the website promoting or selling a product? Does the website advocate a particular political viewpoint? If advertising is included on the website, does the information appear to be influenced in any way by the advertisers? Does the author have any inherent bias (for example, a conflict of interest)? If biases exist, are they clearly stated? What kinds of websites are linking to this website, and what might that say about potential bias? (Using the “link:” feature in many search engines can be used to find this information.)

In addition to authority and bias, debaters must evaluate accuracy. Accuracy refers to the reliability and correctness of the information. Since debaters should avoid using inaccurate information to advance their arguments in a debate, this is one of the most important elements to evaluate. Is the information on the website correct? Consider whether the website lists the sources of its information (perhaps in a bibliography), whether the information is fact or opinion, and whether the information can be verified from external, independent sources.

Currency is related to issues of accuracy. It refers to the date of publication and/or the time period covered by the information on the website. Is the information up to date? Do links work? When was the website created, and when was it last updated? Does the page update automatically on a daily basis, or is it manually updated when information is added or revised? A regularly updated website is not inherently more reliable than one which is updated less frequently, but this information may be important when researching some topics. Debaters must ask themselves if currency of the information they are trying to find matters.

3 A link: search will find pages that link to a particular page. This allows researchers to examine the interrelationships among web pages. For instance, searching on link:www.chinareform.org will return pages that link to The China Institute for Reform and Development’s main web page. Researchers can use this information to help determine authority and evidence of potential bias. The help files for a search engine will usually indicate whether the search engine supports this feature.
Scope refers to the coverage area of the website. It can relate to currency that can be thought of as chronological scope. Consider whether the website is directed at a particular audience (for example, a website intended for pregnant mothers, or a website aimed at educators in China). If there is a printed equivalent to the information, does the website offer the same information? Is the website (or an individual document available through the website) a primary, secondary, or tertiary resource? Primary resources contain firsthand accounts of information or original data. An example of a primary resource is the text of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test-Ban Treaty (1996), available via the United Nations Treaty Collection. Primary resources require debaters to use the information on the website to draw their own conclusions. Secondary resources are derived from primary resources and describe or analyze that information. An example of a secondary resource is a policy analysis report published in 1999 by Kathleen C. Bailey for the Cato Institute, “The Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty: The Costs Outweigh the Benefits” (http://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa330.pdf). Debaters may need to compare and contrast secondary resources to get a complete understanding of an issue and to ensure that they are familiar with all sides of the topic. Tertiary resources are based on secondary resources rather than on original research; occasionally they are written by staff writers rather than by experts in the field (Reitz). While useful for presenting overviews of topics, tertiary resources may not have the same depth of information that primary and secondary resources do. Encyclopedias (including Wikipedia) are often considered tertiary resources. Debaters may begin learning about a topic through tertiary resources, but will be able to make more compelling arguments by using primary and secondary resources.

Finally, debaters must evaluate a website’s relevance. Relevance, sometimes called usability, refers to the value of the information for a researcher’s needs. Consider whether the information is appropriate—can the information be understood easily, or is the website intended for use by experts in the field? Is the website well organized so that information can be located quickly? Does the website cover the topic adequately, or are there obvious omissions in content?

As an example, suppose that debaters arguing that nations should reduce their dependence on nuclear energy need to find expert testimony to support that claim. In order to anticipate arguments from the opposing team, debaters need to research both this claim and the opposite claim (that nations should increase their dependence on nuclear energy). Debaters might want to compare information from the websites of the International Atomic Energy Agency, the United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, the World Nuclear Association, the China Atomic Energy Authority, the Sierra Club, the World Association of Nuclear Operators, Greenpeace, the Council on Foreign Relations, ProPublica, and others. By evaluating the authority, bias, accuracy, currency, scope, and relevance for each website, debaters will be better prepared to defend their own arguments and to refute their opponents’ arguments.

Summary
In summary, preparation is essential for a successful debate. Debaters need to be familiar with effective research strategies so that they can find and evaluate the information needed to construct their arguments. Debaters must develop good research habits, know how to select appropriate information resources, learn to search for information, and know how to evaluate both the information and its source.
Terms and Concepts From Chapter 12

- Research
- Information sources
- Search strategy
- Keywords
- Boolean searching
- Truncation
- Authority
- Bias
- Accuracy
- Currency
- Scope
- Relevance/Usability
- Primary, secondary, and tertiary resources

Discussion Questions For Chapter 12

- What are some of the ways a debater can develop good research habits?

- What factors might influence a debater’s decision to use specific information resources when conducting research?

- How might a debater formulate successful search strategies?

- What are the six key concepts to consider when evaluating websites? How does evaluation of resources, both electronic and print, impact the arguments presented in a debate?

- What are the differences between primary, secondary, and tertiary resources, and why is it important to understand these differences when conducting research for debate?
Exercise For Chapter 12

This exercise gives debaters a chance to practice formulating search strategies for electronic resources; it can be done in pairs or in small groups. Debaters will choose a practice resolution. Taking no more than five minutes, each debater will independently create a list of possible search terms (keywords) and likely resources where information on the topic could be found. At the end of the five minutes, debaters will compare their lists of terms and resources and discuss which they think will be the most effective for retrieving high-quality information. If time permits, debaters can try searching by the same keywords in multiple sources and comparing the results, or they can compare the results of searching multiple keywords within the same source.