In order to argue effectively, debaters must make use of evidence to support their case and to refute their opponents’ cases. Being adequately prepared for a debate means that debaters will need to conduct research in advance. Since debaters will not always know the topic they will be arguing prior to a debate round, it is important to be prepared to speak on a number of different subjects. The following basic guidelines should provide a good starting point for most debaters:

- Read widely, and not just in your area of study. While it is useful to have an area of expertise upon which you can draw in debate rounds, it is more useful to have at least passing familiarity with a significant number of current issues.
- Read and become familiar with a variety of information sources. Newspapers, magazines, academic journals, blogs, websites, encyclopedias – all these (and other) information sources have their own strengths and weaknesses. Some information sources will be better for supporting particular arguments than other information sources; it all depends on the point you are trying to make. Knowing the types of information you are likely to find in various information sources will make it easier for you to research effectively.
- Read information sources that discuss the same topic from contrasting viewpoints. Knowing both sides of an issue means that you will be better prepared to argue either side.
- Do some background research on important governmental and financial organizations that regularly come up during debate rounds (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 resolutions or are mentioned 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, consider reading up on 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. The United Nations Treaty Collection (http://treaties.un.org/) is one good source for this kind of background information.
- Recognize that bias exists in virtually all information sources, so get into the habit of questioning the validity of what you read. Is the source of the information readily apparent? Are you able to verify the information through an independent source?

In addition to these general guidelines, debaters will need to know how to locate and evaluate information. Access to information may vary based on the resources available through your
institution’s library or via the open Web. It is important to recognize that libraries may drop some subscription resources or add new ones based on curricular needs and budgetary constraints. Because the specific tools can change, this guide focuses on more general strategies that can be used for research queries rather than strategies for specific tools.

*Selecting Appropriate Resources & Formulating Searches*

There are many different kinds of information resources debaters might use when conducting research. No matter the type of resource, it is important to keep a few principles in mind.

- What information are you trying to find, and where will you be likely to find it? 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.
- Do you know how to use the resources in which you’ll be looking? Some databases can be complicated to use, so take advantage of user tutorials that your institution’s library may offer. Likewise, you may be able to schedule an appointment with a librarian who will be able to teach you specific strategies for searching. Don’t overlook the help menus that are built into the various electronic resources – this is where you will find tips about doing advanced searching, subject headings used within the resource, information about narrowing to peer-reviewed sources, whether searches are case-sensitive, how to save search queries and create alerts, and myriad other features.
- Taking time to create a search strategy up front often saves time in the end.

Whether you are searching in a subscription database from your institution’s library, browsing in a subject directory, or using a search engine on the open Web, you will need to pay careful attention to formulating your searches so they are successful. Each tool will have its own features, as well as a unique algorithm for displaying results. Once you have identified what information you are trying to find and what type of resource is likely to have that information, consider the following guidelines:

- Identify the primary keywords from your query. Then think of common synonyms for these terms, as well as related terms that might produce results for your search. Select the terms that are most important to your query and begin your search there. Keep track of which terms produce successful searches so that you can avoid wasting time during future searches. Limit vague or generic terms as much as possible; these often add “noise” to your results list. Meta-search tools (such as Dogpile), which search multiple tools simultaneously, can sometimes be a useful way to begin a search.
- Use Boolean search terms (AND; OR; NOT) and quotation marks around phrases to help refine your searches. Look at the help pages for a given search engine 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

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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* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2006) and Rebecca Sullivan’s *Web Research in Academic Libraries* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010).
variations of a term; however, truncation is not supported by all search engines, nor is the wildcard symbol standard across search engines.

• Take advantage of both the standard “simple” search as well as the advanced search that is offered for many search engines. Features often found in advanced search include searching by specific languages, domains, date ranges, location, and more.

• Subject directories use standardized subject headings to organize information into categories. Take advantage of this alternate method of searching for information, particularly if you are having difficulty focusing your search to retrieve relevant results.

• Different search engines will produce different results. 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 it is important to evaluate a website before using that information to build an argument. When evaluating websites, consider the following:

• **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 this person hold? Has this person published other material on this topic? What do other people have to say about this person’s work? (Are there external reviews discussing what this 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? Is there any inherent bias from the author (for example, a conflict of interest)? Are biases clearly stated? What kinds of websites are linking to this website? (Use the link: feature in many search engines to find this information.)

• **Currency** 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? Does currency matter for the information you are trying to find?

• **Accuracy** refers to the reliability and correctness of the information. Is the information on the website correct? Consider whether the website lists the sources of its information

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2 Many library websites provide examples of how to evaluate websites. Sullivan’s book (mentioned previously) aggregates a number of these, and the information presented here draws heavily from her book.
(perhaps in a bibliography), whether the information is fact or opinion, and whether the information can be verified from an independent source.

- **Scope** refers to the coverage area of the website. (It can relate to currency, which 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 Chinese lawyers). If there is a print equivalent to the information, does the website offer the same information? Is the website a primary, secondary, or tertiary resource? (Primary resources contain firsthand accounts of information or original data. Secondary resources are derived from primary resources and describe or analyze that information. Tertiary resources are based entirely on secondary resources rather than on original research.\(^3\))

- **Relevance/Usability** refers to the value of the information for your research needs. Consider whether the information is appropriate – can you understand the information easily, or is the website intended for use by experts in the field? Is the website well organized so that you can locate information quickly? Does the website cover the topic adequately, or are there obvious omissions in content?

Sometimes the information you need for evaluating a website is not as easy to find as it would be for a print resource. However, as a rule you should apply the same level of evaluation to websites as you would to print resources.

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\(^3\) This explanation of primary, secondary, and tertiary resources is based on the definitions in Joan M. Reitz’s *ODLIS: Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science* (available at http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_A.aspx).