

Developing Research Skills*

Research helps you locate evidence to support your arguments, understand the context of the topic, and update your knowledge to keep up with current events. In short, research allows you and your teammates to be “experts” on the topic you’re debating.

In this chapter we first discuss the importance of research. Then we outline a process for researching efficiently. Finally, we describe how a debater can research from different source material.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH

The research process we will explain in this chapter will allow you to discover general and specific knowledge about any debate proposition. General knowledge, one of the motivating reasons people debate, helps you understand the big or general picture for a particular issue. The big picture frames the context of any issue of controversy. The history, key figures involved with the controversy, and descriptions of more specific issues occur with general knowledge. For example, if a proposition dealt with how culture was more important than economic growth, general knowledge of this topic would include definitions of culture, examinations of societies that struggle with privileging economic growth over culture, and the relationship between culture and economic growth.

Gaining general knowledge about a debate topic is important to debaters’ abilities to understand the more specific issues. The more general information you know about a topic, the more capable you become at gathering specific knowledge. Specific knowledge is the intricate understanding of an issue, particularly the key arguments surrounding an issue. If we use the culture vs. growth example, we may view specific knowledge as the distinct ways culture is beneficial to a society (e.g., language), and, in contrast, the distinct ways growth may be detrimental (e.g., environmental degradation). Where general knowledge helps to contextualize the topic, specific knowledge helps locate the particular arguments necessary to build a case, construct debate arguments, and ultimately win a debate contest. When you engage in the research process, you usually want to begin with an understanding of the general knowledge surrounding a topic

* By Joseph P. Zompetti