

## Research

### **A. Goal of the lesson**

To give debaters a better understanding of what “good” research means and efficient ways to conduct the process of researching.

### **B. Activities**

#### **Lecture 1: The “quality” of information (15 min)**

The basic idea of research is to gather and assimilate information about a specific topic or motion. It is important to try and focus the debaters’ effort into clear goals and efficient/productive methods of meeting those goals.

The first topic of discussion is what research means and what “good” research, or information, should consist of. When finding a potentially useful fact, there are a few basic things to check against, in order to discern the “quality” of said information:

- What is the source? Some generalist information does not require in-depth research (ex. The year in which the United States of America was founded). But for nuanced information it is important to find the source (ex. Wikipedia has sources for any credible information presented). Without a credible “expert” source (an institute, a news agency, a scientist, a politician etc.), there is a higher risk that information might not be true or accurate, or be seen as such.
- What is the context of the information? Information without context is meaningless, because it doesn’t integrate in any way to our collective (or subjective) perception of the world. For example, the phrase “12% of muslims condone the tactics used by ISIS terrorists” is meaningless because it is so broad and unspecific. Questions can arise, such as: 12% of all muslims across the world? 12% from a western country? From a middle-eastern country? Who conducted the research? When was it published? Is this number relevant in the present? Context is important to understand the next point about the information.
- What is the relevance of that information for the topic at hand? Information can be impactful or revelatory, but that is only useful if it relates in a meaningful way to the topic of discussion.

#### **Exercise 1: Extracting the important information (25 min)**

Use a video of a speech or hand out a snippet of a news article to the entire class and have them watch/read it. It’s important that the material has a very clear subject and that there are substantial arguments being made or information given on the topic. Afterwards ask them to write down the essential information that they can extract from the material. Offer them two guiding questions: What are the main points being made? What conclusion can you draw about the speaker or the discussed subject?

Discuss the points written down and analyze them using the methods and questions outlined above. What is the source? Is it credible? How much do we know, in the given, limited, circumstances? What is the topic of discussion? How relevant are the points being made in relation to the topic? Does the material present any form of detectable bias? If so, how does it impact the points being made?

## **Lecture 2: The process of research (10 min)**

The second topic of discussion relates to the process of gathering research. It is impossible to become an expert on every subject present at a debate tournament, but a debater has to be well-informed and must find a way to do so efficiently. Two ways of doing this are: having a research plan and prioritisation.

- When setting out to research a topic, you can have different goals and it's useful to know what you're trying to achieve. Finding out general information about the motion and the topic? Finding new information that can lead to new arguments for the case? Finding specific information in order to strengthen existing arguments? What do you search for? General concepts, such as the death penalty? Or more concrete examples, such as the most recent case of a person sentenced to the death penalty in Texas? A specific event? A person? A piece of legislation? Having a research plan and clear goals helps with avoiding shallow or broad research that can be time-consuming and doesn't yield as-useful material
- Prioritisation in a research plan is crucial for the process and helps avoid chaotic gathering of information. For example, on the motion "This house prefers a world with no belief in the afterlife", if you were to conduct research, what would you look for first? First off you should examine the words and concepts proposed by the motion, such as "afterlife". What does it mean? How much does it differ from religion to religion? How many people believe in the afterlife? These are general questions that help establish the context of the motion. Once you have a clearer understanding of the motion, you can delve deeper into more specific information, either to help with building arguments or to reinforce existing ones. If you have an argument that states "People who believe in the afterlife are prone to taking greater risks, because they aren't as scared of death", then you would look for cases in which people did crazy or dangerous things, with the idea that they will find happiness or solace in the afterlife.

## **Exercise 2: Finding the important questions (20 min)**

Give the debaters a motion, it can be the same for everyone, or a different motion for every debater in the room, depending on time and logistics. The task is to write down three things that they want to research in relation to the motion, or more practically, three questions that are important to answer in order to better understand the topic.

After, have an open discussion with the room about the results, why were these questions asked, what do they want to find out specifically, how important is the question for the motion. Give feedback about how these questions can be improved, using the process outlines earlier, plan and prioritise.

## Final notes (5 min)

Beyond specific research, it's important to stay up to date with important world events, as these can always become a topic of debate. It can be useful to give the novice debaters a few examples of research resources, such as news publications (ex. BBC, The Guardian, The Economist, Foreign Affairs, Al Jazeera). These can vary based on personal preferences, but it's important that the information comes from a credible, established or qualified source.

## C. Preparation

For the lectures, it is important to prepare and use examples throughout the lectures. Try picking a few example motions (with associated potential research topics or information). It's useful to have at least one example that you can return to as you progress through the lectures. A few motion databases you can use: [Hello, motions!](#), [Debate Motions Headquarters](#), [International Debate Education Association](#).

For exercise 1, as stated above, prepare a video of a speech or a text, that has a clear subject, source and that several relevant points of pieces are information are presented in said material. It can be useful to have a video/text that most reasonably-informed debaters can relate to in some way, be it a well-known speaker or subject matter that is presently relevant.

For exercise 2, use the above listed motion databases to select one or more motions to give to the debaters. Keep in mind that these should be broadly accessible motions, since the target debater is at beginner level. But avoid motions that are too simplistic, as there should be clear elements that require research and more information.

## D. Hints

Research is a difficult topic to tackle effectively, beyond the basics, and even harder to turn into interactive activities with larger groups, because research in itself is time-consuming. The important aspect of the lesson is to encourage debaters to think analytically about research and in general any information to encounter. To view research more like evidence in a trial, in must be checked, tested, challenged, before it is admitted to the court and have an impact on the verdict. The methods outlined encourage critical thinking and a more disciplined approach to conducting research, and, in some ways, mirror the methods used to build arguments and cases.

## E. Verification

The exercises proposed function as a form of verification for each lecture. There isn't an ideal way to verify how well these lessons have been assimilated on the spot, without actually doing a research workshop, in which they must research a motion using the internet in a limited time. But such an exercise isn't easy to organize, as it requires a lot of time and technology that is generally not available. The best way to verify is by checking if the debaters apply or return to the methods and questions outlined within the lectures. Even if they can't always find a satisfying answer, it's paramount that they try to ask the questions or apply the methods, as the process is more important than the result.

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**F. Theory – We recommend watching [Alfred Snider's Reserach Lecture](#), though some parts of it contain resources that aren't as useful now.**

