

PHASE 1: GENERAL KNOWLEDGE

You should begin your research by locating general information that enables you to understand the history and context of the proposition. This phase also helps you identify and find specific information that you can use in Phase 2.

Stage 1: Locate Background Information. Begin your research by asking others about the proposition and the arguments they may have used in debating similar propositions in the past. For example, you may be able to use arguments from an earlier proposition about environmental pollution when debating one that calls for lowering the consumption of fossil fuels. Simultaneously, you should brainstorm the main arguments that might be associated with the proposition.

The next step is to search library catalogs, online databases, and the Internet for material that provides historical background and puts the topic in context. These more general, abstract sources will contextualize the topic so you can begin to narrow it. If you locate a particular author or source that provides useful information for your arguments, you should look for additional published material by that author or from that source. We discuss how to research books and the Internet below.

Stage 2: Accumulate General Knowledge. Once you have collected information from your previous experiences, the Internet, and print sources, you can analyze that material to gain a basic understanding of the topic. You should look for: information that provides historical background and context, and clues to specific issues surrounding your topic. For example, if you were researching the topic “the U.N. should ban the death penalty globally,” you would want to know the history of capital punishment, the countries that still employ the death penalty, and instances when the U.N. has acted on issues related to it. You need a basic understanding of the topic to research specific issues because sources will frequently refer to historical and contextual information when presenting their specific arguments.

Stage 3: Determine the General Issues. Before completing Phase 1, you will want to see if your general research produces any helpful direction for knowing the more specific arguments. For instance, does your general knowledge tell you why nations use the death penalty? What prevents the U.N. from banning the death penalty now? Does the U.N. garner benefits or encounter drawbacks when acting in this manner? As you move from one level of abstraction to a lesser level of abstraction, the more your general knowledge can inform you of the specific issues. To gain a better sense of how general knowledge might be helpful in a debate, you can incorporate what has come to be known as “the stasis approach.”

Around 150 BCE, Hermagoras developed the stasis system—a system of questions to get at the heart of the topic.¹ The stasis questions are aimed at determining the key issues of clash in a topic. Stasis literally means “impasse,” and its questions are intended to overcome that impasse. The stasis system, based on five questions, can be used to set a research agenda for any topic. Below is an illustration of how it can be used as an aid in researching the death penalty topic:²